Written by Mike Kelly
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The Watauga High baseball team has taken on all comers this season.

And so far, the returns have been pretty impressive. The Pioneers are 3-1, with their only loss coming against Ardrey Kell, the No.1 team in the state in Class 4A, last Saturday. WHS spotted the Knights a 7-0 lead before they came charging back only to lose, 9-8.
"And we had the tying and go-ahead runs on base with two outs, but we couldn't bring them home," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "This team has an extra gear. They love playing baseball, and they love playing against the best."
And they must also love playing on the road. WHS won't play its first home game when A.C.Reynolds comes to town on Saturday, March 19.
But the biggest test of all comes Friday night, when the Pioneers travel to Sawmills, NC, to play south Caldwell in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference opener. The Spartans, who were 22-5 last season, are currently 3-0 and they demolished St. Stephens 16-3 in six innings in their league opener Tuesday night. The Spartans errupted for nine runs in the top of the sixth to break the game open.
"And it's up to us to beat South caldwell," Hardee said. "I really don't believe anyone in our league will be them this season. So, it's up to us. If we want to win the conference, we have top go through them."
The Pioneers have bested South Caldwell the last two years for the conference title. But the Spartans have had the last laugh. They beat the Pioneers for the final Northwestern 4A Conference Tournament title in 2009, and the Pioneers faltered with a subpar effort against Hickory in the semifinals last season. The Spartans went on to defend their tournament championship by beating the Red Tornadoes in the finals. The Spartans have won six consecutive tournament championships, dating back to 2005.
But Hardee feels this year's team could be a special group. The Pioneers haven't had a deep run in the state playoffs since 2008 (ironically, the Pioneers were bested by South Caldwell in the conference finals that year as well), when they lost to North Davidson in the sectional finals. Before that, the last time the Pioneers had a deep run in the state playoffs was in 2000, when they lost to Richmond County 2-1 in nine innings with Jacob Chaney on the mound in the sectional finals.
And like those teams in 2000 and 2008, the Pioneers are blessed with a good pitching staff. "It's the deepest we've been on the mound in a while," Hardee said. "We have a lot of arms this season, and they want the ball. It's an aggressive group. They want to pitch in the big games, and they like attacking the hitters."
Righthander Dylan Norris, the NW3A/4A Conference Pitcher of the Year last season, gets the starting nod against South Caldwell Friday night. And Norris, who has been battling some shoulder issues this season, is coming off a great effort against Ardrey Kell last Saturday.
The senior threw 3 1/3 scoreless innings in relief, allowed one hit and struck out five.
He's also 1-0 lifetime against South Caldwell. He beat the Spartans in relief last season, when the Pioneers rallied late to beat South Caldwell in extra innings. That win also ignited Watauga's run to the conference title.
"And that was impressive to watch," Hardee said. "We've taken it slow with Dylan because of

his shoulder issues. But he really wanted the ball on Saturday. He wanted to pitch against Ardrey Kell, and he did a great job keeping us in the game. He was the pitcher of the year in the league last year, and he really wants to go up against these (Spartans). "

And Jake Watts followed that up with an impressive effort Tuesday night in a 6-3 win against Mount Tabor. The righthander, who was touched up for six earned runs in a little more than an inning of work last Saturday against Ardrey Kell, responded with three strong innings against the Spartans. He gave up one run, which was unearned and he struck out five to pick up his second win of the year.

"We were only going to go two innings with him," Hardee said. "But he wanted to pitch the seventh and finish it off. As a former pitcher, I really like that. These guys want the ball, and they want to win."

South caldwell, led by Jeff Parham, has seven returning starters. The Spartans also have a solid group of JV players on the team this season. That group went undefeated last year, and they also had a deep run in the Junior Legion baseball playoffs.

Junior Spencer Greer, a righthander, is their top pitcher, and one of the toughest in the area. Seniors Jacob Hatton and Travis Cook (who is 1-0 against the Pioneers) round out the pitching staff. Blake Johnson, who has signed with Lenior-Rhyne University, first baseman David Evans and sophomore third baseman Gage Parham are their best positional players. The Spartans can score runs and as always, they're very strong fundamentally.

"It's always a great game and a great challenge to play South Caldwell every year, especially at their place," Hardee said. "We always go hard against each other. It's a big game for both of us. And with the schedule we've played so far, I'm confident about Friday night."

Our coverage from Sawmills begins at 6 pm Friday night on Oldies 100.7 FM.