

Pioneers Face Must Win Tuesday Night.

Written by Mike Kelly
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The Watauga High baseball team, which was scoring runs like they were going out of style at the beginning of the season, currently finds itself in quite a scoring drought.

The Pioneers (7-3 overall; 3-2 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) have been leaving a lot of men on base in recent games. Their ineffectiveness really showed in last Friday night's 2-0 loss at Hickory. The Pioneers squandered numerous scoring chances, left nine men on base and they even hit into a double play that took the air out of what seemed like a big inning. The end result, the Pioneers, who found themselves in a two-way tie with South Caldwell for first place going into last Friday's game with Hickory, now find themselves in a two-way tie with the Red Tornadoes for third place, and they trail the Spartans by one full game for the No.1 seed. The Red Tornadoes at South Caldwell Tuesday night.

"Without question, this is a must game for us," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "We must play with a sense of urgency, and close out the first half of the conference schedule with a 4-2 record. We have a lot of home games coming up, and tonight's game is one we must have on the road."

And the Pioneers, who have played all their games but one on the road to start the season, have held their own by going 6-3 during this month-long road trip. Tuesday night game, which was originally a home game, was moved to St. Stephens because of inclement weather. And the Pioneers will be facing a St. Stephens squad that's been reeling of late. The Indians (2-6; 1-4) begin the night tied with Hibriten for last place. And the Indians, who boast a strong baseball tradition, have fallen on hard times of late.

It's hard to imagine, but St. Stephens won 40 games during a two-year stretch between 2007 and 2008. And they won three consecutive state titles (as a Class 2A school) back in the early '70's (from 1971-73). But they've struggled under head coach Chip Watts.

Watts, who is in his third year with the program, played for the Indians (from 1994-98). An all-conference performer, he played his college baseball at Gardner-Webb University, But since taking over at his alma-mater, it's been anything but smooth sailing.

The Indians only won seven games last year, and were a disappointing 2-10 in league play. They've also missed the playoffs the last two year. But they did split their season series with the Pioneers last season. They rallied to beat WHS at home with a three-run uprising in the sixth inning, and they nearly swept the season series. But they blew an early 5-0 lead and dropped a 9-8 decision in 13 innings.

The Indians return nine players, including five senior, and four starters. And the Indians have some pop on offense. Their lineup is top heavy. The first five hitters are extremely dangerous. Jacob Hoyle is their best hitter. He's verbally committed to Western Carolina. Sophomore Adam Sturgill has been their most consistent hitter this season.

Junior Phillip Carroll, who came up midway through last season from the JV team, is their best defensive player in centerfield, and he's considered a plus offensively by the coaching staff; and

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senior lefthander Sawyer Smith, who is 1-0 with a 2.75 earned-run-average against the Pioneers in his career, is their top pitcher.

"We have to win this game,," said WHS junior David Martin. "We're not panicking right now. but it's real frustrating the way we lost last Friday night. I really thought we could win that game. But we just aren't hitting in the clutch. Hitting is contagious. I know we can get things going again. It's just a matter of someone getting hot in the lineup."

Unfortunately, Martin, who has three hits and five walks (two intentional) in his career against the Indians, won't be playing Tuesday night. He suffered a concussion after he was hit by a foul ball behind the plate last Friday night against Hickory. He saw his family doctor last Saturday, and will see him again on Friday. He should be cleared to play by Saturday when North Davidson comes to town.

"Not having David will hurt," Hardee said. "But we've got guys that can hit. We proved that early in the year. It's just a matter of getting back to the basics, and not putting pressure on ourselves at the plate."

The Pioneers will have the righthander Dylan Norris (2-0) on the mound Tuesday night. In two appearances against the Indians, Norris doesn't have a decision, but he's coughed up eight runs, six earned, in 6 1/3 innings of work for a 6.89 ERA.

Our coverage begins at 6 pm Tuesday night on Oldies 100.7 FM.