

Marion Out For Friday's Opener vs. WHS

Written by Mike Kelly

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Things got a little tougher for A.C. Reynolds football coach Shane Laws.

Laws, who is 45-10 with a state championship during his four-year run with the program, came into the 2011 season with a young football team that lost 29 seniors, including 16 starters to graduation. To make matters worse, the Rockets have now lost their best running back, A.J. Marion, thanks to a knee injury he suffered in a scrimmage against Hendersonville and Brevard last weekend.

"I really feel for A.J.," Laws said. "He's a great guy and a great player. He's really worked hard this off season in preparation for the year coming up. We're not going to rush him back. We're going to give him time to heal.

"The injury isn't as bad as it could have been. But he's strong, and we're strong. We'll overcome this setback together."

Tommy Burns will take over at running back for Marion in Friday's match-up against the Pioneers. And the Rockets will also feature a sophomore in Levi Ledford at quarterback. Ledford threw for more than a 1,000-yards last season at the JV level with 15 touchdowns and two interceptions.

"Our guys have a chance to show what they have," Laws said. "Tommy is a big strong runner, and I'm confident that he will do a good job. It's going to be interesting, but I have personally challenged our captains privately. All five of them played in the 2009 championship game. They know what it takes, and it's their time to show the younger players what it takes to reach the top. They must be an extension of me and the coaching staff. They're our leaders and we'll see how they respond Friday night."

The Rockets (12-2 last season) have faced adversity in the past. Last year, they battled some early-season injuries, but worked their way to the Class 4A Western Semi-Finals, where they were upended by Porter Ridge.

The biggest concern is on defense, where the likes of Courtland Clavette and Ben Councill (a freshman at the University of Notre Dame), backboned a stingy unit that only gave up 255 points in 14 games last fall.

"That's it's not going to be easy replacing people like that," Laws said. "But you're going to have years like this, where you're very young, and your players have to grow up in a hurry. Friday's game will be real test for a lot of our players. Watauga is a veteran team right now. They've got the big dogs, we've got the pups."

But the Rockets have dominated this series with WHS. ACR owns a commanding 9-2 lead in the series. But the last two games have been decided by the mere total of 15 points. The Rockets, battling a number of injuries in last year's game, hung on to beat the Pioneers 14-6 in Asheville.

"I told our kids on Monday that Watauga always plays us tough," Laws said. "I have a lot of respect for coach (Tim) Pruitt, Watauga's football team and their community. They always play

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us tough. And Friday night should be no exception."

Friday's game kicks off at 7:30 p.m.; our coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

Injury-wise for WHS, Taylor Shuford is probable with a knee injury; Cody McKinney is out with a broken hand. The Pioneers hope to get him back for the Ashe County game August 26.