It's been a while to say the least. But the Watauga High football team, which began the season winning four of its first five games, hasn't won a game since September 14 against Fred T. Foard. The Pioneers (4-6; 1-4 Northwestern 3A/

4A Conference) are mired in a five-game losing streak. And Friday's game against St. Stephens, which seemed like a lock just a few short weeks ago, doesn't look like such a sure thing right now.

The Indians (2-8; 1-4), who began the year with a seven-game losing streak, have won two of their last three games. Hickory snapped their modest two-game winning streak last Friday night by beating the Indians, 10-0.

"Our guys knew their backs were against the wall," said first-year Indians' coach Chris Bunting, who was an assistant with the Indians last season. "We felt we had to win our last four games to guarantee ourselves a playoff spot. But we slipped up last week. But I like our intensity right now. We're finally gelling as a team."

And the Indians have also found a running game, thanks to sopohmore Marcus Payne, who was promoted to the varsity on September 29. Payne backboned the Indians to their first win against North Bumcombe on October 5; he rambled for a career-high 186 yards in a 35-13 win against Fred T. Foard the following week.

"Marcus didn't play as a freshman," Bunting said. "But we knew he was special. We wanted to ease him into this, so we kept him on the (junior varsity) level for a few games before we decided to bring him up. But our running game starts with our offensive line. That was the strongest part of our team coming in. And those guys have done a great job transitioning from pass blocking to run blocking."

Dillon Lominac, Andrew Lackey, Darryl Cook, Christian Romaine and Brandon Davis have been the blue collar guys up front.

"And they do a great job creating holes for their skill people," said WHS coach Tom Wright. "They're physical. And that's what running teams do. They just line it up and come right at you."

"And that's the mentality we want to build here at St. Stephens," Bunting said. "I've always believed that establishing a running game will give you an honest chance to be a competitive every time you take the field."

And the Pioneers have had their problems stopping the run duirng this five-game slide. WHS has coughed up 1,901 yards during that stretch---an average of 380-yards-per-game. But the Pioneers, despite a 38-18 loss at Hibriten last week, got a much-needed shot in the arm from senior Collin Augustine, who perked up the running game in the second half, and freshman Aaron Dobbins, who turned in a strong effort at quarterback in his first varsity start. Dobbins was 19-29 for 170 yards and a touchdown.

"And I thought he did a very good job of managing the game last week," Wright said. "He's a smart guy and a student of the game. He understands football, and that's what you want from your quarterback. He's a fine young man, and he has a bright future ahead of him."

"It was nice to get that first one out of the way," Dobbins said. "I'm glad I finally settled in by the second half. But I'm sorry we lost the game. It just shows how much more I have to improve to be as good as I can be."

But win or lose, the Pioneers, thanks to the North Carolina High School Association's generous playoff system, should make the state playoffs. But winning on Senior Night, according to Wright would be huge for a team that's been reeling in recent weeks.

"Senior Night is always special," Wright said. "And I've been through my share of them. We have 24 seniors, and it would be nice to send them off in their final home game with a win. Plus, a win would give us a favorable seed (in the western pod) against a manageable opponent."

The Pioneers broke a three game losing streak in post-season play against Alexander Central last season before they were eliminated by Mooresville in the second round of the state playoffs. This is the 11th meeting between the Pioneers and the Indians. St. Stephens owns a 7-3 lead in the series, and the Indians have beaten WHs three consecutive times, which includes a 25-22 win in Hickory last season (if you're wondering, the Pioneers haven't beaten St. Stephens since 1996).

Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NOTES: The state playoff pairings will be announced Saturday night. First-round games will be played Friday, November 2. The Pioneers have missed the state playoffs once since 2006.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

SOUTH CALDWELL 6-0; 10-0
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 4-1; 5-5
HICKORY 3-2; 6-4
HIBRITEN 3-2; 6-4
WATAUGA 1-4; 4-6
ST. STEPHENS 1-4; 2-8
FRED T. FOARD 0-5; 2-7

FRIDAY'S GAMES

ST. STEPHENS @ WATAUGA
R.S. CENTRAL @ SOUTH CALDWELL
HIBRITEN @ ALEXANDER CENTRAL
FRED T. FOARD @ HICKORY

Photo Courtesy: Collin Augustine, Rob Moore