Written by Mike Kelly
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Alexander Central High girls basketball coach Matt Taylor has had his anxious moments against the Pioneers on the road. And Tuesday night was no exception. Watauga gave the Cougars all they could handle before Marie Ritchie caught fire in

the second half. The Alexander Central junior scored 13 of her game-high 16 points in the second half as the Cougars (19-3 overall; 8-2 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) knocked off WHS 56-49 at Lentz-Eggers Gym. The win also keeps the Cougars just one-half game behind first-place Fred T. Foard. The Tigers (8-1 in conference play) defeated Hibriten 56-29 in Lenior Tuesday night.

A free throw and a conventional three-point play by Ritchie snapped a 39-39 tie and put the Cougars on top to stay.

"It's really hard for us to handle her inside," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "She came up with some key rebounds against our (2-3) zone, and she hit some big shots. Her three-point play gave them a four-point lead and they withstood any run we had left in us."

That three-point play ignited an 11-1 run. A three ball by Mary Setzer gave the Cougars a 46-39 lead, and the Cougars eventually extended their lead to ten points. WHS (7-11; 2-6) never got any closer than five points the rest of the way. A three ball by Clare Harris made it 52-47 with 2:11 left, and a bucket by Savanna Wood with 20.9 seconds to go made it 54-49.

"When a good team gets a lead, they know how to hold it," Anderson said. "Alexander Central has been through some competitive games like this. They've beaten Hickory twice. They know how to close out games."

The game, which was tightly contested, featured four lead changes and five ties along the way. The Cougars have now

beaten WHS four consecutive times in the last two years. But the Cougars have only beaten WHS three times on its home floor in the last seven years (dating back to 2006-07).

Madi Suddreath finished with 13 points; Kelsie Rhyne came off the bench and finished with 12 points. She made four of five free throws down the stretch that salted the game away. Setzer had nine points, including a pair of threes in the second half.

Hannah Margolis paced WHS with 14 points. Wood finished with 11, Harris had eight points, and Danielle Welsh finished with seven points. And the Pioneers, who have lost four in a row, remain in sixth place with the loss. But WHS trails Hibriten by two games for the No.4 seed and home-court advantage in the opening round of the conference tournament with four games left on the schedule.

"I'm still confident we can get that number four seed," Anderson said. "We just have to show up and work hard every night. We put a scare in Alexander Central tonight. But we're limited on offense. (Cougars) are such a seasoned team with a very good bench. They made some big shots down the stretch and won the game."

The Pioneers go back to work tonight as Fred T. Foard comes to town. Coverage begins at 6 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NOTES: Alexander Central defeated the WHS JV girls, 50-32. Heather Ostwalt led WHS with seven points; Olivia Reese and Brooklin Carroll had six points apiece.

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 56, WATAUGA 49

Score By Periods	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**Total**
Alexander Central	11	18	14	13 -	56
Watauga	16	14	9	10 -	49

ACHS: RYHNE 12, SETZER 9, RITCHIE 16, SHARPE 6, SUDDREATH 13. FG: 12, 3FG: 6, 14-23.
THREE-POINTERS: SETZER 3, RHYNE 2, RITCHE.

WHS: WOOD 11, DERRICK 2, MARGOLIS 14, HARRIS 8, McNEILL 4, LOFLIN 3, WELSH 7. FG: 16, 3FG: 4, 5-6.
THREE-POINTERS: HARRIS 2, WOOD, MARGOLIS.