The Watauga High boys basketball team doesn't like doing things the easy way. Take Tuesday night's game with Hibriten at Lentz-Eggers Gym. The Pioneers, who led from wire-to-wire, hit A snag offensively after they built a ten-point lead late

in the first quarter, and survived a huge scare as they knocked off Hibriten 51-49 on Senior Night.

The win clinched the No.4 seed and home-court advantage in the opening-round of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference tournament, which begins next Monday night. The win also nails down the No.1 seed among the Class 4A schools in the NW3A/4A Conference, and guarantees WHS a home game in the opening-round of the state playoffs (which begin February 25).

"This team drives me crazy at times," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "We just can't do things the easy way. We warned these guys coming in, 'don't take Hibriten for granted.' They're a good team going through a tough stretch. If we let this one get away tonight, it takes away all we did in winning last Friday's game against South Caldwell. And any time you let a team like this hang around, it gives them a lot of confidence."

The Pioneers (12-8; 6-5 NW3A/4A) nearly blew a seven-point lead in the final stanza. Leading 50-43 on a three ball by Jay Harrill, the Panthers (8-13; 1-10) came charging back and cut the lead to one with 48 seconds left. A pair of threes by Mansa Hunt (with 1:21 to play) and by Kel Berry (with 48 seconds left) made it 50-49.

"Give them a lot of credit," Sanders said. "They switched to a 2-3 zone and it slowed the game down. We like to play at a fast pace, but they slowed the game down to a walk, and we lost our edge. And we struggle on offense. We couldn't pull away. Every time it looked like we built a nice lead, they kept finding ways to come back."

But like he did last Friday night against South Caldwell, Harrill saved the day once again. Following a missed free throw by Ben Margolis, Mike Davis corralled the rebound and the Panthers had one last possession to possibly win the game. But Harrill made a huge steal at the time line with 1.3 seconds left to seal the deal.

He was fouled on the play and made one free throw, giving WHS a two-point lead, and a huge win heading into Friday's season finale at St. Stephens.

"What can I say about Jay," Sanders said. "He just keeps finding ways to help our cause. Last Friday night, the guy carried us offensively. Tonight, he steps it up on the defensive end. That was a huge steal. He did a great job anticipating that pass. He showed great hustle all night."

Harrill, who also had a blocked shot, finished with 11 points and three steals; Cameron Baker paced WHS with 13 points and 11 rebounds. Collin Augustine, who made his first start of the season, finished with nine points and seven boards. Kel Berry led the Panthers with a game-high 25 points.

"Hibriten is a dangerous team," Sanders said. "That's what makes games like this so tough to win. They came in here with everything to gain, and it nearly cost us. But our guys pulled it out. It wasn't pretty at times, but we found a way. And that's all you can ask."

The Pioneers will host South Caldwell in the opening round of the NW3A/4A tournament next Monday night. The Spartans (8-12; 6-6) defeated Alexander Central 59-56 in overtime Tuesday

night in their final conference game of the season. The Pioneers swept the season series from South Caldwell this season, which includes a 70-66 overtime win last Friday night at home. The Spartans wrap up the regular season tonight at home with a non-conference game against Wilkes Central. The Pioneers travel to St. Stephens Friday night. Coverage begins at 6 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NOTES: WHS has won six in a row against Hibriten....The Panthers, with Tuesday night's loss, have dropped five straight....It was celebrity night at Lentz-Eggers Gym Tuesday night. Eric Breitenstein, who led WHS to a pair of Final Four appearances on the grid-iron (in 2006 and in 2007) and finished third in the Walter Payton Award (which goes to the best offensive player in the nation at the FCS level) voting back in December, was at the game Tuesday night. Breitenstein became the all-time leading rusher at Wofford College this past fall. And also in attendance was former Appalachian State quarterback/defensive back DeAndre Presley, who split time with the San Diego Chargers and the Miami Dolphins in the National Football League this past season....WHS won the JV game, 54-44. T.J. Poulos and Utah Jones had 12 points and five assists apiece. Matt Tyndall had nine points; Lexi Wilcox had seven points and six rebounds.

WATAUGA 51, HIBRITEN 49

Score By Periods	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**Total**
Hibriten	13	12	7	17 -	49
Watauga	19	10	7	15 -	51

HIBRITEN: HUNT 3, THOMAS 2, CALDWELL 2, DAVIS 5, BERRY 25, FELDER 7, BENFIELD 5. FG: 14, 3FG: 4, FT: 9-16.
THREE-POINTERS: BERRY 3, HUNT.

WATAUGA: HARRILL 11 (3 STEALS), STEURY 2, STURGILL 4, AUGUSTINE 9 (7 REBOUNDS), MARGOLIS 9 (5 ASSISTS, 3 STEALS), KOPPENHAVER 2, BAKER 13 (11 REBOUNDS), HOWSER 1. FG: 17, 3FG: 3, FT: 8-13.
THREE-POINTERS: HARRILL 2, MARGOLIS.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

TUESDAY'S GAMES
GIRLS:
WATAUGA 58, HIBRITEN 23
HICKORY 72, ST. STEPHENS 42
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 66, SOUTH CALDWELL 61
FRED T. FOARD - BYE

BOYS:
WATAUGA 51, HIBRITEN 49
HICKORY 70, ST. STEPHENS 58
SOUTH CALDWELL 59, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 56 (OT)
FRED T. FOARD - BYE

WEDNESDAY'S GAMES
WILKES CENTRAL @ SOUTH CALDWELL

FRIDAY'S GAMES
WATAUGA @ ST. STEPHENS
HICKORY @ FRED T. FOARD
ALEXANDER CENTRAL @ HIBRITEN
SOUTH CALDWELL - BYE