Written by Mike Kelly
Tuesday, 19 February 2013 10:24

It didn't take long for the Watauga High boys basketball team to turn it fortunes around. Following a forgettable effort in last Friday's season finale at St. Stephens, the Pioneers (13-9 overall) showed up in full force Monday night against South

Caldwell. The end result, the Pioneers knocked off the Spartans 67-56 in the opening round of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tournament at Lentz-Eggers Gym. The win also moves WHS into a semifinal showdown with Fred T. Foard, the No.1 seed, tonight at Craft Gymnasium in Hickory.

WHS turned the tide in its favor with a 1-3-1 half-court trap that seemed to unravel South Caldwell. The Spartans (8-14) had problems getting the ball up the floor. Head coach Lee Swanson even called a pair of time outs early in the first quarter trying to settle his team down. But to no avail.

"We knew coming in that South Caldwell was weak on the perimeter," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "That's why we employed that defense. We wanted to force the issue early, and we wanted to create offense off our defense. We got some transtiion buckets early, and it set the tone for the rest of the night."

The Pioneers led all the way. The Spartans made a run and got within three at 27-24 late in the second quarter. But the Pioneers went on a 7-0 run and built a 34-24 advantage with 58 seconds left in the first half. DeWayne Mackey had five points in that run. He finished with 10 points, five rebounds, nine assists, and three steals before he fouled out with 1:48 left in the game.

Ben Howser, who was in a scoring slump (15 points in his last five games), rediscovered his scoring touch and finished with 14 points, six rebounds and four assists. Collin Augustine paced WHS with a career-high 16 points and five steals.

"We were real aggressive on the boards," Sanders said. "We came out with a lot of energy tonight and we were focused. Hopefully, we can turn the page and start a new run in the tournament. We didn't have any lapses on offense tonight. That's because we were so aggressive on the defensive end. When we execute on both ends of the court, we're a tough team to beat. When we don't, especially in this league, it can get ugly real quick."

The Spartans made one last run at WHS in the second half. They got within six points at 49-43 on a pair of free throws by Jared Mask in the fourth quarter. But an 8-1 run, ignited by Howser and Augustine, put the contest out of reach. WHS led 57-44 and coasted home from there. The lead eventually grew to 15 points.

The Pioneers also did a good job shutting down Mask. He was held to nine points, and he didn't score his first field goal until 5:57 remained in the fourth quarter. Jordyn Probst led South Caldwell with 22 points.

"Those guys are the backbone of their team," Sanders said. "And if they're on, it's tough to shut them off. But we were there to contest (Mask's) shots tonight, and we did a good job boxing out inside. We limited them to one shot, and that allowed us to pull away. But we can't dwell on this. We've got a real challenge (tonight) with Fred T. Foard."

The Tigers (20-4), who defeated Hickory to win the regular-season title Friday night, swept the season series against WHS. Foard blasted WHS 69-41 in their last meeting at Lentz Eggers

Gym on February 5. And after winning seven straight against the Tigers, the Pioneers have lost two in a row in the series.
"We know we're going to have our hands full (tonight) with Fred T. Foard," Sanders said. "But we got the hard part out of the way. We won the first game. You can't win the tournament, if you don't win that first game. We're in the semifinals tonight, and we need a solid four quarters from our guys to advance. I told them before tonight's game, 'we are in survive and advance mode.'"
Coverage of tonight's semifinal game with the Tigers begins at 6:10 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.
Tonight's second semifinal game finds Hickory taking on St. Stephens at 8 p.m. The Red Tornaodes advanced by knocking off Alexander Central 59-46 Monday night; the Indians advanced by knocking off Hibriten, 77-57. The Panthers finish the season having lost seven in a row. The boys championship game will be played Friday night at 8 p.m. The Pioneers haven't been to the conference finals since 2006-07 at McDowell, when they were members of the old Northwetern 4A Conference.

WATAUGA 67, SOUTH CALDWELL 56

Score By Periods 1st 2nd 3rd 4th Total

South Caldwell	10	16	8	22	56
Watauga	17	18	12	20	67

SOUTH CALDWELL: SMITH 3, BROWN 3, BARKER 10, WAKEFIELD 2, PROBST 22, MASK 9, GREENE 3, EGGERS 4. FG: 13, 3FG: 5, FT: 15-22.
THREE-POINTERS: SMITH, BROWN, BARKER, PROBST, MASK.

WHS: HARRILL 2, STURGILL 2, EGGERS 2, AUGUSTINE 16 (5 STEALS), MARGOLIS 1, KOPPENHAVER 7, BAKER 9 (6 REBOUNDS, 5 STEALS, 6 ASSISTS), HOWSER 14 (6 REBOUNDS, 4 ASSISTS), MACKEY 10 (5 REBOUNDS, 3 STEALS, 9 REBOUNDS), LAMBERT 2, POUILOS 2. FG: 24, 3FG: 1, FT: 16-26.
THREE-POINTERS: HOWSER.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

MONDAY'S GAMES

GIRLS:

WATUAGA 56, HIBRITEN 50

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 76, SOUTH CALDWELL 47

FRED T. FOARD 54, ST. STEPHENS 34

WEDNESDAY'S SEMIFINAL GAMES

CRAFT GYMNASIUM (HICKORY)

WATAUGA v. HICKORY, 6:30 P.M.

FRED T. FOARD v. ALEXANDER CENTRAL 8 P.M.

BOYS:

MONDAY'S GAMES

WATAUGA 67, SOUTH CALDWELL 56

ST. STEPHENS 77, HIBRITEN 57

HICKORY 59, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 46

TUESDAY'S SEMIFINAL GAMES

CRAFT GYMNASIUM (HICKORY)

WATAUGA v. FRED T. FOARD, 6:30 P.M.

HICKORY v. ST. STEPHENS, 8 P.M.