Written by Mike Kelly
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The Watauga High girl's basketball team gave Hickory all it could handle Wednesday night in the semifinal round of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tournament. The Pioneers (11-13), thanks to a stingy defensive stand, kept the Red

Tornadoes (23-2), the No.1 seed, in check for the most part. But the Pioneers struggled offensively and dropped a 54-33 decision at Craft Gymnasium. The loss also snapped WHS' four-game winning streak.

The win moves Hickory into Friday night's championship game against Alexander Central. The Cougars (23-3) defeated Fred T. Foard 68-56 in Wednesday night's second semifinal game. It will be the fourth meeting between the schools this season. The Cougars have beaten the Red Tornadoes twice this year.

But Hickory had to earn its way into the finals. The Pioneers, who dropped a pair of lopsided games against the Red Tornadoes (81-39 in Boone on January 4, and 64-37 in Hickory on January 29), frustrated Hickory Wednesday night. The most frustrated Hickory player had to be sophomore Yazman Hannah, one of the top scorers in the confernce. She poured in 40 points against Fred T. Foard last Friday night. But against WHS, she was held scoreless in the first half, and she didn't score her first field goal until 3:47 remained in the game.

"We got a hand in her face, and we were constantly getting someone in front of her," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "We got a couple of traveling calls, and she never really got comfortable around the basket. We had a great defensive effort tonight. But we lacked confidence on offense and we didn't score enough points."

The Pioneers didn't score until 2:50 remained in the first quarter on a pair of free throws by Hannah Margolis. But WHS only trailed 12-5 after one. And the Pioneers trailed 16-7 late in the first half before the Red Tornadoes went on a 13-4 run and opened up a 29-11 lead at the break. Senior Farrah Young ignited that outburst by scoring nine points in the run.

"That little run just before halftime really hurt us," Anderson said. "It gave them a big lead, but we still weren't out of the game. They had to earn their points tonight. We did a great job boxing out and limiting them to one shot. That 2-3 zone has really paid off for us this season. It's made us more competitive, especially against some very good teams."

Danasia Witherspoon literally put the Red Tornadoes on her back. She finished with a game-high 25 points. But the Red Tornadoes were a mear 21-63 from the floor (33%).

"Danasia is just a great player," Anderson said. "She is so strong inside. It's tough to contain a player like that for the entire game. She kept battling in there and eventually started winning the battle. She came up with some big rebounds, and she made some huge buckets for them that kept the game out of reach for us. And that was really the difference tonight."

Witherspoon put the game out of reach in the late stages of the third quarter. Leading 33-22, Witherspoon scored the last five points in the period and gave Hickory a 16-point advantage heading into the final stanza. The Pioneers never got any closer than 13 points the rest of way.

A 10-2 run early in the fourth quarter gave Hickory a 50-29 lead. Hannah scored six points in that run, and the Red Tornaodes eventually stretched their lead to 23 points with less than two minutes to play.

"Give Hickory a lot of credit," Anderson said. "They really turned up their defense against us.

That's the most aggressive I've seen them on defense against us all year. They really hurt us with their pressure and forced us to make a lot of mistakes."
The Pioneers were 12-29 from the floor (41%), but they made 37 turnovers. Margolis led WHS with 12 points; Savanna Wood finished with six points. Young had 11 for the Red Tornadoes; Hannah and Alex Wright finished with eight points apiece. And despite the loss, there's still some basketball yet to play.
Both the WHS boy's and girl's basketball teams will open the state playoffs at Lentz-Eggers Gym next Monday night. The state playoff pairings will be announced on Saturday by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association and will be posted on goblueridge.net when they become available.

HICKORY 54, WATAUGA 33

Score By Period	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**Total**
Watauga	5	6	11	11	- 33
Hickory	12	17	9	16	- 54

WHS: WOOD 6, DERRICK 2, MARGOLIS 12, HARRIS 4, McNEILL 4, MAKAROVA 2, LOFLIN 3. FG: 11, 3FG: 1, FT: 8-9.
THREE-POINTERS: WOOD.

HHS: YOUNG 11, WITHERSPOON 25, HANNAH 8, WRIGHT 8, GAITHER 2. FG: 19, 3FG: 2,

FT: 10-16.
THREE-POINTERS: YOUNG 2.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT

WEDNESDAY'S SEMIFINAL GAMES
GIRLS:
HICKORY 54, WATAUGA 33
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 68, FRED T. FOARD 56

FRIDAY'S CHAMPIONSHIP GAMES
GIRLS:
ALEXANDER CENTRAL v. HICKORY, 6:30 p.m.

BOYS:
HICKORY v. FRED T. FOARD, 8 p.m.