

Hickory Wins NW3A/4A Title

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 19 February 2011 13:42

Watauga High's dream of winning its first conference championship came to a crashing halt Friday night at Kraft Gymnasium in Hickory, NC.

The Hickory Red Tornadoes (23-2 overall) lived up to their billing as regular-season champions by crushing WHS 86-53 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference championship game. But the Pioneers (14-12), who were the last team to beat Hickory in conference play, gave the Red Tornadoes fits early on.

A three-pointer by Shelby Gilliam and her fastbreak basket moments later gave WHS an early 5-2 advantage. The Pioneers even got one of Hickory's best players, Jada Payne, in foul trouble. Payne picked up her second foul in the opening quarter when she got tangled up with Brook Rhodes and was forced to sit the bench.

But like all championship teams, the Red Tornadoes shook off the effects of their slow start and eventually grabbed the lead. Andrea Miller became a force in the paint as she hit the go-ahead basket giving Hickory a 9-7 lead, and putting the Red Tornadoes on top to stay.

"I told the girls before the game that we had to work to win every minute of this game," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "I was proud of how we started the game. Defensively, we slowed the game down and it disrupted their offense. They weren't comfortable. But it's hard to slow a team like this down for a full game. They have a lot of weapons."

One of those weapons, Hillary Sigmon, picked up where Miller left off. After struggling with her shooting touch early on, she finally settled in and buried three trifectas, two in the second quarter, that ignited a 12-0 run. That turned a 22-15 lead into a 19-point cushion.

Hickory eventually led by 21 and was up 40-23 by halftime. But Anderson felt his team was still in contention.

"I know we were down by 17 at the break," he said. "But I felt we were still in it. I really felt we had a chance to make another run at them."

But Payne, who was saddled with two quick fouls and only scored six points in the first half, disrupted all those plans in the third period. She erupted for 22 points in the quarter, and that effort ballooned the lead to 39 points. The Red Tornadoes outscored WHS 34-12 in the period and the Pioneers never recovered.

"Great players make big plays in games like this," Anderson said. "I'll guarantee you that the majority, if not all, of her shots in that third quarter came in the paint or at the free throw line. She's very strong inside. We couldn't shut her off."

Payne, who was also named the tournament's Most Valuable Player, finished with a game-high 28 points. Sigmon finished with 23, Miller had 13. Rhodes led WHS with 12 points. Gilliam finished with seven points, Hannah Margolis had eight.

The Red Tornadoes have now won 16 consecutive league games dating back to last year. And they've beaten WHS four straight times since that loss at the old Lentz-Eggers Gym last season.

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The Pioneers will open the state playoffs at home Monday night against East Gaston. The Warriors (11-12) are the No.5 seed overall, and the No.3 seed among the Class 4A schools in the MEGA 7 3A/4A Conference. The Pioneers defeated East Gaston in the first-round of the state playoffs last season. Rhodes, only a freshman as the time, came off the bench and poured in 16 points in that win.

Our coverage begins at 6 pm Monday night on Oldies 100.7 FM. Hickory won the men's title game by knocking off St. Stephens, 64-59. Denzel Dillingham led Hickory with 19 points and was named the tournament's MVP.

HICKORY 86, WHS 53

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| WATAUGA | 11 | 12 | 12 | 18 | - 53 |
| HICKORY | 18 | 22 | 34 | 12 | - 86 |

WHS: MARGOLIS 8, CHURCH 5, BAIRD 5, SHIPP 2, WRIGHT 2, GILLIAM 7, ALFORD 4, HARRLESON 4, RHODES 12, WILSON 4.

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HICKORY: ABERNATHY 2, YOUNG 8, HOYLE 1, BOWERS 3, SIGMON 23, PAYNE 28,
COLBERT 4, MILLER 13, PASPA 2, BROWN 2.