

McKinney Returns Friday vs. Vikings

Written by Mike Kelly

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Watauga High senior Cody McKinney will finally play his first game of the season Friday night.

And McKinney, who has been on the shelf with a broken left hand, makes his 2011 debut against WHS's biggest rival, the Avery Vikings, a team that beat the Pioneers last season. "I can't wait," McKinney said. "It's so excited, I can't wait. I broke my hand in the first scrimmage we had against Johnson County (TN). My hand started hurting, but I played through it. I thought it was bruised, but when I took off my glove, my hand was huge and I had it checked out. "(WHS trainer) Cindy (Lentz) said she thought it was broken, and I was out two weeks. It was very frustrating and disappointing."

McKinney, a linebacker, turned in a stellar junior year for the Pioneers. He put up all-conference numbers with 81 tackles, 3.5 tackles-for-loss, an interception and a fumble recovery for a team that was 3-8 and missed the state playoffs for the first time since 2005.

"I really want this to be a special year," McKinney said. "Not just for me, but for our team. It was tough losing last year like we did. We're better than that, and this year's senior class is doing a great job of leading our team."

And the Pioneers have put together a pair of stellar efforts, especially on the defensive side of the ball. In their first two games this season----against A.C. Reynolds and Ashe County----the Pioneers have been a very stingy group. They gave up 207 yards against the Rockets, and they held Ashe County to 137 yards in a 32-14 win last Friday night.

"And we could easily be 2-0." McKinney said. "The guys are giving their all. We really want to turn this thing around. Last year wasn't any fun. But give coach (Klay) Anderson and coach (Preston) Clark a lot of the credit. They've done a great job working with us. And coach Anderson really thinks things out. He's a real patient, intelligent guy. Their coaching has paid off with the way we're playing right now."

And McKinney has a chance to redeem himself Friday night against Avery. The Vikings (1-1) are led by pre-season All-State quarterback Alex Villanueva, who threw for 293 yards and two touchdowns last season against the Pioneers. Avery won that game 28-14 at Jack Groce Stadium.

That win snapped a four-game slide against the Pioneers. It was also Avery's first win in Boone since 2004.

"Alex is a great quarterback and he has a very quick release," McKinney said. "A three step drop and the ball is gone. But if we can squeeze his receivers Friday night, we might have a chance. His receivers are talented, but they're also pretty young. And for me personally, to come back against Avery is big for me.

"It's a rivalry game. We want to beat them. Losing to them last year, and with Alex (Fox) getting hurt, it was tough to take. Beating them this year, with this being my first game back, would be huge."

Our coverage of that game begins at 6:30 p.m. Friday night from MacDonald Stadium in

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