

Pioneers Defy Their Critics

Written by Mike Kelly

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Let's face it, the Watauga High football team was left for dead coming into this season.

The expectations weren't very good. After all, the 2010 campaign was a whirlwind of controversy and disappointment. A humiliating loss at Hickory, only one conference win, capped off by an embarrassing loss against St. Stephens at home in the season finale shut the door on a forgettable year.

But it's a new year, and in turn, it's been a new beginning. And for a football team that was primarily an after-thought when the season began, the Pioneers have become serious contenders for a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference championship.

WHS (5-3 overall; 3-0 NW3A/4A) took a huge step in that direction by knocking off Alexander Central 28-10 Friday night on Homecoming Night at Jack Groce Stadium. The win leaves WHS just one-half game behind South Caldwell for first place. And the Pioneers travel to Sawmills to play the Spartans next Friday night.

"It's the conference championship game," said WHS senior Alex Fox, who was laid up with a knee injury at this time last season. "Last year was tough to take. But the attitudes have been real good since the off season. We really worked hard to reach this point. We're going to work real hard next week in practice, and we're going to give it our best shot next week against South."

Next Friday night's game at South Caldwell will be WHS's largest showdown since 2007, when the Pioneers defeated A.C. Reynolds (25-12) to earn a share of the Northwestern 4A Conference title with East Burke and the Rockets. A win next Friday night, and the Pioneers will be in a position to capture their third conference title since 1981.

"Nobody is giving us a chance," said WHS senior linebacker Cody McKinney. "Maxpreps (.com) had us losing this game (against Alexander Central) by five points. When we beat Hickory, the Hickory paper (the Daily Record) said the rain slowed them down. We just have to ignore that and play football. Tonight's win against Alexander Central is big. It guarantees us a playoff spot."

Remember, the Pioneers missed the playoffs last season, the first time that's happened since 2005. And the odds going into their match-up with the Spartans next Friday night seems to be in their favor. The Spartans beat WHS 27-7 last season, but the Pioneers have won three of their last five meetings between the schools dating back to 2006.

"The whole thing this year is just to prove everyone wrong," said quarterback Ethan Greene. "We have the ability, so why not do it. Even this week, NCPreps had us losing this game tonight. But we won and proved them wrong. So next week, we have to go down to South Caldwell and prove those people wrong."

Alexander Central coach Tom Harper is a firm believer in WHS and head coach Tim Pruitt. And he had a front-row seat as he watched his team get manhandled by the Pioneers Friday night. "They're a determined bunch," he said. "You could see it on film. They just get after you. They

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have a great bunch of seniors that won't take no for an answer. Watauga is a solid football team."

It's about time someone started paying attention.