

## Pioneers Hope To Regroup

Written by Mike Kelly

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The Watauga High football team suffered a minor setback Friday night.

Yes, the Pioneers (5-4 overall; 3-1 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) lost to South Caldwell (8-1; 5-0), but all is not lost. The Spartans, who have won eight in a row, rambled for 267 yards and beat WHS

20-0 to earn a tie for the conference championship. It's South Caldwell's first conference championship since 1994, when the Spartans won the old Western Piedmont 3A title.

Despite the loss, however, the Pioneers still have an honest shot at earning a share of the NW3A/4A title. All they have to do is win their last two games against Hibriten and St. Stephens, and Alexander Central must beat South Caldwell next Friday night, and the Pioneers would be co-champions.

"It's a little bittersweet to have it happen that way," said WHS senior Will Morgan. "You really want to win it outright. But winning the conference or not, we still have a lot of football left to play. Coach (Klay) Anderson and (Preston) Clark told us we still have two games to go, so there's still work to do."

And the WHS defense, which has been stellar this season, turned in its usual day at the office. Even though the Spartans ran for 267 yards, they earned every yard they got. The Pioneers, who were victimized by a fake punt early in the second quarter that set up South Caldwell's first touchdown of the game, kept the contest within reach until the fourth quarter. But a couple of costly penalties, and a short field eventually allowed the Spartans to pull away.

"Even though we lost this game, we still have two games to play," said WHS linebacker Cody McKinney. "That's what coach (Tim Pruitt) was telling us after the game. It's disappointing that we lost this game, but we still have a shot to finish strong, and we're going to the state playoffs." And making the state playoffs is quite an achievement for a team that only won three games last season. The Pioneers, the No.2 seed overall in the NW3A/4A Conference, and the No.2 seed among the Class 4A schools in league play, have a shot at hosting a first-round playoff game (on November 4), something they haven't done since 2007.

"we're in the playoffs," Pruitt said. "And we'll be pulling for South Caldwell to win next week at Alexander Central. The last thing we want is for Alexander to win. It would give everyone a 1-1 record among the (Class) 4A schools, and we really don't want to go to a coin toss. There's a chance we could lose that coin toss, and the possibility of hosting a first-round playoff game. But at the same time, a big congratulations to coach (Butch) Carter and South Caldwell. They have a great team."

All the Spartans have to do is beat Alexander Central next Friday night and they win the conference outright. For WHS, the Pioneers missed out on winning only their third championship in 30 years, and their first since 2007. The big problem Friday night was offense, or the lack of it. WHS only had 58 yards, and running back Kyle Chambers, who had 905 rushing yards coming in, was held to 17 yards on eight carries. It was his most unproductive

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game since the season opener against A.C. Reynolds, when he was held to minus three-yards rushing.

"We knew he was a huge weapon for them," said Carter, now in his 11th year and the dean of coaches in the NW3A/4A Conference. "He's a very strong runner, so we had to jam things up inside, and we had to watch the corners. We didn't want him getting loose for a big run downfield. He reminds me a lot of Eric (Breitenstein, a red-shirt junior at Wofford College). He has deceptive speed, and once he gets going, it's hard to bring him down."

But the Pioneers have been resilient. They're 3-0 coming off a loss this season, and they haven't lost two consecutive games all year.

"I really want us to win our last two games," Pruitt said. "We've got to move forward. We've responded well to losses this season. We've got a big one next week (against Hibriten) and it will be Senior Night. If we come out and play with the same effort we did tonight, I really feel good about our chances, especially in the last two weeks."

"We can't dwell on this loss," Morgan said. "We have to focus on our last two games. We have a chance to host a state playoff game, so we have to win our next two games to be able to do that. We have a great senior group and a great coaching staff behind us. We're excited about playing our next two games. There's still a lot to play for."

The Pioneers return home to play Hibriten next Friday night. Our coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.