

Pioneers Fall In Season Finale

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 29 October 2011 12:02

It was an impressive start, but it turned into a struggle, and that struggle led to a disappointing finish.

That sentence pretty much summed up Friday night's season ending loss for the Watauga High football team. The Pioneers (6-5 overall; 4-2 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference), who had an outside chance of possibly hosting their first state playoff game in four years,

dropped a 25-22 decision at St. Stephens. It's also the third straight time the Indians (4-7; 2-4) have victimized the Pioneers in the final game of the season. The Indians also nailed down the No.2 seed among the Class 3A schools in the league and earned an automatic bid to the state playoffs---their first appearance since 2008.

"And they're the only team we haven't beaten since this league started up (in the fall of 2009)," said WHS coach Tim Pruitt. "They just seem to have our number. What can I say. There's got to be a winner and a loser. And we lost tonight. But the way this game started, and the way it finished was very disappointing."

The Pioneers got things started in dominant fashion. WHS took the opening kick-off and marched into the end zone five plays later. Kyle Chambers ignited the drive with a 57-yard scamper on the first offensive play of the game. He scored four-plays later on a one-yard run for a 7-0 lead. But from that point on, the Pioneers hit a snag offensively.

Chambers, who ran for a career-high 253 yards against Hibriten last week, had 137 yards in the first quarter alone. But he was held to a mere 35 yards the rest of the way.

"Our defense has done a pretty good job this season," said St. Stephens coach Fred Whalen.

"But we've put them in a lot of bad situations because of turnovers. They've had to defend a short field on a lot of occasions."

And the Indians turned it over three times Friday night, but the Pioneers returned the favor with three turnovers of their own. Leading 18-15, the Indians finally put the game out of reach. An interception by Zach Fincannon at midfield, that he fumbled, was recovered by Joel Vera, who returned it to the WHS 26-yard-line. That play led to the game-clinching score as Jon Sweet rambled in from three-yards out, three plays later for a 25-15 lead with 1:59 left.

"That was a big play for them," Pruitt said. "(Zach Bumgarner) did a good job tipping that ball on the interception. They aren't as bad as their record. I told our guys that all week. St. Stephens has some good athletes, and they made a few more plays than we did tonight."

Sweet, who led the NW3A/4A in rushing this season, finished with 177 yards on 27 carries and two touchdowns. His 35-yard run with 8:07 left in the third quarter gave the Indians a 12-7 lead.

"To look at him, you wouldn't think he was such an impact player," Whalen said. "He's not real big (5-foot-9, 175 pounds), but he's an elusive runner. He ran for nearly two thousand yards at the JV level last year, so we had an idea of what he could do for us this season."

The Indians added to their lead early in the fourth quarter. Freshman quarterback Matt Williams hooked up with Ian Martin on a 17-yard scoring toss with eight minutes left for an 18-7 lead. It

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was Martin's second touchdown toss of the night. He hooked up with Martin on a 36-yard scoring toss on a flee-flicker late in the first half.

"We decided to make Matt our starting quarterback in the fifth game of the season," Whalen said. "We had been alternating him with Ky'rawn (Whitfield), but I just decided Matt was our guy. He's made mistakes, of course. He's only a freshman, but he's also handled the position pretty well."

Williams was 9-14 for 115 yards through the air; he also ran for 30 yards. As a team, the Indians, who were next to last in rushing offense last season, had 227 yards on the ground. And they actually out gained the Pioneers.

"Since the Elizabethon game, we've been giving up way too many rushing yards," Pruitt said. "We've got to shore that up. We can't give up rushing yards like this next Friday (in the opening round of the state playoffs). It's something we have fix."

Quarterback Ethan Greene was 9-16 passing for 132 yards with a pair of touchdown passes. His 47-yard strike to Cameron Baker with 6:39 to play got WHS with three at 18-15; and his 25-yard toss to Ethan Poulos with eight seconds left made it 25-22.

WHS tried an on-side kick and recovered at the Indians 44-yard-line. The Pioneers moved it to the 32 with 1.4 seconds left before Greene fumbled and Dale Harshman recovered as time expired. Greene was also sacked four times.

"We tried to go to the end zone there, but we couldn't get the pass off," Pruitt said. "They got good pressure up front. I never thought about a possible field goal. It would have been a 50 yarder, and we haven't practiced that all year. But they made some big plays defensively, and we made some costly penalties."

The Pioneers, who will be making their fifth playoff appearance in six years, will open post-season play against an opponent to be determined by Saturday afternoon.

NOTES: The Pioneers were also flagged six times for 61 yards.....The Indians lead the all-time series against WHS, 7-3.....The Pioneers haven 't beaten St. Stephens since 1996.....WHS which finished in a two-way tie for second place with Hickory is officially the No.2 seed overall in the NW3A/4A. WHS owns the tie-breaker after the Pioneers defeated Hickory on September 23.....The Pioneers are also the No.2 seed among the Class 4A schools in the league.....The Pioneers haven't won a state playoff game since they defeated Purnell Swett in 2007.....Our coverage of next Friday night's playoff opener begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

SCORING

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PASSING:

WHS: GREENE 9-16-2INT-2TD-132
STS: WILLIAMS 9-14-115-2INT-2TD

RECEIVING:

WHS: POULOS 4-55-TD, BOLSTER 3-22, BAKER 1-47-TD
STS: FUSSELL 4-29, MARTIN 2-53-2TD

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

SOUTH CALDWELL 6-0; 10-1
WATAUGA 4-2; 6-5

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HICKORY 4-2; 7-3-1
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3-3; 5-6
ST. STEPHENS 2-4; 4-7
HIBRITEN 1-5; 4-7
FRED T. FOARD 1-5; 2-8

FRIDAY NIGHT'S GAMES

ST. STEPHENS 25, WATAUGA 22

SOUTH CALDWELL 48, R.S. CENTRAL 14

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 48, HIBRITEN 19

HICKORY 31, FRED T. FOARD 6

OTHER GAMES

A.C REYNOLDS 42, NORTH BUNCOMBE 20

T.C. ROBERSON 47, ENKA 37

FREEDOM 63, PATTON 0

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NEWTON-CONOVER 57, WEST CALDWELL 30
SOUTH IREDELL 17, EAST BURKE 14