

## Pioneers Finally "Get Off The Schnide"

Written by Mike Kelly

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The Watauga High football team ended four years of frustration Friday night. It all came to an end, thanks to a determined senior class and a gutsy effort by quarterback Ethan Greene, who was playing on a badly sprained ankle. Greene, who rolled his ankle with 8:42 left in the first half as he was going out of bounds, hooked up with Ethan Poulos on a 28-yard scoring toss with 7:37 left in the fourth quarter that handed the Pioneers a 14-10 win at Jack Groce Stadium

in the opening round of the Class 4A state playoffs.

It also handed the Pioneers their first playoff victory since November 23, 2007, when they defeated Purnell Swett at the old Jack Groce Stadium. The win also nailed down WHS (7-5) first winning season in four years, and it gave head coach Tim Pruitt his first playoff victory.

And it all happened in a matter of 47 seconds. And it was all set up by senior Alex Fox, who picked off a Nick Salyer pass and returned it to the Cougars (5-7) 30-yard-line.

"These seniors are such a special group," said WHS coach Tim Pruitt. "It was a great effort by our kids. They never gave up. We had two major injuries tonight, but our kids battled through the adversity."

The Pioneers lost tight end Clint Trivette, who suffered a broken hand, in the second quarter after he collided with Nathan Birkedall of the Cougars trying to catch a pass. They also overcame two crucial turnovers late in the first half that gave Alexander Central a 10-7 lead. A fumble by T.J. Poulos on a punt return set up Salyer's 10-yard touchdown strike to Phillip Ferguson that tied up the game at 7-7 with 3:52 left in the first half; and Kyle Chambers fumble on WHS's next possession set up Ismael Aldaco's record-setting 43 -yard field goal just before halftime that gave the Cougars the lead. But the Pioneers, like they have all year, found a way to get it done. A great defensive effort, led by David Martin who turned in a game-high 13 tackles, and three costly turnovers by the Cougars in the second half, put the Pioneers in a position to win the game.

"I've looked up to this senior class since they were sophomores," said junior Collin Augustine, who snared a 36 yard third-down pass that gave WHS a first down at the Cougars' 20-yard-line that iced the game away. "They're great leaders and I've learned a lot from them. We fell behind, but our defense was playing well. We knew the offense would eventually come through. We went through some adversity tonight, especially against a team we've all ready beaten. It's hard to beat the same team twice in one season, but we executed when we had to and won the game."

The win moves WHS into a second-round game next Friday night at Mooresville. The Blue Devils (10-2) defeated East Gaston 35-15 in their first-round game Friday night. But for WHS, the monkey is finally off its back. The Pioneers, who lost three consecutive playoff games and were outscored 103-24 during that stretch, are still alive. And that's all that matters at the moment.

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"To come out and play football this year, and to have a winning season, and to win a playoff game is such a great feeling," Martin said. "The coaches put together a great game plan, and Ethan showed a lot of determination coming back to play with a real bad ankle sprain. He could hardly walk at halftime. Everybody stepped up big when we had to."

Greene was 7-14 passing for 141 yards. He threw a touchdown pass and he also scored WHS's first touchdown on a one-yard run, capping off a ten play, 69-yard drive to start the game. Ethan Poulos caught five passes for 83 yards, which included his game-winning 28-yard reception, and Chambers ran for 96 yards on 23 carries.

Defensively, Fox finished with nine tackles and his interception that set up the game-winning score; Cody McKinney, who had a 40-yard run on WHS's first possession of the game that set up Greene's touchdown run, had eight stops and two tackles-for-loss; and Augustine had eight stops, a quarterback sack and a tackle for loss.

"We don't like to lose," Chambers said. "We have a lot of heart, and we like to show it on the field. Getting the winning record is great. This is the best team I've ever been on. This was a big game, and we found a way to win. I've never been to the second round of the playoffs, but we made it happen."

The Pioneers travel to Mooresville next Friday night. Our coverage of that game begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM.

**NOTES:** The Pioneers have won two in a row against the Cougars. That's their longest winning streak since they won three in a row from 2007-09.....The Cougars lead the all-time series with 20-15....But the Cougars are 1-5 against the Pioneers in Boone since 2005.....They're 0-2 at the new Jack Groce Stadium.....Cougars coach Tom Harper is 3-7 against the Pioneers. He's 2-5 with the Cougars.