

Sanders Reaching A Milestone

Written by Mike Kelly

Tuesday, 06 December 2011 09:08

He won't make a big deal out of it, but Watauga High men's basketball coach Rob Sanders is just one win away from his 100th career victory.

He's also third in school history in wins behind a pair of

legends in Carter Lentz (198 wins) and Marc Payne (182 wins), who is currently the men's coach and the Athletics Director at Ashe County High School. Not bad for a guy that got his start as a middle-school coach at Parkway School.

"I don't even think about those things," Sanders said. "I'm more concerned about our game (tonight) against West Caldwell. That's what really concerns me. The players are responsible for this. It wouldn't happen without them."

A modest response for a guy was named head coach of the Pioneers on an interim basis back in 2004-05. His first team went 14-11. And the Pioneers suffered a loss in the opening round of the conference tournament (the old Northwestern 4A Conference) in Marion against McDowell, knocking them out of the state playoffs. He's only had two losing seasons during his eight-year stretch with the program, and along the way, he's also pulled off some monumental wins

The first one came against East Burke in the opening round of the state playoffs in 2007-08.

Despite a 10-16 record that season, Sanders led the Pioneers to their first playoff win in 20 years. Prior to that, the last time WHS had won a playoff game was in Marc Payne's rookie year in 1989, when the Pioneers defeated Myers Park in a first-round game.

He topped that off by getting the Pioneers to their first sectional championship game two years ago. It was WHS's first trip to such a venue in 30 years. The last time it happened, Carter Lentz led the Pioneers to the Western Regional in 1970. And now, Sanders is just one win away from 100, and he can get it tonight against West Caldwell on the road in Gamewell, NC.

The Warriors (0-3) have a new look this season---a new coach and a new philosophy. Hank Newson, who was an assistant coach under the legendary Danny Anderson the last four years, takes over this season. And the Warriors, a run-and-gun team under Anderson, are taking more of a deliberate approach this year.

"(Newson) has a very tough job," Sander said. "He's replacing a legend in Danny. He's got to prove himself to the players, and he's got to prove that his system will produce wins. Let's face it, they're use to playing one way. This is something new. It takes time, but they're still blessed with a lot of athletes."

And the Warriors, who were 24-3 last season, we hit very hard by graduation. The biggest loss was three-time all (Caldwell) County Player of the Year, Kendall Jones. The Warriors also lost their top five scorers. In turn, they feature an entirely new starting five, and there's also four freshmen on the team.

"Kendall was their leader the last four years," Sanders said. "How he went, they went. He was a great player and he led them to a lot of wins. But now, they've got to find another way to get it done. It's a tough situation for (Newson), but sometimes as coaches, you go through things like that. You just have to be who you are. He can't be Danny Anderson. He's utilizing his talent to play a certain way to help his team win games."

Newson is hoping Kalice Steptoe, who backed up Jones last season, can fill the bill at the point guard position. Meanwhile, the Pioneers (2-0), who were hit hard by graduation themselves, are

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off to a pretty good start. And they pulled off an impressive win on the road at Avery last Friday night with their best player, Jake Pifer, on the bench with an ankle injury. Pifer is expected to play tonight.

"Jake is fine and ready to go," Sanders said. "It was killing him to have to sit and watch that game last Friday night. We were fortunate to win without him. He's chomping at the bit to get back out there. Hopefully, he won't reaggavate the injury.

"And I'm happy with our start, but we have to make smarter decisions on the floor. We have to give ourselves a chance to win. Last Friday night at Avery, there were several occasions, had we recognized some things better, we could have ran out the clock. But you learn from it, move on, and here's the next challenge."

And knock on wood, win No. 100.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS

WOMEN:

HICKORY 0-0; 4-0

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 0-0; 3-1

FRED T. FOARD 0-0; 3-1

SOUTH CALDWELL 0-0; 2-2

HIBRITEN 0-0; 1-3

ST. STEPHENS 0-0;; 1-3

WATAUGA 0-0; □ 0-2

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MEN:

HIBRITEN 0-0; 4-0

FRED T. FOARD 0-0; 4-0

WATAUGA 0-0; 2-0

HICKORY 0-0; 3-1

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 0-0; 3-1

SOUTH CALDWELL 0-0; 2-2

ST. STEPHENS 0-0; 2-2

MONDAY NIGHT'S GAMES

WOMEN:

HICKORY 59, NEWTON-CONOVER 48

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 72, WEST IREDELL 26

HIBRITEN 54, PATTON 48

WILKES CENTRAL 61, SOUTH CALDWELL 40

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MEN:

HICKORY 87, NEWTON-CONOVER 43
HIBRITEN 56, PATTON 45
WILKES CENTRAL 57, SOUTH CALDWELL 48
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 58, WEST IREDELL 38

TUESDAY NIGHT'S GAMES

(MEN & WOMEN)

WATUAGA @ WEST CALDWELL
MAIDEN @ ST. ST. STEPHENS
HICKORY @ STATESVILLE
BUNKER HILL @ FRED T. FOARD

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