

Pifer's Heroics Can't Save Pioneers

Written by Mike Kelly

Tuesday, 21 February 2012 11:30

Watauga High senior Jake Pifer closed out his prep career in memorable fashion as he poured in a game-high 25 points in a losing cause against East Gaston Monday night. Unfortunately, the Pioneers (10-15) got too far behind and their second-half rally, spurred on by Pifer, came up short. The end result, East Gaston (11-14) defeated WHS 58-50 in the opening-round of the Class 4A Western Sectional in Mount Holly, N.C. The win moves East Gaston

into a second-round state playoff game against Charlotte-Olympic Wednesday night. The Trojans (26-1), the No.1 seed in the west sectional, defeated South Caldwell 76-41 in their first-round game. The Pioneers lost their third post-season game in a row dating back to 2009-10, and they experienced their first losing season in four years (2007-08).

"We just got ourselves into a hole," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "That's why getting a home playoff game is so important. Playing on the road, especially in a strange gym like tonight that we haven't seen before, can really throw off your game. We had to make some adjustments because we didn't play real well in the first half."

The first half turned into a nightmare for Sanders and the Pioneers. Pifer gave WHS an early 2-0 lead and tweaked his ankle on the shot leaving the game briefly in the first quarter. From that point on, East Gaston took control. The Warriors went on 16-3 run and built a commanding 11-point lead in the opening stanza. They eventually stretched that lead to 20 points in the second period.

Desean Murray did most of the damage as he poured in 17 points in the first half.

"We did a great job passing the ball around in the first half," said Warriors coach Ken Howell.

"We have a lot of guys with great hand-eye coordination. We really did a great job pushing the ball up the floor, moving to open spaces and creating a lot of great looks inside. That second quarter was probably the best quarter we've put together all year."

The Warriors scored 25 points in that second-quarter blitz. Trailing 41-21 to start the third quarter, the Pioneers changed things up defensively and went to a 2-3 zone. The move not only slowed the game down, it forced East Gaston to shoot from the outside. In turn, Pifer caught fire and ignited WHS' comeback bid. Adding some fuel to that fire, Murray was ejected from the game with 5:14 left in the third quarter when he picked up his second technical foul.

Murray was removed after he was fouled by Allan Koppenhaver and pointed at the scoreboard.

"When you see that career coming to an end, and you have 16 minutes left, it tends to spark you a little bit," Sanders said. "I'm glad Jake had a good game in his final game with us. He's had a lot of good games for us in his career, and it was a pleasure to coach him. And Murray having to leave the game was huge for us. He's a big offensive weapon. He's one of their better players. It was unfortunate for East Gaston to lose him. I didn't see anything flagrant. I don't know what happened, or was said, but they asked him to leave."

The ejection was later changed to a disqualification and Murray will be eligible to play Wednesday night against Olympic. The Pioneers outscored the Warriors 16-6 in the third quarter, cutting the lead to ten points at 47-37. And a three ball by Pifer with 4:03 left in the game got the Pioneers within six at 52-46. But junior Jawontee Olds buried a three point shot that gave East Gaston a nine point advantage moments later and put the game out of reach.

"We got off to a terrible start," Pifer said. "It (wasn't good). But we got a lot more rebounds in the

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second half when we went to that 2-3 zone, and we stopped their drives to the basket. I just started looking for my shot in the second half and it started falling."

Pifer was the only WHS player in double figures. Matt Proffitt, playing in his final game for the Pioneers, finished with six points; Ben Howser had five. Jaran Hopkins-Benton had 12 points for the Warriors; Tyler Persinger and Olds each finished with eight points apiece. Robbie Sterling had seven points.

NOTES: The woes continue for the Pioneers against Charlotte-based schools. Dating back to 1989, WHS has only beaten two Charlotte area teams in the state playoffs (Myers Park in 1989-90 and Garinger in 2009-10).....WHS' last playoff win came against Garinger in 2009-10 at the old Lentz-Eggers Gym.....Assistant head coach Jerry Moretz did not attend Monday night's game. He attended his grandmother's funeral Monday afternoon.

EAST GASTON 58, WHS 50

SCORE BY PERIODS **1ST** **2ND** **3RD** **4TH** **TOTAL**

WATAUGA.....	7	14	16	13	50
EAST GASTON.....	16	25	6	11	58

WHS: PIFER 25, POULOS 4, PROFFITT 6, HOWSER 5, CHASTEEN 2, KOPPENHAVER 4, BAKER 2, MACKEY 2.

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EAST GASTON: CRANE 4, PERSINGER 8, HOPKINS-BENTON 12, MURRAY 17, OLDS 8, STERLING 7, NASH 2.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

CLASS 4A

(WOMEN)

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 90, WEST CHARLOTTE 62
CORNELIUS HOUGH 39, SOUTH CALDWELL 33

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CLASS 3A

HICKORY 74, BELMONT-SOUTH POINT 48
FREEDOM 53, FRED T. FOARD 49
R.S. CENTRAL 56, HIBRITEN 40

(MEN)

CLASS 4A

CHARLOTTE-OLYMPIC 76, SOUTH CALDWELL 41
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 62, EAST MECKLENBURG 60 (OT)

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CLASS 3A

HICKORY 85, EAST HENDERSON 44
HUNTER HUSS 70, ST. STEPHENS 56
ENKA 68, FRED T. FOARD 56

OTHER GAMES

CLASS 2A

MEN: ASHE COUNTY 70, MAIDEN 37

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CLASS 1A

WOMEN: AVERY 63, ROSMAN 36

Photo Courtesy: Jake Pifer, by Bill Sheffield