

Habich Era Officially Begins Friday Night

Written by Mike Kelly

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Well, the moment has finally arrived. Ryan Habich, who was hired as Watauga High's new football coach last spring, will make his debut Friday night when the Pioneers take on Alexander Central in their season opener at Jack Groce Stadium.

And unlike past years, Friday night's game will feature a different twist. Longtime conference foes, the Cougars take on WHS in a non-conference game. Alexander Central, thanks to realignment, is now a member of the newly-formed Northern Piedmont 3A/4A Conference.

"But it's still a rivalry game," said ACHS coach Nick Bazzle. "We tried to keep as many rivals on our non-conference schedule as we could, and Watauga was one of those teams. It's always been a hard-hitting game, and the new coach they've got will get them turned around. I had a chance to meet him at a Georgia Southern camp some years ago, when he was at Fuquay-Varina. And let me tell you, the guy knows what he's doing."

And Habich comes to Boone with a winning reputation. After all, he tutored under one of the best coaches in the state of North Carolina in David Riggs, and he was part of 89 wins (50-14 as head coach) during his eight-year stay at FVHS. And now, Habich finds himself in a new surrounding, and he inherits a football team that's only produced five winning seasons since 1982.

But the young coach remains optimistic.

"It's a new year, and like always, I'm excited about what lies ahead," Habich said. "We've got a great group of kids, and they've been working hard. And we're young. We only have five seniors this season, but I really like our sophomores and juniors. They're the future. But regardless, we're playing to win every game."

And WHS' odds on winning Friday night might be pretty good. The Cougars, who defeated WHS 41-19 last season in Taylorsville, have never won at the new Jack Groce Stadium.

Alexander Central defeated WHS 20-0 in Boone in 2010, but that win came at Appalachian State University's Kidd Brewer Stadium, thanks to a power outage at "The Groce."

And Friday's match up should be interesting. The Cougars, who graduated all but one starter on their offensive line, only return five starters (two on offense and three on defense).

"But they've got 28 seniors on their team," Habich said. "And I don't care if they haven't started in the past, or if they were on the scout team. We had seniors like that at Fuquay. Once they got the chance to play as seniors, they excelled. Those guys have been in the program for four years. They've been in the weight room, and they understand the offensive and defensive schemes.

"They're also bigger and stronger than we are. And they're also more experienced. But I have a lot of confidence in our kids."

And the teams are nearly a mirror-image of one another. Both teams will run an option offense. WHS will utilize the triple option; the Cougars run a flexbone.

"They run it more, and we will throw it a little more," Habich said. "But like I've said all along, we'll do what works the best on that given night that will give us an honest chance to win the game. But defending the option is tough, especially at the high school level. It's assignment football, and a lot of times, teams tend to break down defensively."

"I love running the option," Bazzle said. "But I call it a mess when I've got to defend it. If you develop your rhythm, you will move the ball. In turn, you can keep the ball away from the other team."

The Cougars are led by quarterback Logan Hammer, a sophomore, who cracked the starting

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line up midway through last year. They also have a solid fullback in sophomore Davante Clark. "And Clark is very mature for his age," Bazzle said. "It's hard keeping a guy like that out of the starting line up. And Landon got some valuable playing time last year as a freshman at this level. He knew what to expect when he came to camp this year. They're talented guys, and two guys we're going to build around."

But the Pioneers have a weapon of their own in sophomore quarterback Aaron Dobbins, who like Hammer, cracked WHS' starting line up midway through last season. The youngster displayed a big arm, and strong leadership qualities.

"Aaron is just a great kid," Habich said. "He's coachable, and he's a great student academically. He's a coach's dream. And he's a guy we're building around. But we've got a lot of kids that have displayed a drive to work and a desire to turn this program around. It's not going to happen overnight, but I like what we're doing. We're heading in the right direction.

Friday night's game kicks off at 7:30 p.m. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and Goblueridge.net.

NOTES: This is the 37th meeting between the schools. Alexander Central owns a 21-15 lead in the series.....The Cougars are 0-2 lifetime at Jack Groce Stadium. Both of those losses came in 2011, one of those in the opening-round of the state playoffs....Nick Bazzle is 117-63 in his 26-year career. He was 112-56 with three trips to the state finals and a state championship in 2008 at Newton-Conover; he's 5-7 at Alexander Central. He's 1-0 against WHS. Bazzle makes his first appearance at Jack Groce Stadium Friday night.....The Pioneers haven't won a season opener since they defeated Ashe County 35-0 in 2010 at "The Groce".....Habich is WHS' third coach in three years, and the ninth head coach since 1995 (Jack Roten, Randy Baldwin, Craig Styron, Mike Probst, Mike Hudson, Adrian Snow, Tim Pruitt and current Athletics Director Tom Wright).