

An Even Dozen?

Written by Mike Kelly

Thursday, 29 August 2013 17:18

It's hard to believe, but at one time, the Watauga High football team and Ashe County were on even ground. And through the first three games of this series, which

began way back in 1999, the Huskies actually won two of the first three meetings between the schools.

But that all changed in 2003. Ironically, it was a Breitenstein, that's Seth Breitenstein (a member of Appalachian State University's three-time national championship teams and currently an assistant athletics director at Loyola University in Chicago, IL.), not Eric, who set the tone at Huskies Stadium that season. His punt return for a touchdown backboned WHS (1-0) to its first win in West Jefferson. And the Pioneers haven't looked back since.

WHS has won 11 in a row against the Huskies, including five straight on the road, and leads the all-time series, 12-2.

"Some people might get mad at me for saying this, but this is not a rivalry," said Ashe County coach Brian Hampton, now in his second season. "In a rivalry, teams take turns beating each other. But we haven't won this game in ten, eleven years. Is the pressure on us? Yes, it is. So for us, it's just another game, and another chance for us to get a little better."

Making matters worse, the Huskies (0-1), who lost their season opener at North Surry last Friday night, are without their best player, senior Jonathan Cox. Cox, an all-Mountain Valley 1A/2A Conference performer last fall, ran for more than 1,300 yards last season. And the Huskies were hoping for similar results this season. But Cox suffered a knee injury during a scrimmage at Surry Central on August 10.

"And he got hurt on his third and final carry in that scrimmage," Hampton said. "He's a great player, and we were really counting on him a lot this season. We were going to ride him like an army mule. We just have to find an identity without him. We were one for five in the red zone last week. And that's on me, but our team really counts on him a lot."

But despite the loss of Cox and WHS' domination in this series, Pioneers coach Ryan Habich, who makes his first appearance against the Huskies, isn't buying Hampton's line.

"This is a rivalry game to us," he said. "We want to be the 'King of the Mountain,' and if we're going to do that, we've got to beat Ashe County and Avery. And we have to be ready to play Friday night. If we go in there believing this isn't a rivalry game, we're going to be in big trouble. He's just saying that to motivate his players"

Hampton and the Huskies nearly ended their frustrations last season, but the Pioneers hung on to win the game, 23-21, at Jack Groce Stadium. It was the closest game between the schools since 2004 (a 14-8 WHS win that season). And to spice things up a bit, WHS may be without its starting quarterback, Aaron Dobbins.

Dobbins suffered a concussion last Friday night against Alexander Central. But before he left, Dobbins was 5-6 for 111 yards and three touchdown passes. According to Habich, Dobbins will be a game-time decision. And if he can't go, Austin Northern, who played well in a relief role last week (5-5 for 113 yards and two TDs), and T.J. Poulos will split time behind center.

"Dobbins is a great athlete," Hampton said. "If he can't go, that's going to be a concern for them. He is a terrific runner, and that's what makes him so tough to defend. His running ability fuels that big arm, and that makes him a dangerous weapon. He's Watauga's best runner."

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And the running game is a huge concern for both teams. The Huskies only mustered 35 yards in their loss to North Surry; the Pioneers had all of 56 yards against Alexander Central.

"And we aren't real healthy, either," Habich said. "We have some people banged up, and we're still moving people in and out of there. We're getting some people back this week, and I plan on playing a lot of people back there. And we get Zach Williams back this week. He definitely will play some back there, but he's coming off an injury, and we want to work him back gradually." Williams sat out last week's game with a high ankle sprain. Hunter Isaacs, who played fullback last week, will play tight end this week. The Huskies will use their share of running backs as well. Matthew Hamilton, Hunter Barnes, Cullen Ashley and Keith Miller, who battled an off-season shoulder injury, will see plenty of time at running back against the Pioneers. Sophomore quarterback Conner Bowers gives the Huskies a legitimate passing attack. Bowers, who joined the varsity last fall, was 14-28 for 217 yards and two TDs last week. Sophomore Maison McNeil is Ashe County's best receiver. He caught five passes for 132 yards and a TD against the Greyhounds.

Defensively, the Pioneers put forth a great effort last week in their win against the Cougars. They bent, but didn't break against an Alexander Central team and its option attack. The defense made the play of the game early in the fourth quarter following a turnover deep in its territory. Leading 20-12, the Pioneers stopped Alexander Central on fourth-and-two at the WHS 29 yard-line, and killed the drive.

"Our defense did a great job getting 11 hats to the ball," Habich said. "And our tackling was very good. As a coach, especially in the first game, you always worry about how your team is going to tackle. But the guys did a great job, and they made the play of the game with that stand. It won the game."

Meanwhile, the Huskies, despite their problems on offense, feature a strong defensive unit of their own. Led by senior safety Michael Elliott, the Huskies are big up front with the likes of Nick Gregory, Jason Baker and Mitchell Brown. And the linebacking corps, led by the likes of Alex Laws, Shawn Baker, Ashley, and Hamilton, who played in the secondary last season, gives the Huskies an athletic unit.

"I was impressed with them on defense," Habich said. "They're an aggressive unit. We have to do a good job protecting the ball and not turning it over. We put it on the ground a couple of times last week. I'm anxious to see how we respond after winning last week. It's just another step in our development."

Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m., on AM 1450 WATA and Goblueridge.net.

Photo Courtesy: Aaron Dobbins, Rob Moore