

A Time To Regroup.....

Written by Mike Kelly

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The Watauga High football team and first-year coach Ryan Habich have gone back to the basics this week. With a bye week coming up Friday night, the Pioneers (2-0), off to their best start in seven years, are looking to make some much-needed improvements.

"And our biggest concerns right now are blocking and running the football," Habich said. "And we could also improve on our tackling a bit as well. We won last week against Ashe County, and it's nice to be unbeaten through our first two games, but we are still very far away from where we need to be, and where we want to be."

The Pioneers knocked off Ashe County 13-7 in overtime last Friday night. And the Pioneers, thanks to a strong defensive effort, beat the Huskies for the 12th consecutive time. But WHS struggled offensively. For the second week in a row, the Pioneers never established their running game. WHS finished with a mere 31 yards on 23 carries (an average of 1.3 yards-per-carry).

"We're still looking for a guy that can run the ball with authority between the tackles," Habich said. "Zach Williams (who scored the game-winning touchdown last week) is a guy we're definitely looking at, but we also have some other young guys we're looking to play back there. We need to be balanced. My goal is to have at least 200 yards rushing, and 200 yards passing in every game. We need a balanced attack to be successful. And to achieve that we must establish a running game. Running the ball between the tackles, opens up the outside running lanes, and it opens up the passing game."

But a strong running game starts with a good offensive line. And WHS' offensive line, which had its trying moments for the most part last Friday night, really established itself in overtime against the Huskies. The Pioneers ran the ball with Zach Williams on four consecutive plays, and finally punched it in on fourth-and-goal from inside the one.

"My game plan going into overtime was to run the football," Habich said. "And possibly kick a field goal, if it came down to that. But when we got the ball inside the one, just inches from the goal line, I told our guys we were going for it. Man, if we can't advance the ball inches from the goal line, then we don't need to be playing high school football. And our line did a great job blocking on that series, especially on the last play. (Ashe County) were blitzing on the play, but our line blocked down and Zach had a huge opening on the right side and walked in."

And the Pioneers are young up front. There's only one senior on the offensive line (Aaron Spencer, a guard). The rest of the group is junior heavy with Jacob Rutz (center), Kenon Fox (guard), Jake Williams and Stephen Miller (at the tackles).

"I'm not making excuses, but we're young," Habich said. "The majority of our team is made up of sophomores and juniors, so the future looks bright. But we still have to work hard to get where we want to be. Being young doesn't promise anything. We have to work at it every day, and we have to refine our fundamentals every day at practice.

"And that's on us as coaches. It's our job to teach them. Right now, the guys up front are still learning how to block in this scheme. I have confidence in that group. They're working hard, and that's all I can ask. And I really give a lot of credit to our seniors for buying into what we're trying to do. It's a learning process, and I'm confident we'll get there."

The Pioneers go back to work next Friday night at Avery. It's the next to last game before they open Northwestern 3A/4A Conference play on September 20 against St. Stephens (on Homecoming) at Jack Groce Stadium.

"And the schedule is going to start getting tougher," Habich said. "We're going to play better

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teams, with better athletes, and teams that are loaded with size and speed. Hickory and Freedom are going to be huge challenges for us down the road. That's why we're aiming our sights on getting better and stronger each week. The bye week has been good for us. We took a couple of days off, and we're trying to keep their legs fresh. But we need to shore some things up. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we won last week, but we did a poor job of blocking and tackling in that game against Ashe County."

Another plus is getting quarterback Aaron Dobbins back in the line up. Dobbins, who suffered a concussion in WHS' season opener against Alexander Central, sat out last week's game against the Huskies. And with a bye this week, Dobbins chances of of coming back next week against Avery look pretty good.

"We'll see how he feels," Habich said. "The guy suffered a head injury, and anytime you have someone suffer a concussion, the last thing you want to do is to bring him back too soon. We want to make sure that's he's fully recovered when he does comes back. Look, I'm happy we've won our last two games, and I'm proud of the way our guys found a way to win that game last week. But we're still learning. We can't get too high, or too low during the course of a game. The goal is to keep working at it, no matter what. It's takes time. It's a work in progress."

The Pioneers travel to Avery next Friday night. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM 1450 WATA and Goblueridge.net.