

## Pioneers, Vikings, Here We Go Again....

Written by Mike Kelly

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That's usually the case when the Watauga High football team hooks up with Avery in their annual showdown. These two have been butting heads for 46 years.

It all started in 1968, and following a dominant start by the Pioneers (2-0), the series has been tightly contested since 1996. The Pioneers, who are 31-13-1 against Avery, own a slim 9-8 margin going into Friday night's match up at MacDonald Stadium in Newland, N.C. (air time 6:30 p.m., on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net).

The Pioneers snapped a two-game losing streak against the Vikings (2-1) last fall. They rallied from a 12-0 deficit to beat the Vikings 35-20 at Jack Groce Stadium. But WHS hasn't won in Newland since 2009.

"It's a backyard brawl," said Avery coach Darrell Brewer, now in his tenth year with the Vikings. "I've been on both ends of this rivalry as a player and a coach. We finally beat them the year after I graduated (in 1988). It puts a lot of pressure on you, and it's a game for bragging rights. But it's also a lot of fun."

Up until that win, all the Vikings could hang their hats on was a scoreless tie in 1979. Brewer is 4-5 against the Pioneers in his coaching career.

And the Vikings, who stumbled in their season opener against Cloudland, TN., will be the best team WHS has seen this year. The Vikings have won two in a row, thanks to their offensive line. That group (Blake Johnson and Scott Wiseman at tackle, Ryan Sheppard at center, Eric Jackson and Braeden Rose at guard) has pushed and shoved its way to more than 400 rushing yards the last two weeks.

"I'm real proud of those guys," Brewer said. "I really thought our biggest weakness coming into this year was the offensive line. My biggest goal was to develop a running game. I really feel that when you have a strong running game, you have a hard-nosed mentality as a football team."

"I'm real impressed with Avery," WHS coach Ryan Habich said. "They aren't as big as Alexander Central was (in the season opener on August 23), and they may not be as physical, but they have good skill players on the offensive and defensive sides of the ball. They also have good speed at those positions. They can create a lot of problems. They are the best team we've seen, so far, this season."

The Vikings are led by their all-purpose quarterback, Tre Jackson, and running back Daniel Childress. Jackson, who suffered a broken hand against the Pioneers last season, is a dual threat. He's had 234 yards of total offense in Avery's first three games, and he's accounted for four touchdowns (two passing and two rushing).

On special teams, Jackson is averaging 42-yards a punt, which includes a 69 yarder at McDowell on August 30.

"A dual threat quarterback always concerns you," Habich said. "I went up against one, when I coached (at Fuquay-Varina) against (current Appalachian State University quarterback) Kam Bryant when he was at (Cary) Panther Creek. The biggest thing is that when things go wrong, guys like that find a way to make a big play. They go back to pass, you've got pressure on him, and everyone's covered. But he bounces outside, you come up from the secondary, and he completes a long pass. On the option, we've got to contain him. If he runs outside, he makes a

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big run down field thanks to his speed. The first two teams we played didn't have that one player that was capable of the big play

"In high school football, especially, it's hard to move the ball 15 plays without making a mistake. But if you've got one guy that can make the big play, it makes it that much easier to score. And that's a concern. And Avery has a quarterback that's big, physical and fast. It's going to be a handful for us."

Childress has been a force the last two weeks. He ran for 119 yards against Thomas Jefferson last week. Childress is Avery's leading rusher. He's averaging nearly seven-yards a carry.

"They're more experienced than we are," Habich said,. "They have a lot of kids back. But we're young, and this is still new to a lot of our players. We have to play assignment football Friday night, and we have to contain and cover. We've got to keep (Jackson) in the pocket. If we do that, we'll be all right. But it's going to be a big challenge."

And Habich, who has WHS off to its best start since 2006, hopes to find some much-needed answers when it comes to his own running game. While the Vikings have prospered with their ground game the last two weeks, the Pioneers have struggled. WHS has all of 87 yards in its first two games.

"We just have to keep chopping," Habich said. "Right now, we're not very good. We have (87) yards in two games. I'm use to having (87) yards on two plays. It's unacceptable. And it isn't just the offensive line. It's the running backs, too. They're not doing a very good job of blocking or running. We're just going to find a way to win Friday night."

Quarterback Aaron Dobbins, will be a game-time decision, according to Habich. Dobbins hasn't played since he suffered a concussion in the second quarter of WHS' season opener.

"And we're not rushing him back at all," Habich said. "He's been cleared to play, and he's been working out with us during the bye week, and practicing some. But he's still day-by-day and week-by-week. You don't want to rush someone back from a head injury. Plus, he's only a sophomore. He's not a senior. He's going to be a game time decision, and we'll see how it goes Friday night. But as a team overall, we're pretty banged up right now.""

Austin Northern and T.J. Poulos will split time at quarterback Friday night, if Dobbins doesn't play. Center Jacob Rutz joins Dobbins on that game-time decision list for Friday night. And the Pioneers are also battling through their share of bumps and bruises going into their fourth game. The Vikings have been bitten by the injury bug themselves.

The Vikings lost senior defensive back Tyler Polsgrove, a pre-season Class 1A All-State selection by NCPreps.com, to a season-ending hip injury on the first day of practice (on the very first play); they also lost fellow senior Jonah Tenge to a season-ending knee injury on the opening kick-off of Avery's season opener.

"This is a rivarly game," Habich said. "And you always want to win your rivarly games. Our goal is to be "King of the Mountain." We won part one when we knocked off Ashe County. Now this is part two. You always want to win your rivalry game each year. Our goal is to beat Avery and Ashe County every year. But if we don't play well, or execute well Friday night, it could be a long night for us. "