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Written by Mike Kelly
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The Watauga High football team has marched its way to an unblemished record. The Pioneers (4-0) find themselves riding a four-game winning streak, their longest winning streak since 2006. And on Friday, the Pioneers, who have looked practically unstoppable the last two weeks, take on St. Stephens, a program headed in the opposite direction, in their Homecoming game.

The Indians (0-4) have struggled mightily, and their opponents have feasted on those weaknesses. The Indians are giving up an average of 48 points, 285 yards rushing, and 424-yards of total offense per outing. That also includes 17 rushing touchdowns (they coughed up 33 last year), and teams are completing a whopping 80% of their passes against the Indians.

Add to that, the Pioneers have racked up 99 points and 897 yards in their last two games in lopsided victories against Avery and Wilkes Central.

"The biggest thing is that you want to see improvement each week," said WHS coach Ryan Habich. "We've worked hard in practice on what we need to improve on, and the kids have responded. It's really all about the kids. They've done a good job making those corrections, and they've listened to the coaches."

And the results have shown, especially in the running game, which seemed non-existent in the WHS' first two games. The Pioneers have racked up 517 yards on the ground during that stretch. Those numbers even amazed WHS quarterback Aaron Dobbins.

"We've just bought into what coach Habich has been talking about since he got here," Dobbins said. "I admit, I was a little leary at first about the triple option, but we've done a good job of mixing the passing game with the running game, and the results have been very good."

"We're not a typical triple option team," Habich said. "Our running game has really improved the last two weeks. We run the triple option to set up the running game, but we want to be a multiple team offensively. And we may throw it a little more once our pass blocking gets better. And when teams try to double cover our receivers (mainly Cam Baker), teams can't really stop the triple option with just seven men in the box."

And WHS could run the table Friday night against St. Stephens' generous defense. But it is the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference opener, and Habich is approaching this game with a cautious attitude.

"It's the conference opener, so the competition is going to be much better," Habich said. "The thing about St. Stephens is that they've played a tough non-conference schedule. Two of those teams (Bunker Hill and Maiden) are undefeated. And their schedule overall has been tough. When you play teams like they have (with a combined record of 12-4), those statistics can be misleading."

The Indians were victimized 49-14 last week by Alexander Central. The Cougars only ran 14 plays in the first half and scored 28 points. The Indians coughed up six touchdown passes in a

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63-0 loss against Maiden, and Bunker Hill rambled for 353 yards in a 39-26 win against the Indians.

"It's been tough to say the least," said first year coach Wayne Hicks of the Indians. "But it's a work in progress. And Watauga is a solid, well-oiled machine. They're playing very well right now, and they're very confident. They will definitely be a force for us to compete with Friday night."

Matt Baker is St. Stephens strongest player. He the anchor on both the offensive (at guard) and defensive lines (at tackle). Spencer Brown, a sophomore, takes over at quarterback for senior Marvin Sutton, last year's starter who is now a tight end and an outside linebacker. The Indians are also blessed with a bevy of running backs. They're averaging 219 yards a game on the ground, and Janario Knox is their leading rusher with 378 yards on 74 carries and three TDs.

"And Marvin had a good attitude about changing positions," said Hicks, who has coached at the collegiate level (at Elon University, Lenior-Rhyne and North Carolina A&T) and was Hickory's defensive coordinator the last five years. "He's our best athlete, and he understands what's good for the team. And that's what we're trying to establish here. A winning attitude for the school and the community. But it's going to take time, and we have to start winning some games."

But that might be out of the question Friday night. Afterall, the Indians struggled mightly against a pretty good quarterback in Jake McRee of Maiden. McRee burned St. Stephens for 272 yards on 17-22 passing. And it definitely won't get any easier against Dobbins, who has been nearly flawless the last two weeks.

Dobbins is 15-25 (60%) for 395 yards with five TD passes and no interceptions. Dobbins also leads the NW3A/4A Conference in passing. He's 20-31 (65%) for 506 yards, eight TD passes with no interceptions in less than three games.

"He's an excellent quarterback," Hicks said. "And he creates things by the way he moves around back there. He's always looking to make a play, and he runs well. He has good size, and he's going to make things tough on us Friday night."

"There's a lot of quarterbacks that have the skills to play the position," said Habich, a former quarterback himself. "But Aaron has moxie. He doesn't panic, and he makes plays back there. Plus, he's athletic. A lot of teams don't realize how fast he is. Aaron has very good speed.

"But (St. Stephens) got some kids with size. And they have some good players. I'm real impressed with (Baker). He's big and strong up front and (Knox) is a strong runner. He runs with power and he has good speed. They're better than you think, and this game might be a lot closer than you think."

Now this is the 12th meeting between the schools. The Indians lead the all-time series, 7-4. WHS won last year's game 43-21 in the season finale at Jack Groce Stadium. That win also broke a personal six-game losing streak against the Indians.

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

Photo Courtesy: Aaron Dobbins, WHS Athletics