

## Never Grab A Tiger By The Tail.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 02 October 2013 17:46

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t's been a while since the Watauga High football team found itself with an undefeated record this deep into the season. But believe it or not, WHS (5-0 overall; 1-0 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) is unblemished

through its first five games, and the offense has resembled a well-oiled machine the last three weeks.

The Pioneers are averaging 47 points and 428 yards a game in their last three outings, It's WHS' best start since 2006, and Friday night, the Pioneers take on Fred T. Foard, which is reeling at the moment.

The Tigers (0-5; 0-1) are winless, and they've lost seven straight in league play dating back to 2011.

As a matter of fact, the Tigers haven't won a NW3A/4A Conference game since they were awarded a forfeit win against Hickory on October 28, 2011. They're last win on the field in league play came against St. Stephens, a 27-14 win, on October 14 of that year. But the Tigers haven't beaten a league opponent at home since they knocked off South Caldwell 20-17 in 2009.

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"It has been difficult to say the least," said first year coach Tom Harper, who led Hickory to the third-round of the state playoffs last fall. "Our players are learning what it means to build a successful program. A lot of this stuff is new to them, but I love their approach, and I love their work ethic. But we still have a long way to go."

And it doesn't get any easier Friday night against the Pioneers, a team the Tigers haven't beaten in their previous four meetings.

"They are so well coached," Harper said. "(WHS coach Ryan Habich) has gotten those kids to buy into his system. And it all starts with their quarterback (Aaron Dobbins). He doesn't do anything fancy, but he is such a great athlete that Watuaga has put him in a system where he can be successful. And the results are there. They're 5-0, and when you're 5-0 this deep in the season the other teams better watch out."

But Habich and his players aren't getting all caught up in the hype. He understands that there are greater challenges awaiting the Pioneers in the coming weeks.

"I think they're handling it pretty well," he said. "We're young and we're not over confident. Every day in practice, they're working hard to get better. They're coachable kids. And I've told them plenty of times not to worry about the record. Just look to improve and take it one game at a

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time. We're more concerned about where we're going right now."

And Habich knows Friday's game could be a prat fall with Freedom looming on the schedule next Friday night. He admits he's worried about playing a winless team on the road.

"You've got to be careful when you play a team like this, especially on the road," Habich said. "You don't want to be over confident. You know, they're 0-5, and if some people start telling our kids it's an easy game, and our kids start believing that, they're going to beat us. We just have to go in and execute our game plan."

But the Tigers, who have produced only 14 winning seasons in their 54-year history, have been snake-bitten from the start this season. Quarterback Matt Williams, who transferred in from Hickory during the summer (his third school in three years; he played at St. Stephens as a freshman), broke his leg in the season opener against Maiden (on August 23); running back (and last year's starting quarterback), senior Jacob Schmidt, has been hobbled by a knee injury all season.

Schmidt amassed more than 800-yards offensively in 2012 (440 through the air and 375 on the ground) and ten touchdowns. But thanks to a nagging knee injury that he suffered playing basketball this summer, Schmidt has been extremely limited.

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He missed the first three games of the season before he made his debut against West Lincoln on September 13. But Schmidt suffered another setback at practice on Tuesday and he's questionable for Friday's match up against the Pioneers.

And the Tigers, much like St. Stephens last week, are struggling mightily on offense and defense. They've been outscored 217-48 in five games, and statistically, they're practically dead last in practically every category imaginable in the NW3A/4A.

And making matters worse, the Tigers, with the season-ending injury to Williams, have named sophomore Alexander Toy their starting quarterback. And Toy, a first-year varsity player, has struggled.

The Tigers are dead last in rushing (105 yards-per-game), fifth in passing (82 ypg), dead last in total offense (186 ypg), fifth against the run (215 ypg), last against the pass (174 ypg) and next to last in total defense (390 ypg).

"We could sit here and have a pity party and feel sorry for ourselves," Harper said. "But we're not going to do that. We're teaching our players that this is life. Things go wrong some times, and you must find a way to adjust, you must find other means to succeed. It's been tough. No doubt about it, but we plan on giving Watauga our best shot Friday night, win or lose."

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The Pioneers survived a scare last year as they pulled out a 28-27 win against the Tigers in Newton on a last-second field goal by Alex Parsons. The Pioneers blew an 18-0 lead in that game.

"Foard, they've got nothing to lose," Harper said. "They've got a new coach (Harper is also Foard's third coach in four years), i'll bet they'll be excited about playing us. You're 0-5, you're excited about knocking off a team that's undefeated. They're going to play with enthusiasm, and it's a home game. I feel they'll be ready for us. It's going to be a heck of a football game Friday night."

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

**NOTES:** The Pioneers are 4-0 lifetime against the Tigers....WHS hasn't gone 2-0 in league play since 2011. The Pioneers actually started that season 3-0 in the NW3A/4A that year and finished in second place. Overall, the Pioneers were 7-6 that year, their first winning season since 2007. They also broke a three-game losing streak in the state playoffs in 2011. Ironically, they defeated Alexander Central, which was coached by Tom Harper....Harper is 4-7 lifetime against the Pioneers. He led Hickory to a 22-6 win against WHS at Jack Groce Stadium last fall....Ryan Habich of the Pioneers is 55-14 in his career; Harper is 50-60....Former Appalachian State University coach Jerry Moore, the winningest coach in school history and a three-time national champion, spoke to the Pioneers before their scheduled practice on Wednesday.

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**Photo Courtesy: WHS Coach Ryan Habich, Rob Moore**