

## It Just Wasn't Meant To Be.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 12 October 2013 10:48

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The Watauga High football team suffered its first loss of the season Friday night. Freedom rallied from a 34-28 deficit with 57 seconds left to play, and defeated the Patriots 41-34 in overtime at Jack Groce Stadium.

The loss drops WHS (6-1 overall; 2-1 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) into a third-place tie with Patton in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference standings; the Patriots (6-1; 3-0) move into a first-place tie with Hibriten. The Patriots play Hibriten at home next Friday night.

A 65-yard touchdown pass from Titus Smith to all-state wide receiver Khris Gardin tied the game. And the Patriots went on to win it from there on a one-yard run by Chris Bridges in the first OT period. But WHS had its chance to tie the game and force a second OT.

Unfortunately, a sideline warning penalty against the Patriots, their second sideline warning of the night, pushed them back five yards and turned a fourth-and-goal situation from the seven-yard line to a fourth-and-goal from the 12. And a desperation pass from quarterback Aaron Dobbins, who racked up 215 yards offensively in Friday's setback, to Cam Baker in the near corner of the end zone was knocked away by Gardin to end the game.

"We had a play I felt we could score on," WHS coach Ryan Habich said. "That hurt us making a call that late. But we have to execute, we can't make excuses. If I was on the field, it was my fault. That penalty changed the play. There really isn't a good play on fourth and 12. We have a special player in Cam, and we wanted to get the ball in his hands."

"I should have thrown the ball a little more to the outside," Dobbins said. "(Gardin) was their best defensive back. They had Cam covered up all night. We tried to make some adjustments at halftime to get him the ball. I just wanted Cam to go up and get it on that last play. We could have scored, but we came up short. It was a tough game and coach Habich was proud of us for how hard we played and fought tonight. It's a tough loss."

Dobbins and the Patriots more than held their own against the Patriots. The Patriots, who were averaging more than 420 yards a game in their last four outings, finished with 423 yards, including 262 on the ground. The Patriots finished with 563 yards.

T.J. Poulos paced the WHS running game with 104 yards on just eight carries. His 11-yard run with 3:26 left to play gave WHS a 34-28 lead. B.J. Emmons and Bridges were the top ground gainers for the Patriots. Emmons finished with 148 yards on 16 carries, and Bridges racked up 124 yards on 14 attempts.

"Oh man, (the Freedom running backs) we're big," said WHS junior Hunter Isaacs. "We were trying to tackle high, like we always have. It's not going to work against teams like this. They

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were stronger, faster, just an all-around better team. We played our hearts out on defense and forced some turnovers. It was tough playing a fast team like that."

The WHS defense forced six turnovers---four fumbles and two interceptions. But the Pioneers only scored on one of those miscues. WHS turned a fumble recovery by Jackson Carr in the third quarter into a 12-play, 76-yard scoring drive in the third quarter. Dobbins closed things out with a four-yard run that tied the game at 21-21 going into the final stanza.

"We ran the ball pretty well tonight," Dobbins said. "We mixed things up with the option run and the counter game. That's basically our offense. We've been working on it since day one. Coach Habich harped on it all week that we could run the ball on this team, if we played our assignments. We almost had it tonight."

"Watauga is a solid football team," said Freedom coach Blair Hardin, who was at the helm when Indian Trail-Porter Ridge clobbered WHS 69-0 in the opening round of the state playoffs last season. "(WHS) is well coached, they're physical and they don't make mistakes. They have a lot of confidence, and the scary part, they're very young. We had six turnovers tonight, and we shouldn't have won the game. Our kids found a way at the end, but we have to do a better job of protecting the football."

The Pioneers had a chance to ice the game away following Freedom's final turnover of the night. The Patriots marched the ball into WHS territory, but Smith fumbled at the WHS 29. Poulos recovered for the Pioneers with 2:40 to play. But the Pioneers were forced to punt with 1:42 to go. And the Patriots, who took over at their 31 with no time outs remaining, capitalized on Smith's 65-yard scoring toss to Gardin.

He hooked up with Gardin on a slant pattern at the WHS 45-yard-line, and Gardin took over from there. He zigged-and-zagged his way through traffic and waltzed into the end zone. That drive covered 69-yards in just two plays and it only took 32 seconds. But Poulos blocked McCartney Barrier's extra-point try to force overtime.

"(Gardin) good," Habich said. "They did a good job using him as a slot receiver. I did a poor job lining up the kids up correctly when he was in the slot. He got to the middle, and he had some space to work with. But I'm proud of the effort. Our kids played hard, and they represented Watauga well. But it was my fault. I have to do a better job coaching this team in the second half."

Gardin finished with nine catches for 180 yards and three TDs. Baker was held to a season-low three catches for 51 yards and no TDs for WHS. The Pioneers take on Hibirten at home next Friday night. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM `1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

**NOTES:** The Patriots have won two in a row against WHS.....It was the first meeting between the schools since 2008, but their 37th meeting overall....Freedom leads the all-time series, 29-7-1....The loss denied WHS' its first 7-0 start since 2006.....The Pioneers are 1-1 in overtime games this season.

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### FREEDOM 41, WATAUGA 34 (OT)

Freedom 14 7 0 13 7 — 41

Watauga 7 7 7 13 0 — 34

#### SCORING:

##### 1ST

FHS—Bridges 38 run (Barrier kick), 6-92 (2:19)

WHS—Ford 14 pass from Dobbins (Shirley kick), 7-60 (2:45)

FHS—Gardin 6 pass from Smith (Barrier kick), (9-80)

##### 2ND

WHS—Williams 1 run (Shirley kick), 7-71 (3:38)

FHS—Emmons 14 run (Barrier kick), 6-55 (2:27)

##### 3RD

WHS—Dobbins 4 run (Shirley kick), 12-76 (5:03)

##### 4TH

WHS—Williams 4 run (Shirley kick), 7-80 (3:14)

FHS—Gardin 5 pass from Smith (Barrier kick), 9-80 (2:52)

WHS—Poulos 11 run (Kick failed), 4-45 (1:40)

FHS—Gardin 65 pass from Smith (Kick blocked), 2-69 (0:32)

##### Overtime

FHS—Bridges 6 run (Barrier kick), 3-10

#### TEAM STATISTICS:

FIRST DOWNS: FHS 17, WHS 14

RUSHING YARDS: FHS 365, WHS 262

PASSING YARDS: FHS 198, WHS 161

TOTAL YARDS: FHS 563, WHS 423

PENALTY YARDS: FHS 3-15, WHS 7-40

FUMBLES/LOST: FHS 6-4, WHS 3-0

TURNOVERS: FHS 6, WHS 2

#### INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS:

##### Rushing:

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FHS—Emmons 16-148, Bridges 14-124, Smith 7-55, Davis 2-33  
WHS—Poulos 8-104, Williams 16-77, Dobbins 15-54, Ford 4-24, Baker 1-3

### Passing:

FHS—Smith 12-18-2TD-2I 198  
WHS—Dobbins 10-18-TD-2I 161

### Receiving:

FHS—Gardin 9-180, Ray 1-9, Wakefield 1-9  
WHS—Ford 4-32, Poulos 3-61, Baker 3-51, Isaacs 1-17

## NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

HIBRITEN	3-0; 7-0
FREEDOM	3-0; 6-1
<b>WATAUGA (4A)</b>	<b>2-1; 6-1</b>
PATTON	2-1; 6-1
SOUTH CALDWELL (4A)	1-2; 3-4
HICKORY	1-2; 3-4
FRED T. FOARD	0-3; 0-7
ST. STEPHENS	0-3; 0-7

### FRIDAY'S GAMES

**FREEDOM 41, WATAUGA 34 (OT)**  
HIBRITEN 49, FRED T. FOARD 7  
PATTON 28, ST. STEPHENS 0  
SOUTH CALDWELL 37, HICKORY 35

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

**HIBRITEN @ WATUAGA, 7:30 P.M.**  
HICKORY @ ST. STEPHENS, 7:30 P.M.  
PATTON @ FRED T. FOARD, 7:30 P.M.  
SOUTH CALDWELL @ FREEDOM, 7:30 P.M.

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### **OTHER GAMES:**

ASHE COUNTY 35, WEST WILKES 14

HENDERSONVILLE 51, AVERY 34

**Photo Courtesy: T.J. Poulos, WHS Athletics**