

## A Huge Step Forward.....

Written by Mike Kelly  
Saturday, 19 October 2013 10:37

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The Watauga High football team may have lost the battle the last two weeks, but in the long term, the Pioneers are slowly winning the war.

For the second week in a row, WHS came up short in its upset bid against one of the powerhouse teams in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference. Last week, Freedom escaped by winning in overtime; Friday night, Hibriten (8-0; 4-0) survived a huge WHS comeback to win 45-44 at Jack Groce Stadium.

The loss drops WHS (6-2 overall; 2-2 NW3A/4A) into fourth place. But the Pioneers are also sending a serious message to their opponents.

"What a job coach (Ryan) Habich has done with Watauga," said Hibriten coach Clay Lewis. "Compared to last year, it's a complete turnaround. They are so well coached, and they're so hard to defend. And the scary thing is that their a young team. They're going to be something to watch in the next two years. We were very lucky to pull out a win here tonight."

And that's putting it mildly. Trailing 45-31 with 9:10 left in the game, WHS rallied and got within a point with 31 seconds left. A one-yard run by Zach Williams, who paced the WHS running game with 113 yards on 18 carries, capped off a seven-play, 40-yard drive. And Habich decided to go for two. But Aaron Dobbins' two-point conversion pass to a wide open Hunter Issacs at the goal line was ruled a trap, and the Panthers survived.

"I just threw it short," said Dobbins, who had a couple of defenders in his face when he let the pass go. "I threw it off my back foot, and I just didn't get it there. But coach (Habich) told us to forget about it. We still have a lot of games to play. I'm anxious to get back to work Monday for our next game."

"That's what I really love about this team, their attitude," Habich said. "Yeah, it's tough to lose. Sometimes you come up inches short. We knew we were going for the win. It didn't happen, but the kids stayed in the game. They never got their heads down. We didn't get the win, but I'm real excited about the attitude of our kids. In a sport like this, attitude and desire are more important than winning and losing."

The Panthers made their biggest mistake of the game on fourth-and-two at the WHS 42-yard-line. A bad snap sailed over quarterback Jacob Copper's head. Duquan Suddreath ran it down at his 40, but he was gang tackled there, and the Pioneers took possession in great field position with 3:50 left. The Panthers lost 18 yards on that play.

"We weren't going to punt on that play," Lewis said. "We felt we could get the first down, that's why we went for it. We've got a veteran offensive line, and you wouldn't expect a bad snap like that in that situation. But it happened, and it gave them another chance to score."

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"All I said when I saw that play was, 'get on it, get on the ball,'" said WHS senior Cam Baker, who caught five passes for 114 yards, including a 61-yard strike that gave WHS a 17-13 lead in the second quarter. "It's a tough loss, but we're not going to let it stop us from being what we want to be, and that's a great football team."

The Panthers, who also botched four extra point tries, remain in a first-place tie in the NW3A/4A Conference standings with Freedom, who they play next Friday night in Morganton, N.C. The Patriots kept their share of first place by knocking off South Caldwell, 30-6. Patton (7-1; 3-1), who the Pioneers play next Friday night in Morganton, moved into sole possession of third place with a 31-12 win against winless Fred T. Foard.

Friday night's game at Jack Groce Stadium see-sawed back-and-forth. And the Pioneers, who trailed three times in the first half, came back to take a 24-19 halftime lead. Williams capped off a seven-play, 64-yard drive with a one-yard run with 14 seconds left in the second quarter to give WHS it's five points advantage at the break.

"That's the first time we've trailed all year," Lewis said. "And our kids were a little shell shocked at halftime. They're not use to playing from behind. But we hung on to win. A game like this will only benefit us in the long run."

Hibriten's best defense was its offense. The Panthers scored on all but two of their possessions. They got the ball to the WHS 40-yard-line as time ran out in the first half, and they took a knee at their 49 after they recovered an onside kick to end the game.

And the Panthers did the bulk of their damage on the ground. They came in averaging a league-leading 49 points and 390-rushing yards a game. Friday night, they finished with 493 yards on the ground. And they did it by committee. They had six different ball carriers. But Copper was their main threat. He rambled for 162 yards on 15 carries and scored five times. His final TD on a 10 yard run early in the fourth quarter gave the Panthers their 14-point cushion.

"You want to get a win," Habich said. "The last two weeks have been real tough. We called a play on that two-point conversion that we've worked on constantly. And it was open, but we just came up short. (Hibriten) have a lot of seniors on their team and a lot of experience. But I'm proud of our effort. Like I told the kids, we can't dwell on what's happened the last two weeks. We have to keep looking forward."

Dobbins and T.J. Poulos paced the Pioneers Friday night. Dobbins threw for 167 yards and ran for 76 more; Poulos ran for 59 yards and he caught three passes for 67 yards. His 26-yard reception with 6:01 left in the game narrowed the margin to seven points at 45-38.

"There's games we need to win, and we can win," Habich said. "We tried to take some chances with the onside kick and all those things that we did. (Hibriten) is so good offensively. We couldn't consistently stop them, and we missed a lot of tackles. But our kids are getting better, and they're going to keep improving. It's tough to lose a game like this, but the kids know now that they can play with teams like this."

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The teams combined for nearly 1,000 yard offensively in Friday night's shootout. The Panthers finished with 516 total yards; the Pioneers had 471, including 260 on the ground.

"I was real proud of (Aaron)," Habich said. "He did a great job on the option tonight, and he picked up some big yards for us. That really got our running game going. He made some solid decisions tonight."

"Hibriten was so good offensively, it really put it on our shoulders to score again every time we got the ball," Dobbins said. "We just couldn't make any stops on defense. But we just played the top two teams in the conference and came so close to winning both times. We're so excited about our team."

And so is everyone else.

### HIBRITEN 45, WATAUGA 44

#### Scoring Summary

##### Score by Quarters 1 2 3 4 Total

Hibriten 7 12 19 7 - 45

Watauga 3 21 7 13 - 44

##### 1st

08:48 WHS - S. Shirley 25 yd field goal, 9-74 3:12 0 - 3

01:25 HHS - Jacob Copper 16 yd run (Luke Robson kick), 11-75 5:19 7 - 3

##### 2nd

07:14 WHS - Aaron Dobbins 20 yd run (S. Shirley kick), 12-80 6:05 7 - 10

04:23 HHS - Devell Maxwell 20 yd run (Luke Robson kick failed), 8-81 2:42 13 - 10

04:06 WHS - Cam Baker 61 yd pass from Aaron Dobbins (S. Shirley kick), 1-61 0:17 13 - 17

01:53 HHS - Jacob Copper 10 yd run (Luke Robson kick failed), 6-80 2:13 19 - 17

00:14 WHS - Zach Williams 1 yd run (S. Shirley kick), 7-64 1:31 19 - 24

##### 3rd

10:18 HHS - Tishawn Daniels 18 yd run (Tishawn Daniels rush failed), 4-49 1:35 25 - 24

06:27 WHS - Zach Williams 3 yd run (S. Shirley kick), 8-62 3:43 25 - 31

03:10 HHS - Jacob Copper 1 yd run (Luke Robson kick failed), 9-81 3:09 31 - 31

00:23 HHS - Jacob Copper 19 yd run (Luke Robson kick), 4-57 2:02 38 - 31

##### 4th

09:10 HHS - Jacob Copper 10 yd run (Luke Robson kick), 5-42 2:04 45 - 31

06:02 WHS - TJ Poulos 26 yd pass from Aaron Dobbins (S. Shirley kick), 8-68 2:58 45 - 38

00:31 WHS - Zach Williams 1 yd run (Aaron Dobbins pass failed), 7-40 3:19 45 - 44

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### **Team Statistics**

FIRST DOWNS: WHS 27, HIBRITEN 21  
RUSHING YARDS: WHS 260, HIBRITEN 493  
PASSING YARDS: WHS 211, HIBRITEN 23  
TOTAL YARDS: WHS 516, HIBRITEN 471  
PENALTY YARDS: WHS 3-16, HIBRITEN 6-57  
FUMBLES/LOST: WHS 1-1, HIBRITEN 0-0  
TURNOVERS: WHS 1, HIBRITEN 0  
TIME OF POSSESSION: WHS 25:49, HIBRITEN 22:11  
THIRD DOWN CONVERSIONS: WHS 4-10, HIBRITEN 4-6  
FOURTH DOWN CONVERSIONS: WHS 2-3, HIBRITEN 1-2

### **Individual Statistics**

#### **RUSHING:**

WHS: WILLIAMS 18-113-2TD, DOBBINS 13-76, POULOS 9-59-TD  
HIBRITEN: COPPER 15-263-5TD, MAXWELL 12-137-TD, DANIELS 11-94-TD

#### **PASSING:**

WHS: DOBBINS 9-21-167-2TD  
HIBRITEN: COPPER 1-4-23

#### **RECEIVING:**

WHS: BAKER 5-114-TD, POULOS 3-67-TD  
HIBRITEN: DANIELS 1-23

**Photo Courtesy: Zach Williams, WHS Athletics**