

## Life In The Fast Lane.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Thursday, 24 October 2013 16:10

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Remember that song by the Eagles. Life in the fast lane, surely makes you lose your mind; life in the fast lane, everything all the time. Well, that chorus best describes the Watauga High football team the last two weeks. The Pioneers have scored enough points and racked up enough yardage during that stretch to beat

the top two teams in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference. And instead of being in first place, the Pioneers find themselves in fourth place, mired in a two-game losing streak, and trailing Freedom (which beat WHs in overtime on October 18) and Hibriten (which held on to beat WHS 45-44 last Friday night at Jack Groce Stadium) by two games with three games left to play.

"Sure, it's tough," said WHS coach Ryan Habich,. "We had our chances to win both of those games, but we made too many mistakes. We need to stay where we are with our intensity level, but we need to be more disciplined, especially in close games like we've played in the last two weeks."

And the Pioneers (6-2 overall; 2-2 NW3A/4A Conference) make their way to Morganton, N.C., to play Patton Friday night. It's the first meeting between the schools, and it's WHS' first trip to Morganton since 2007.

And the Pioneers will be up against a team much like themselves. The Panthers (7-1; 3-1), who begin the night in third place, are enjoying their best season in their short history. Patton High, which opened its doors in the fall of 2008, has never produced a winning season.

Their best season came in 2010, when the Panthers posted a .500 record. And that's also the only time the Panthers have made the state playoffs. Head coach Joe Glass, now in his second season, is also Patton's fourth head coach in the last six years.

"It's been a work in progress," Glass said. "But our guys have stayed with it. Yes, we've lost a few players along the way, but that's normal. The main thing is, we've brought this group along the last two years, and they've bought into our system. It's been a long journey in a short period of time, and we still aren't finished."

And what a journey it's been for Glass, who has made coaching stops at Hickory and Alexander Central. He inherited a team that had lost 16 straight. And that losing streak grew to 23 games before the Panthers finally broke their string of bad luck by knocking off R-S Central, 15-14.

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"And it was huge for our kids," Glass said. "It gave us a big shot in the arm going into our off-season workouts. The kids were anxious to get their work in. They're hungry, and I'll admit I'm a little surprised by our instant success, but these kids aren't quitters. They've put in the work, and now they're reaping the rewards."

"Hey, Patton is a solid team," Habich said. "They beat the defending league champion, South Caldwell, and it was a solid win (19-14 on October 4). They're not as big as Freedom or Hibriten, and they don't have the blazing speed, but they're fast enough, they're well coached, and they make plays. On top of that, we don't play very well on the road."

But that's debatable. The Pioneers are 3-0 on the road, and despite a 13-7 overtime win at Ashe County on August 30 (quarterback Aaron Dobbins didn't play in that game; he was out with a concussion), the Pioneers have marched their way to a pair of easy wins away from home. They put up 57 points on Avery (on September 13) and 48 points in their conference opener at Fred T. Foard (thanks to a huge second half on October 4).

"I just feel we're a better home team right now," Habich said. "We're developing an attitude about playing at home. I just feel we have more confidence playing at home. But like I told our players, we have three big games coming up, and it all starts (tonight) against Patton."

And like Hibriten last week, the Panthers feature a running game by committee. Patton is averaging 202 rushing yards a game with 17 touchdowns. Sampson Cuthbertson is their leading rusher with 624 yards and three TDs. But the Panthers will use up to six different ball carriers in a game.

"We like spreading the ball around," Glass said. "Our guys usually get the same amount of touches a game, and they don't complain about it. It's an unselfish group, and that's basically the personality of our team. These guys know it takes a team effort to win games."

Something the Pioneers have done on a regular basis themselves. But the Pioneers have also been blessed with a talented quarterback in Dobbins. Dobbins leads the NW3A/4A Conference with 1,268 passing yards; he's completed 57% of his passes (53-93), and he's thrown 18 TD passes compared to just four interceptions.

Dobbins had a huge performance last Friday night against Hibriten. He amassed 243 yards. He threw for 167 yard with two TD passes; he ran for 76 more and scored a TD.

"Aaron played a great game last week," Habich said. "He made some great reads on the option, and he's not afraid of getting hit. He'll call his own number. But I thought he did a great job of distributing the ball last week. He's strong and physical, and he's a talented quarterback. He's quite a weapon for us."

"Dobbins is a great player, and they run so many different formations," Glass said. "They're just tough to defend. Some teams move a tight end, or a running back to a certain spot, and you know they're going to run the ball that way. But with (Watauga), they move people around, but you just don't know who is going to get the ball. Coach Habich does a great job spreading out

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the field, and Dobbins is just a great player. Our defense is going have its hands full."

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

**NOTES:** The Pioneers defeated Freedom 27-8 in their last trip to Morganton way back in 2007.....Running back Zach Williams is the tenth leading rusher in the NW3A/4A Conference with 559 yards and 13 TDs. Williams is tied for second in the league in rushing TDs....The Pioneers also have two of the top three receivers in the NW3A/4A. Cam Baker leads the league with 795 receiving yards and a league-leading ten TD receptions. His 30 catches are second in the league to Khris Gardin of Freedom, who has a league best 41. T.J. Poulos is third in the league with 22 catches for 522 yards and six TDs.