

Tornado Warning....

Written by Mike Kelly
Wednesday, 30 October 2013 19:59

And it has Watauga High football coach Ryan Habich quite concerned. But Habich, who has the Pioneers in the middle of a conference championship race in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference, isn't worried about the weather forecast for Friday night's game at Jack Groce Stadium.

Instead, he's concerned about a Hickory football team, that without question, has arguably the best talent in the league. And the Pioneers will get a first-hand look at that talent pool Friday night at Jack Groce Stadium.

"They have outstanding talent," Habich said. "They've got eight to ten guys that are very fast, and they are very mean and aggressive. These guys can fly, and they're very physical. We can't match up with them one-on-one. They're explosive, especially in the open field. We need a total team effort to beat these guys, and we've got to get a lot of hats to the ball on defense."

The Pioneers (7-2 overall; 6-3 NW3A/4A Conference) begin the week in a three-way tie for third place with Hickory and Patton. All those team also find themselves just two games behind first-place Freedom with two games left on the regular season schedule.

"I don't care if we have to share a conference championship, I want our guys playing for one every season," Habich said. "That's the mindset we're trying to develop here. But our kids are young and nieve right now. They're just having a lot of fun. There isn't any pressure on this team, and they sure don't panick."

The Red Tornadoes (5-4; 3-2) are definitely talented, but their record doesn't show it. Their record, however, is also a little misleading.

They've played a heavyweight schedule that includes Statesville (which made it to the Class 3A regional semifinals last season), South Iredell (which won the Class 2AA state championship in 2012), Newton-Conover and Mooresville (a Class 4A heavyweight led by the legendary Hal Capps).

"When I saw the schedule after I took this job, I kind of questioned myself about taking it," said Mike Helms, who led Freedom to 37 wins the last four years and the Class 3A western finals last fall. "We sure haven't played many easy ones this season, but we've been competitive for the most part.

"It's been a learning curve for a lot of our guys, but if we put it all together, we could be an excellent team. This is the most explosive team I've ever coached. Our real problem is that our guys don't play hard all the time. They tend to let up."

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That lackadaisical attitude haunted Hickory in a costly 37-35 loss back on October 11. Since that loss, the Red Tornadoes have been on a mission. They've outscored their last two opponents (St. Stephens and Fred T. Foard) by the combined score of 94-0.

The Red Tornadoes are blessed with tremendous speed and a slew of great athletes. Their deepest position is at running back, where they will utilize up to four different players. Senior Jahiz Linebarger, their leading rusher, is one of the best running backs in the NW3A/4A Conference.

He's averaging 94 yards a game and he leads the NW3A/4A Conference with 16 rushing touchdowns. And he's complimented by sophomore JaQuon Crawford, who took over the reins as the starting quarterback when Matt Williams transferred to Fred T. Foard last summer.

Crawford has displayed a big arm, and he has blazing speed. He's completed 56% of his passes, he's thrown for more than a 1,000 yards with nine TD passes. But he's also throw seven interceptions. And much like quarterback Aaron Dobbins of the Pioneers, Crawford has big-play ability.

"We definitely have to keep him bottled up," Habich said. "He's a strong guy, and he can get the ball downfield. We have to put a lot of pressure on him Friday night, and we can't let him get outside. If he turns the corner, he can break it for 50 yards or more. Believe me, this is a team that can score from anywhere on the field, and Crawford is just another weapon we've got to deal with."

Ironically, Helms is just as worried about Dobbins, the leading passer in the NW3A/4A Conference. Dobbins backboned WHS to a huge road win at Patton last Friday night. He accounted for 244 of WHS' 321 total yards.

"He's a smart quarterback," Helms said. "That's what I like about him. He doesn't force things, he reads coverages real well, and he takes what the defense gives him. He's everything a coach wants in a quarterback, and he's going to be a huge challenge for us on defense. The guy makes plays, clutch plays."

And the Red Tornadoes have some concerns on defense. They've only given up 91 points in league play, but they're coughing up nearly 320 yards an outing. The secondary, led by Cameron Stinson, who is questionable for Friday's game with a small fracture in his foot (he hasn't played since week two), and Shakeed Washington at the cornerback spots, is considered the strength of the defense.

That unit only gave up 12 TD passes last year, and the fewest passing yards in the league. But it's a little different this year, especially with Stinson on the sidelines. They're coughing up 136 yards a game, and they've all ready given up ten TD passes.

"Their secondary does a great job supporting against the run, and those guys hit hard," Habich said. "Some of those guys look more like linebackers, and they run fast. We have to keep them honest, and we've got to give Aaron time back there to work. We've got to block these guys."

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They get to areas on the field real quick. It's going to be another tough game, but if we can keep it competitive going into the fourth quarter, you never know."

The Red Tornadoes lead the all-time series 14-3, but the teams have split their last four meetings right down the middle. The Red Tornadoes defeated WHS 22-6 at Jack Groce Stadium last season. Coverage begins at 6:230 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

NOTES: Friday night will be a very busy night at Jack Groce Stadium. The Pioneers will celebrate Senior Night during pre-game ceremonies. WHS will also honor senior Savanna Wood, a four-time state qualifier and three-time state place finisher. Wood finished in a sixth-place tie at the Class 4A state tournament in Pinecrest, N.C., on Monday and Tuesday of this week.....It will also be Pack the Pantries Night for Watauga County and the Watauga Humaine Society....The Pioneers will honor the 1978 state championship team and its coach Bill Maudlin at halftime....The Pioneers will also retire the jerseys of Eric Breitenstein and Danny Triplett during halftime ceremonies. Breitenstein led WHS to consecutive Final Four appearances in 2006 and 2007. He was an All-America running back at Wofford College and finished third in the Walter Payton Award (which goes to the best offensive player in the country in the Football Championship Series) voting last season....Triplett played on WHS' state championship team, he won a national championship at Clemson, and he played in the National Football League for three years with the Los Angeles Rams, the Cleveland Browns and the Miami Dolphins.....Triplett was coached by the late Bob Mathison, who played at Appalachian High, was an All-America at Duke and starred with the Miami Dolphins....He was a member of Miami's 1972 undefeated team. Matheson was often used by the Dolphins as a fourth linebacker in passing situations. This defensive alignment was often referred to as the "53" defense, named for Matheson's #53 jersey number. This is also referred to as a "34 defense" based on there being 3 linemen and 4 linebackers.....Breitenstein will be featured on Friday night's pre-game show on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net....Triplett will be featured at halftime.