

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back....

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 02 November 2013 01:13

That best describes the Watauga High football team. The Pioneers, who kept their slim hopes alive to at least earn a share of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference championship by winning on the road last week at Patton, coughed up that dream Friday night.

The Pioneers dropped a 42-27 decision at Jack Groce Stadium on Senior Night. The Red Tornadoes (6-4 overall; 4-2 NW3A/4A), who move into sole possession of third place, kept their hopes alive for a No.2 seed among the Class 3A schools in the league with the win. They trail Hibriten by one game.

The Panthers (5-1 NW3A/4A, and in second place) defeated Patton 21-13 in Lenior, N.C., Friday night. Patton (3-3 NW3A/4A) finds itself in a fourth-place tie with WHS (7-3; 3-3), but the Pioneers own the tiebreaker, thanks to last week's win. South Caldwell (5-5; 3-3) pulled into a fourth-place tie Friday night by crushing Fred T. Foard, 36-0.

The Pioneers have a shot at claiming the No.1 seed among the Class 4A schools when they venture to South Caldwell next Friday night.

But on this particular night, the Pioneers were victimized by Hickory's powerful running game. The Red Tornadoes racked up 337 yards on the ground, and they set the tone on the opening possession of the game.

Hickory marched 80-yards in 11 plays and ate more than five minutes off the clock for a 7-0 lead. JaQuon Crawford hooked up with Brandon Helms on a 17-yard scoring toss with 6:39 left in the opening quarter. Helms made a beautiful catch in the far corner of the end zone as he stayed inbounds on the play.

"We feature our tailback in our offensive scheme," said Hickory coach Mike Helms. "And we've got four of them. Tonight Jahiz Linebarger was our featured back. I feel he's one of the best players in this league. Last year, he started the season, and he didn't finish it for some reason. I don't know what happened. But this year, he's been a big-play guy for us.

"And (Corey) Stinson gave us the power stuff inside. He ran the ball hard tonight. And when we run the ball like we did tonight, we're pretty hard to stop."

The Red Tornadoes, thanks to their selfish ways, ran for 159 yards on 24 plays in their first two possessions of the game for a 14-0 lead. A Darian Jolly 38-yard interception return for a TD with 3:57 left in the second quarter made it 21-0.

"It falls on the head coach," WHS coach Ryan Habich said. "We just weren't disciplined tonight and it falls on me. Give Hickory credit. They're explosive, and they've got some great athletes.

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When you play a team with that many athletes, you must be patient and you must play under control. We didn't do that tonight and it's my fault."

The Pioneers finally got on the board with 1:06 left in the first half as Aaron Dobbins hooked up with Cameron Baker on a 37-yard scoring toss. Baker made a leaping grab between two defenders in the end zone. Baker, the leading receiver in the NW3A/4A Conference, caught four passes for 182 yards on the night and three TDs. Dobbins, the leading passer in the league, was 7-18 for 236 yards and three TD passes in the loss.

"(Hickory) put a lot of pressure on him tonight," Habich said. "That's why Aaron hurried some of his throws. But he's a terrific football player. He made some very good decisions tonight. And I really like this team. When I came here, I wanted to be competitive against the best teams in this league. And I'm confident we can play with the best teams in the state."

"The minute I let that ball go (on the interception), I knew he was going to pick it off," Dobbins said. "He just broke on the ball. We did a better job adjusting to their speed as the game wore on, but it was a tough night. We've got a big one next week with South Caldwell. It's a big game for the (Class) 4A teams in our league."

The play that broke WHS' back occurred in the third quarter. The Pioneers took their opening possession of the second half and marched 66 yards in seven plays, cutting their deficit to seven points at 21-14. Zach Williams, who led the Pioneers with 78 yards on 12 carries, finished things off with a one-yard run.

But Linebarger returned the ensuing kick-off 93 yards for a touchdown and a 28-14 lead just 15 seconds later. It's the second kick-off return for a TD against WHS in the last two games. They gave one up last week against Patton.

"We just played a sloppy game tonight," Habich said. "Offense, defense, special teams, we just didn't do a good job. They made a lot of big plays, and a lot of it goes back to us not being disciplined. I really felt we could compete with this team. We want to play with the best teams. But we didn't play Watauga football tonight. I'm disappointed."

The Red Tornadoes basically put the game out of reach early in the fourth quarter. Following Linebarger's kick-off return, the Pioneers marched the ball from their own 34 to the Hickory nine-yard-line. But facing a fourth and four, WHS turned the ball over on downs when Ryan Honeycutt nearly picked off Dobbins in the end zone.

Hickory proceeded to put the contest on ice. The Red Tornadoes marched the ball 91 yards in 13 plays for a 35-14 lead. Isaiah Bane scored on a one-yard run, and that scoring drive took 6:32 off the clock.

"And that really was the drive that won the game for us," Helms said. "It changed the game for us. We ate time off the clock, and it gave us a pretty good lead. But we knew coming in here that Watauga is an outstanding team. They are well coached, and (Baker) is probably the best receiver we've seen all year."

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The Pioneers travel to South Caldwell next Friday night in a huge Class 4A match up in the NW3A/4A Conference. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

NOTES: The Red Tornadoes have won two in a row against the Pioneers....Hickory leads the all-time series 15-3....The Pioneers honored their 1978 state championship team and coach Bill Maudlin at halftime on Friday night. The Pioneers won the Class 3A title against Burlington-Cummings 35 years ago at Conrad (now Kidd Brewer) Stadium....The Pioneers also retired the jerseys of Eric Breitenstein (#2) and Danny Triplett (#82). Triplett played on WHS' state championship team, won a national title at Clemson in 1981-82, and played three years in the National Football League with the Los Angeles (now St. Louis) Rams, Cleveland Browns and Miami Dolphins. He also played one year in the old United States Football League with the Washington Federals....Breitenstein led WHS to a pair of western finals in 2006 and 2007. He is WHS' all-time leading rusher and a two-time All-State player. Breitenstein, who started and played in every WHS game during his four-year career, also had a stellar career at Wofford College. He led the Terriers to a pair of Southern Conference championships and was the SoCon Offensive Player of the Year in 2011 and again in 2012. Breitenstein is also Wofford's all-time leading rusher, and he owns the SoCon single game rushing record with 321 yards....Breitenstein also paid a visit to the WHS football team on Thursday. "I knew about Eric because I played for his dad, coach (Steve) Breitenstein, in middle school. I also got to lift with him a few times this off season. He's a cool guy. He's really nice."....The 2006 and 2007 teams were also on hand for Friday night's festivities....Also in attendance was their former coach Adrian Snow, who is currently the head man at West Forsyth. The Titans are 9-1 this season. They close out the season against North Davidson next Friday night.

SCORING SUMMARY:

HICKORY 42, WATAUGA 27

	1	2	3	4	TOTAL
HICKORY	7	14	7	14	- 42
WATUAGA	0	7	7	13	- 27

1ST

6:39 HHS - CRAWFORDC 17 YARD PASS TO HELMS (HARTMAN KICK), 11-80 5:21, 7-0

2ND

8:55 HHS - CRAWFORD 5 YARD PASS TO SURBAUGH (HARTMAN KICK), 13-79 4:48, 14-0

3:57 HHS - JOLLY 38 YARD INTERCEPTION RETURN (HARTMAN KICK) 21-0

1:06 WHS - DOBBINS 37 YARD PASS TO BAKER (SHIRLEY KICK), 5-76 2:44, 21-7

3RD

8:42 WHS - WILLIAMS 1 YARD RUN (SHIRLEY KICK), 7-66 3:10, 21-14

8:27 HHS - LINEBARGER 93 YARK KICK-OFF RETURN (HARTMAN KICK), 28-14

4TH

9:32 HHS - BANE 1 YARD RUN, (HARTMAN KICK), 13-91 6:32, 35-14

4:07 WHS - DOBBINS 66 YARD PASS TO BAKER (SHIRLEY KICK), 3-77 0:39, 35-21

0:43 WHS - SANTIAGO 2 YARD RUN (HARTMAN KICK), 9-60 3:22, 42-21

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0:00 WHS - DOBBINS 30 YARD PASS TO BAKER (NO EXTRA POINT TRY), 42-27

TEAM STATISTICS

FIRST DOWNS: WHS 13, HHS 24

RUSHING YARDS: WHS 121, HHS 337

PASSING YARDS: WHS 236, HHS 36

TOTAL YARDS: WHS 357, HHS 373

PENALTY YARDS: WHS 4-15, HHS 6-126

TURNOVERS: WHS 2, HHS 0

TIME OF POSSESSION: WHS 20:16, HHS 27:44

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING:

HHS

LINEBARGER 18-131

STINSON 14-105

SANTIAGO 2-28

HAMILTON 3-24

CRAWFORD 7-30

DUMAINE 2-11

JOLLY 1-8

HELMS 2-3

BANE 1-1

WHS

WILLIAMS 12-78-TD

DOBBINS 10-39

SUGGS 1-5

POULOS 3- -1

PASSING:

HHS

CRAWFORD 4-11-36-2TD

WHS

DOBBINS 7-18-236-I-3TD

RECEIVING:

HHS

HELMS 2-22-2TD

HONEYCUTT 1-9

SURBAUGH 1-5-TD

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WHS

BAKER 4-182-3TD

POULOS 2-26

ISAACS 1-28

Photo Courtesy: WHS Field House Displays championship banner and the retired jerseys of Eric Breitenstein and Danny Triplett