

## And Now, Enter South Caldwell.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 06 November 2013 21:39

---

The Watauga High football team has been preparing itself for this moment all season. And the Pioneers (7-3 overall; 3-3 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) seem well prepared for Friday night's huge match up with South Caldwell at Spartans Stadium in Sawmills, N.C.

A win, and the Pioneers nail down the No.1 seed among the Class 4A schools in the NW3A/4A Conference and at least a home game in the opening round of the state playoffs, which begin next week. A loss, and the Pioneers will probably find themselves playing on the road.

"Coach (Ryan) Habich has been preaching all week that the state playoffs begin Friday night," said WHS junior Austin Northern. "Like he said, 'it's like the (Atlantic Coast Conference) championship game. You win, and you get to play in a (Bowl Championship Series) game. Lose, and you're playing in something like the blockbuster bowl.'"

And the odds may be in WHS' favor. The Spartans (5-5; 3-3), who are two-time defending champions in the NW3A/4A Conference, have been bitten by the injury bug this season. The biggest loss came in the season opener against West Caldwell on August 30, when All-State running back Zac Pollard suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee.

But that was only the beginning. The Spartans also lost linebacker Andrew Tilghman, a pre-season candidate for Defensive Player of the Year honors in the NW3A/4A Conference, with a torn ACL the same night that Pollard went down. In all, the Spartans have lost eight starters to injury this season.

"In all my years of coaching, I have never seen a team that was as injury prone like we've been this season," said South Caldwell coach Butch Carter, now in his 13th year with the Spartans. "But injuries are part of the game, and you've got to make adjustments. I give a lot of credit to our coaching staff and our players. They've learned to regroup, and we've redeveloped our team."

And the Spartans come into Friday's match up with a skip in their step. The Spartans, who defeated Hickory 37-35 back on October 11, are riding a modest two-game winning streak, and they've won three of their last four games. They've also had their way with the Pioneers in recent years.

The Spartans have won three in a row in this series, and the Pioneers have only won twice at Spartans Stadium since 1997. Their last win in Sawmills came in 2007, but the Pioneers are 4-0 on the road this season.

"I really feel our win at Patton (on October 20) will really benefit us in this game," Habich said. "That win gave us a lot of confidence that we can beat a quality team in this conference on the road. And I feel real good about our team. Our guys are mentally focused for this game. They know what's at stake, and winning Friday night would be a huge step for our program, especially if we can play a home game in the state playoffs."

## And Now, Enter South Caldwell.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 06 November 2013 21:39

---

The Pioneers haven't hosted a state playoff game since 2011. They defeated Alexander Central that year and broke a three-game slide in post-season play.

"I remember that team with (Ethan Greene) and those guys," Northern said. "It was my freshman year. It means a lot for us to play at home in the state playoffs. I hope it snows and it's cold as (heck) when we do. A lot of us were pretty (ticked) off at the beginning of the season, especially the rising juniors. We were picked to finish near the bottom of the league, but we take a lot of pride in what we do. And a lot of the juniors on this team made a run at the conference championship last year at the (junior varsity) level."

Ironically, the Pioneers were beaten out by South Caldwell, which has won 19 consecutive games at the JV level the last two years.

"They have an established program," Habich said. "They're strong and they all run downhill. It's going to be a real test for our guys, especially running the football inside. They're big, they move well, and they hit hard. And they have filled their holes injury wise. The motto is, 'the next man in.' Well, when you have an established program like they have, you've got the players that can step in and fill those spots."

Gavin Reed has done just that for the Spartans. The South Caldwell junior stepped in for Pollard, when he went down, and he's filled in admirably. Reed is the leading rusher in the NW3A/4A with 1,123 yards and nine touchdowns.

"And he never played running back before," Carter said. "He was our quarterback on the JV team last season. But when we lost Pollard, he stepped up, and he's turned into our go-to guy."

"I'm impressed with Reed, but they also have four more guys that can run the ball back there," Habich said. "This is a solid team we're playing Friday night. Don't let this injury bug stuff fool you. They have a three-year starter at quarterback (Trevar Soles), and they're peaking at the right time.

"They're playing their best football of the season right now. I'm telling you, these guys are going to be ready for us, and we haven't faired very well down there."

But the Spartans also haven't seen a quarterback as good as Aaron Dobbins of the Pioneers. The NW3A/4A's leading passer, Dobbins could give the Spartans and their young secondary (senior Nick Matthews is the only returnee) fits on Friday night. Dobbins has thrown for 1,648 yards in ten games with 22 TD passes and just six interceptions. He threw for 236 yards and three TDs in last Friday night's loss against Hickory.

"I remember him from last season," Carter said. "I'm very impressed with him. He doesn't make mistakes, and he does a good job getting the ball to his receivers. He's a very good quarterback, and he's done a tremendous job running that offense. And we always have a lot of respect for Watauga.

"I've been fortunate to play in this series and to coach in it. And every time we play Watauga, it's

## And Now, Enter South Caldwell.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 06 November 2013 21:39

---

been a terrific game. But right now, especially with our injuries, we're more concerned with becoming a better football team each and every week."

"We let down a little bit last week," Northern said. "Those close losses we had against Freedom and Hibriten took a lot out of us. That's why we didn't play real well last week. As coach puts it, 'we didn't play Watauga football.' But we'll be ready Friday night. We really want that number one seed."

Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

**NOTES:** Friday's game will be heard on Classic Hits 100.7 FM because the Appalachian State University's men's basketball team opens its season in Raleigh against North Carolina State. Coverage of that game begins at 6:15 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA.....This is the 37th meeting between the Pioneers and South Caldwell. South leads the all-time series, 21-15. The Pioneers haven't won since 2009. They haven't won in Sawmills since 2007....WHS must drop its endowment game win against Wilkes Central (a 42-0 win on September 20) heading into the state playoffs. It's a North Carolina High School Athletic Association rule. So, if WHS wins Friday night, its official record would be 7-3 going into the state playoffs. If the Pioneers lose, their record would be 6-4.....Tyson Fernandez, who played for WHS coach Ryan Habich at Fuquay-Varina last season, made his first collegiate start for App State last Saturday against Chattanooga. He made four tackles play nose guard. "And I thought he played one heck of a game," Habich said. "Believe it or not, he didn't start playing football until his sophomore year. The JV baseball coach was one of my assistants in football, and he threatened to cut (Fernandez) unless he came out for football his sophomore year. He was a first baseman in baseball. He was a potential scholarship player in football and he wound up at ASU. I'm real proud of him."

**Photo Courtesy: Cam Baker, WHS Athletics**