

Rematch....

Written by Mike Kelly
Saturday, 09 November 2013 16:50

The North Carolina High School Athletic Association has released its state playoff brackets, and the Watauga High football team, which nailed down the No.1 seed among the Class 4A schools in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference by knocking off South Caldwell 22-21 Friday night in Sawmills, N.C., will play Indian Trail-Porter

Ridge in the opening round Friday night at Jack Groce Stadium.

It's a rematch of last year's first-round game between the Pioneers (8-3) and the Pirates (7-4) in Indian Trail, won by the Pirates, 69-0. For WHS, it was the worst loss in school history.

But it's a new year, and the Pioneers are a much better team. WHS posted its winningest season since 2007, and the Pioneers enter the state playoffs as a No.1 seed for the first time in seven years (2007).

"We're certainly excited about the opportunity of playing Porter Ridge, especially at home," said WHS coach Ryan Habich. "It's a new season, and thankfully, we don't have to make the long trip, they do. Plus, it's supposed to snow up here (Wednesday), so that could play a role in Friday's game. But they're blessed with some great athletes. They've got eight or ten guys that are playmakers."

"It's real exciting to play at home," quarterback Aaron Dobbins said. "It's awesome, and it's supposed to snow. I think that's pretty cool. That could play to our advantage."

The Pirates will have to duplicate WHS' long trip last season. It's at least a three-plus hour bus trip from Indian Trail to Boone.

"I'm just thankful we don't have to travel," Habich said. "It's a long bus ride, and mix in the cold weather, you never know how it could affect their team. It's the playoffs, anything is possible now."

Overall, WHS is the No.6 seed in the Class 4A Western playoffs; Porter Ridge is the No.11 seed. The Pirates were the No.3 seed in the Southwestern 4A Conference. The Pirates, who are led by first-year coach Greg Neuendorf, finished the season losing to Rocky River 20-0 Friday night. That win handed the Ravens their first championship in school history.

Neuendorf replaced Blair Hardin, who is currently in his first year at Freedom. The Pirates, who made it to the Class 4A state finals the last two years and lost the championship to New Bern last fall, feature a balanced attack on offense. They're averaging 217 yards a game on the ground and 160 yards through the air.

Junior quarterback Isaiah Hicklin (6-foot-1, 170 pounds), who sat out Friday's season finale with a concussion, has completed 52% of his passes and he's thrown for 1,645 yards with 13

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touchdown passes and eight interceptions. He has an 85 QB rating. He's also blessed with three talented receivers in Casey Hardison (5-10, 175), A.J. Barrett (6-1, 185) and Luke Bayly (6-3, 215).

Bayly is their leading receiver with 34 catches for 526 yards and four TDs; Barrett's caught 32 balls for 524 yards and three TDs; Barrett has 23 catches for 468 yards and four TDs.

Jerrick Robbins is their best athlete. He's their leading rusher with 724 yards (an average of 74 yards a game with 11 TDs) and he leads the team in all-purpose yards with 1,367. Grant Vandervoort, who was Porter Ridge's leading ball carrier in its season-ending loss to Rocky River with 63 yards rushing, is second on the team in rushing with 638 yards on 95 carries and five TDs.

"They have the athletes, that's for sure," Habich said. "But athletes don't win football games, especially in the playoffs. Teams win championships, and that's our motto. Win as a team. That's how we beat Patton and South Caldwell on the road this season, and why we play Freedom and Hibriten so close. Quoting Mike Ditka (former Chicago Bears coach and pro football Hall of Famer), 'you're not beaten until you quit trying.' And we're preaching that to our kids."

Defensively, the Pirates have been somewhat generous, coughing up 22 points a game. They gave up a season high 55 points in a 55-6 blowout loss to Charlotte-Butler on October 25. They also gave up 42 points in a loss to Sun Valley on September 20, and Charlotte-Independance put up 34 points on the Pirates in a 35-34 loss on October 4.

The Pirates finished in a third-place tie with Independance in the SW4A, but gained the No.3 seed with that win against the Patriots.

Senior linebacker Nick Vagnone (6-0, 200) their leading tackler with 110 stops; senior defensive lineman Donnie Warren (6-3, 210) leads the Pirates with eight quarterback sacks; Hardison leads Porter Ridge with four interceptions; Vagnone had three picks. The Pirates are plus seven in turnover ratio.

The winner of this game will play either the No.4 seed Rocky River (the SW4A champion), or the No.13 seed, Pfafftown-Reagan (the No.3 seed from the Central Piedmont 4A Conference) on Friday November 22 in the second round.

In other Class 4A games,. South Caldwell (5-6), coming off its first losing season since 2009, is a 15th seed in the west. The Spartans open the playoffs at Greensboro-Dudley (10-0), the No.2 seed. Alexander Central (5-6) is a 16th seed in the west and opens the playoffs at the No.1 seed and Northern Piedmont 3A/4A Conference foe, Mooresville.

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The Blue Devils (10-1) defeated Alexander Central 28-23 in their regular-season meeting on October 11.

In Class 3A, Freedom (10-1 and the NW3A/4A Conference champion) is the No.1 seed in the west. The Patroits, who made it to the Class 3A western finals last season, take on East Rowan at home next Friday night. Hibriten (10-1), which finished in second place in the NW3A/4A Conference, is the No.5 seed in the west. The Panthers take on Patton (7-4), the No.12 seed, at Jeff Storie Stadium in Lenior, N.C., Friday night.

Hickory (6-5), which lost to Hibriten Friday night, is seeded 13th, and the Red Tornadoes will open the state playoffs at Pisgah (8-3), the No.4 seed.

In Class 2AA, Ashe County (7-4), which was 6-1 in the Mountain Valley 1A/2A Conference, openings the state playoffs at home against Bunker Hill. The Huskies are a No.4 seed; the Bears (7-4) from the Southern District 7 2A Conference, are seeded 13th. The Huskies finished the season by blowing out Elkin 56-7 on Senior Night at Huskies Stadium in West Jefferson, N.C.

In Class 1AA, Avery, despite a 4-7 record, is a No.4 seed. The Vikings will open the state playoffs at home against the No.5 seed in the west, Bessemer City (6-5) at MacDonald Stadium in Newland, N.C., Friday night. The Vikings finished the season with a 21-14 win against Mitchell,.

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FRIDAY NIGHT'S GAMES NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A

WATAUGA 22, SOUTH CALDWELL 21
HIBRITEN 35, HICKORY 33
FREEDOM 48, PATTON 14
ST. STEPHENS 20, FRED T. FOARD 7

OTHER GAMES

ASHE COUNTY 56, ELKIN 7

AVERY 21, MITCHELL 14

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15

FIRST-ROUND STATE PLAYOFFS

CLASS 4A

INDIAN TRAIL-PORTER RIDGE @ WATAUGA

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SOUTH CALDWELL @ GREENSBORO-DUDLEY

ALEXANDER CENTRAL @ MOOERSVILLE

CLASS 3A

EAST ROWAN @ FREEDOM

PATTON @ HIBRITEN

HICKORY@ PISGAH

CLASS 2AA

BUNKER HILL @ ASHE COUNTY

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CLASS 1AA

BESSEMER CITY @ AVERY