

Remember What Happened Last Year.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 13 November 2013 19:14

It wasn't pretty. The Watauga High football team made a three-hour trip to Indian Trail, N.C., for a first-round state playoff game that was over by halftime.

Porter Ridge, which made its second straight trip to the Class 4A state title game last fall, blasted the Pioneer 69-0, handing WHS (8-3) its worst loss in school history. But it's a new year, and the Pioneers are a much better team.

And if there's any doubts, especially where Porter Ridge (7-4) is concerned, the Pirates may be in for quite a surprise.

"We're definitely not looking back at last year's game," said Porter Ridge coach Greg Neuendorf, who replaced Blair Hardin (now at Freedom) as head coach this season. "We've been preaching that to our players all week. There's no comparisons or similarities related to last year's game. The only thing that hasn't changed is that the same schools are facing each other in the first round of the state playoffs."

"Man, I'm just ready to take them down," said WHS junior linebacker Dakota McCreary. "I remember what we went through last year. We just want to show these guys that we can play with them. They probably feel they're going to come up here and stomp all over us, but we're going to give them a show."

The Pirates and the Pioneers will square off at Jack Groce Stadium Friday night at 7:30 p.m. (coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net) in the opening round of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association Class 4A state playoffs. The winner of this game will play either Rocky River or Pfafftown-Reagan in the second round next Friday night.

And the Pioneers have something to prove. They've only won one playoff game---against Alexander Central in 2011---dating back to 2008.

"Our kids are excited about playing Porter Ridge," WHS coach Ryan Habich said. "It's a new season, and our kids really believe they have a chance against this team. Our kids have really played with a lot of confidence all season. We nearly beat Freedom and Hibriten, and we won two big games on the road against Patton and South Caldwell (last Friday night, which gave WHS the No.1 seed among the Class 4A schools in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference), so our kids believe they can hold their own with this team."

But the Pirates, who are 47-9 the last five years, had something to prove themselves this season. Thanks to realignment, Porter Ridge, a Union County school, was moved from the Southern Carolina 3A/4A Conference to the powerful Southwestern 4A Conference this season.

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"And our players didn't embarrass themselves," Neuendorf said. "They've heard it all about how they played in a bad conference against smaller schools, that they couldn't hold their own against Charlotte. Well, I thought we played pretty well. We just finished one game out of first place."

The Pirates were 4-2 in the SW4A. A 20-0 loss to Rocky River, which won the conference title, in the final game of the regular season last Friday night cost them a share of the championship. Porter Ridge finished in a third-place tie with Charlotte-Independance, but gained the No.3 seed after beating the Patriots 35-34 on October 4.

And the Pirates are blessed with a very strong senior class that was part of 40 wins, three conference titles, three final four appearances, and two trips to the state championship game.

Luke Bayly, who stands 6-foot-3 and weighs in at 215 pounds, leads a talented receiving corps. He's complimented by A.J. Barrett and Casey Hardison. That group has amassed 89 catches for 1,518 yards and 11 touchdowns. Jerrick Robbins paces the running game. He's rambled for 742 yards and 11 TDs this season. He's rushed for more than 2,000 yards the last two years.

Isaiah Hicklin, who sat out last week's season finale with a concussion, is "the straw that stirs the drink," according to Bayly. Hicklin, who took over as the starting quarterback late last season, has completed 52% of his passes (104-199) for 1,645 yards with 13 TD passes. But he's also thrown eight interceptions. Rushing-wise, Hicklin is averaging nearly six-yards a carry with four TDs.

"He's a dual-threat guy," Habich said. "We've got to contain him. If he gets on the edge, or if he escapes our pressure and gets outside, he'll pick up big yardage. He's got speed, but their entire team is faster and stronger than we are. And they come out of a tough conference. It's another challenge for our players, but I feel we have the advantage.

"We're playing at home and nobody is giving us a chance to win. Everybody thinks it's going to be another lopsided game. It's the playoffs. Anything can happen at this time of the year."

Middle linebacker Nick Vagnone leads the Pirates with 110 tackles and four tackles-for-loss. He's averaging 11 stops a game. Fellow senior, Ron Hedd, is second on the team with 88 stops, and defensive lineman Donnie Warren leads the Pirates with eight quarterback sacks.

The Pirates have also been opportunistic on defense. They've forced 22 turnovers and they're a plus-seven in turnover ratio.

"We're blessed with a great group of seniors," Neuendorf said. "I came in late, around June (actually, June 5), when I was named head coach. So, I didn't get a chance to work with the players that much. But our seniors made up for it. They know what it takes to play at a championship level. Their record speaks for itself the last three years."

But the Pioneers have a few weapons of their own, and it all begins with sophomore quarterback Aaron Dobbins, who engineered last week's game-winning drive against South

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Caldwell. Cameron Baker led the NW3A/4A in receiving yards and TD receptions; T.J. Poulos was one of the top dual threats (rushing and receiving) in the NW3A/4A.

"He's a tremendous field general," Neuendorf said concerning Dobbins. "And you've got to have a solid quarterback to run an offense like theirs. He is so efficient, and he's so precise with his passes. He's definitely a handful for any defense. And Watauga's a solid team. They're physical and fundamentally sound. Our guys better be ready to play."

"We're going to need some breaks to win this game," Habich said. "No doubt about it. But if we can force some turnovers, move the ball on offense, and if we can make some stops on defense, I feel pretty good about chances, especially playing at home."

NOTES: Running back Zac Pollard of South Caldwell, who suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee in the season opener against West Caldwell on August 30, will attend Presbyterian College, a Division I school and a member of the Big South Conference, to play football next season. Pollard, an All-State player last fall, ran for more than 3,000 yards his junior year.

Photo Courtesy: Nick Vagnone, PHOTO SUBMITTED