

It's about time....

Written by Mike Kelly
Saturday, 11 January 2014 11:12

At least that's the way Watauga High boy's basketball coach Rob Sanders felt after Friday night's come-from-behind win against Hibriten at Lentz-Eggers Gym.

The Pioneers rallied from a 15-3 first-quarter deficit and beat the Panthers 64-53 for their first win in Northwestern 3A/4A Conference play. It was also WHS' (10-4 overall; 1-3 NW3A/4A) eighth consecutive win against the Panthers.

Hibriten hasn't beaten WHS since the 2009-10 season, when they swept the Pioneers that year. Since then, the Pioneers have literally owned them.

This time around, it was WHS junior Utah Jones, who made the biggest play of the game. His steal and ensuing layup snapped a 53-53 tie and put the Pioneers on top to stay with 4:32 left in the game. From that point on, the Pioneers were in complete control as they closed out the game with an 11-point run.

"I told our guys that we're much better team than we showed in the first quarter," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "We're capable of scoring more than just three points in eight minutes of play. But Hibriten was running a one-four high set on offense, and they got a lot of open looks. We had to adjust on defense. And when we turned up our defensive intensity, it got us back in the game."

The win leaves WHS just one game out of third place, and just two games behind second-place Patton, who they play next Tuesday night in Morganton. Hibriten (6-4; 2-2), which has lost two in a row, finds itself in a four-way tie for third with Hickory, St. Stephens, and Fred T. Foard.

"This race isn't over," Sanders said. "Just because we lost three conference season to start off doesn't mean we're out of it by any means. This is a very balanced conference. We're right back in the race, but we need to play with this type of must-win intensity the rest of the way, if we want to stay in contention. I told our guys that we deserved to win this game, we took care of business and we did just that."

Jay Harrill paced WHS with 21 points. His three ball in the fourth quarter capped off a 7-2 run and tied the game at 51-51 with 4:51 left. Harrill also had seven rebounds and a pair of steals. Cameron Baker chipped in with 19 points and ten boards. His jumper following Jones' steal gave the Pioneers a four-point advantage and jump-started their game-ending 11-point run.

WHS salted the game away from there at the foul line. The Pioneers made seven free throws in the final 2:04 to clinch it.

"We shot free throws very well tonight (19-29), especially early in the game when we were

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struggling offensively," Sanders said. "Our goal is similar to Duke's approach by making more free throws than your opponent. And we did that by attacking the basket instead of settling for the three point shot. Our guys just found a way. Hibriten is an excellent team and we knew this was going to be a difficult game. We saw that when we played them back in December (in the championship game of the Colvard Oil Christmas Classic). They're very disciplined and methodical.

"They play under control, but we took them out of their comfort zone with our defensive intensity. We forced them to speed things up with our pressure. We forced some turnovers and it led to a lot of transitions baskets. And that led to a big second quarter for us."

That pressure brought WHS back from a 12-point first-quarter deficit. The Pioneers erupted for 29 points in the second period and took a 32-27 halftime lead.

But the Panthers regrouped and regained the lead, 45-42, entering the fourth quarter. And the Panthers expanded their lead to five points at 49-44 on a bucket by Makaland Thomas. But that's when the Pioneers stepped things up and finally took control.

"It feels great to finally get that first win," Sanders said. "Our guys were really frustrated after that loss at Fred T. Foard last (Friday). And the weather didn't do us any favors going into that Freedom game Wednesday night. But I like the make up of this team. The seniors, especially Cameron and Jay, are really stepping up and leading this team. They really stepped it up for us tonight from the second quarter on."

Kel Berry led Hibriten with 19 points. He ignited Hibriten's third-quarter rally by scoring nine points in the period. Drake Felder, who finished with 11 points, gave Hibriten a 43-42 lead with 1:17 left in the period; a jumper by Jon Bolick with 49 seconds left gave Hibriten its three-point advantage heading into the final stanza.

But the Panthers couldn't make it stand up. Making matters worse, the Panthers also lost their starting point guard, sophomore Bishop Walton, who went down with a shoulder injury late in the third quarter. Walton, who scored 11 points, all in the first half, left the game favoring his right shoulder and never returned.

"We've got to do this all over again on Tuesday," Sanders said. "It's a huge game, but considering where we are right now in the standings, every game is a must-win game for us. We've got to treat every game like we're playing for the conference championship. And if we do that until the end of the season, you never know what might happen. To think we're down and out with three conference losses is wrong. This group hasn't lost any faith in one another. They still believe they can make a run in the conference race."

The Pioneers travel to Morganton-Patton Tuesday night. It was originally WHS' home game, but the schools flipped playing dates because of final exams. Tuesday's games will be varsity only with the girls starting at 5 p.m. Coverage begins at 4:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

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NOTES: The WHS junior varsity girls defeated Hibriten, 37-16. Karson Hemrick led WHS with 13 points. Olivia Reese, Katie Hamrick, Holly Greene and Callin Idol each had four points apiece....Hibriten beat the WHS JV boys, 50-36. Caleb Bryson led the Pioneers with 16 points. Levi Wilcox finished with six points, Harrison Cobb had five.

WATAUGA 64, HIBRITEN 53

SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

HIBRITEN HIGH	15	12	18	8	-	53
WATAUGA HIGH	3	29	10	22	-	64

HIBRITEN: WALTON 11, THOMAS 3, DAVIS 2, BERRY 19, BOLICK 4, FELDER 11, BENFIELD 3. FG: 18, 3FG: 3, FT: 8-14.

WHS: HARRILL 21 (7 REBOUNDS, 2 STEALS), EGGERS 3, POULOS 2, DOBBINS 5, JONES 5, EBAUGH 3, BAKER 19 (10 REBOUNDS), LAMBERT 6. FG: 18, 3FG: 3, FT: 19-29.

WATAUGA GIRLS 49, HIBRITEN 31

The Watauga High girl's basketball team bounced back from Wednesday disappointing loss at Freedom by blasting Hibriten 49-31 Friday night at Lentz-Eggers Gym.

The Pioneers (5-9 overall; 3-1 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) jumped on Hibriten right away by scoring 20 consecutive points to start the game. The Panthers (1-10; 0-4), who haven't beaten WHS since the 1997-98 season, didn't score until Cheyenne Calloway sank a free throw with 2.1 seconds left in the period.

"I wasn't too concerned about our attitude coming into tonight's game," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "I would have been real worried, if we had beaten Freedom Wednesday night. But we had a great practice (Thursday) and we jumped on them right away. It was a fantastic first quarter for us. We pushed the ball up the floor, we played under control, and we found some holes in their zone defense. And in turn, our defense led to many transition baskets."

The win leaves WHS in a second-place tie with Freedom in the NW3A/4A Conference standings, and only one game behind first-place Hickory.

"It really hasn't soaked into our girls just yet," Anderson said. "We're usually in the lower half of the conference standings this early into the season. But we're right up there contending. And tonight, we stay in contention with a huge win."

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Kaelin McNeill and Ryan Loflin backboned WHS' first-quarter assault. They combined for 14 points as the Pioneers built their commanding lead. McNeill finished with a season-high 17 points; Loflin poured in 16 points.

WHS, which led by as many as 26 points in the first half, was up 31-8 at halftime. And despite a ten-point run by the Panthers to close out the third quarter, the Pioneers were never seriously challenged.

A bucket by Loflin with 3:16 left gave WHS its biggest advantage at 49-22. The Pioneers had three players score in double figures.

"Ryan had her best game in a month," Anderson said. "She really struggled during the Christmas break. And Kaelin was long and tall tonight. She was a presence in the post. I'm really tickled that those two played well tonight, and really carried us early in the game."

Savanna Wood finished with 11 points. The Pioneers travel to Morganton-Patton Tuesday night, and the Panthers, like Hibriten, are struggling at the moment. Patton (5-8; 1-3) finally cracked the win column in league play Friday night by knocking off Fred T. Foard, 67-55.

"We're 3-1 right now, and we protected our home floor with this win," Anderson said. "Now we have Patton coming up Tuesday night, and they're struggling, too. And when you have a team that struggling like they are, it's a good time to catch them on the schedule. I'm tickled with this win, I'm anxious to get back in the gym Monday and to play Tuesday night."

Calloway led Hibriten with nine points; Emerald Brown and Katie Bruce finished with seven points apiece. The Pioneers play at Patton Tuesday night in a varsity-only game. The WHS girls play at 5 p.m., the WHS boy's game will follow. Coverage begins at 4:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

WATAUGA 49, HIBRITEN 31

SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 **TOTAL**

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HIBRITEN HIGH 1 7 11 12 - 31
WATAUGA HIGH 20 11 4 14 - 49

HIBRITEN: BROWN 7, BRUCE 7, CHURCH 3, SANDERS 5, CALLOWAY 9. FG: 8, 3FG: 2, FT: 9-16.

WHS: WOOD 11, CARROLL 2, LOFLIN 16, McNEILL 17, FOUTZ 3. FG: 15, 3FG: 3, FT: 10-19.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

FRIDAY'S GAMES

GIRLS:

WATAUGA 49, HIBRITEN 31

PATTON 67, FRED T. FOARD 55

FREEDOM 55, SOUTH CALDWELL 51 (OT)

HICKORY 75, ST. STEPHENS 53

BOYS:

WATAUGA 64, HIBRITEN 53

PATTON 55, FRED T. FOARD 52

FREEDOM 92, SOUTH CALDWELL 35

HICKORY 58, ST. STEPHENS 47

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS

GIRLS:

Conf. All

Hickory 4-0 11-0

Watauga 3-1 5-9

Freedom 3-1 8-5

S. Caldwell 2-2 9-5

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St. Stephens 2-2 7-7

Fred T. Foard 1-3 2-10

Patton 1-3 5-8

Hibriten 0-4 1-10

BOYS:

Conf. All

Freedom 4-0 13-0

Patton 3-1 9-4

St. Stephens 2-2 10-4

Hibriten 2-2 6-4

Fred T. Foard 2-2 7-6

Hickory 2-2 3-8

Watauga 1-3 10-4

S. Caldwell 0-4 1-12

Photo Courtesy: WHS Coach Rob Sanders, WHS Athletics