

Pioneers Upend Hickory

Written by Mike Kelly

Sunday, 16 February 2014 01:35

The Watauga High boy's basketball team is getting hot at the right time. And that's bad news for the rest of the teams in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference.

The Pioneers (15-8 overall; 6-7 NW3A/4A), who were playing their first game in more than a week, knocked off Hickory 56-50 at Craft Gymnasium Saturday night. The Pioneers also spoiled Senior Night for the Red Tornadoes. And WHS, coupled with Fred T. Foard beating St. Stephens, also clinched the No.5 seed in the conference standings. And with a win against South Caldwell Monday night, the Pioneers would finish fourth, and they would host Patton in the opening-round of the NW3A/4A Conference tournament at Lentz-Eggers Gym Tuesday night.

The Panthers (7-7 in league play and currently the No.4 seed) lost to Freedom Saturday night. And if the Pioneers do finish in a fourth place tie with the Panthers, they would win the tie-breaker after they beat Patton twice during the regular season. The Pioneers have also beaten the top two seeds in the league (Freedom and Hickory).

A decision on whether or not that South Caldwell game will be played Monday night will be made Sunday afternoon at the conference seeding meeting. The brackets for the conference tournament will be released Sunday at 3 p.m.

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"We need to play that game," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "Like I told the guys before the game, 'if we lose tonight, there's no reason to play Monday night.' But now, by winning this game, it makes Monday's game all that important."

And the Pioneers, who have won two in a row, beat Hickory for the second time in three years. It's also their first win at Hickory since the Marc Payne era (between 1989-93), when the Pioneers and Red Tornadoes were members of the old Northwestern 4A Conference (Payne and the Pioneers defeated Hickory three times, and one of those wins came on the road, but Payne couldn't remember the exact year it happened).

Jay Harrill ignited WHS' fourth-quarter rally. He put the Pioneers on top for good with 4:45 left to play. He scored on a feed from Cameron Baker, giving WHS a 44-43 lead. A putback by Baker moments later gave the Pioneers a three point lead.

The Red Tornadoes (10-10; 9-4) trimmed the lead to one at 46-45 on a bucket by Thomas Clontz, but the Pioneers stretched their lead to five points at 50-45 on a steal and a bucket by Baker with 1:42 left. A three ball by Hickory's Zachary Walker made it 52-50 with 18 seconds left, but WHS iced it away at the free throw line. The Pioneers also spoiled Senior Night for the Red Tornadoes.

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Eli Gales, who made four free throws down the stretch, and Harrill each made a pair of free throws to put the contest out of reach. And the Pioneers were nearly perfect at the line. They were 12-15 on Saturday.

"I am so proud of our effort tonight," Sanders said. "We were very patient on offense. We made the extra pass, we worked the ball around, and had a great shot selection tonight. We didn't rush ourselves all night."

Ironically, the Pioneers didn't make a three-point shot all night. It's the first time all season that WHS has failed to make a three pointer in a game. But in turn, like they did against Patton, the Pioneers got a strong inside game from Aaron Dobbins, Baker, and Matt Lambert. That trio combined for 36 points. Dobbins pulled down a team-high 13 rebounds.

"Aaron is becoming the player we were expecting him to be," Sanders said. "He really stepped it up when Cam sat out our game against Patton (February 7). He took upon himself to step things up, and he looks a lot like the player we saw last year (at the junior varsity level) that can play any position on the floor."

Dobbins had 14 points, 12 of those in the first half. Baker finished with 14 points, 12 of those in the second half. Harrill had ten points. Devonte Fuller, who erupted for 48 points against the Pioneers in their last meeting on January 31, led the Red Tornadoes with 13 points, but the Pioneers kept him in check. He only had one point in the second half. Shakeed Washington had

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11 points.

"When they made their run late in the second quarter, they did it by driving to the basket," Sanders said. "That's why we went to a zone in the second half. We wanted to force them to beat us from the outside. Just like we did against Freedom, we made (Hickory) into jump shooters. Devonte, like the great player he is, tried to carry his team, but we did a great job shutting off the lane. We never allowed him to take over."

Trailing 20-15 with 5:23 left in the first half, the Red Tornadoes went on a 8-2 run to take a 23-22 lead. Fuller nailed a pair of free throws that put Hickory on top with 3:07 left in the second quarter. The Pioneers narrowed the gap and trailed 28-26 at halftime.

"This is a tough gym to play in," Harrill said. "It's a big floor, and it's lighting isn't real good. And we haven't had a lot of success here. They beat us pretty bad here last year. But coach has been using a lot of different line ups. Moving Aaron in the starting line up has really given us a boost. We're playing with a lot of confidence right now, and that's big with the conference tournament coming up."

"Starting Aaron allowed us to put Cam up front in the (3-2) zone," Sanders said. "Cam's quick, and he's got a terrific reach. He came up with a pair of steals tonight that led to a couple of easy baskets in transition. It's a great win for our guys."

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If the Pioneers play Monday night, coverage begins at 6:05 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net. It will also be Senior Night. The conference tournament begins Tuesday night.

NOTES: Hickory defeated the WHS junior varsity girls, 38-36. Allison Quinn, Karson Hamrick and Alden McClure each had seven points apiece. Olivia Reese finished with five points....The WHS JV boys defeated Hickory, 48-30. The Red Tornadoes did not score in the third quarter. Jeremy Ringler led the Pioneers with ten points. Caleb Bryson and Levi Wilcox each had seven points apiece; Harrison Cobb had five points. The JV boys are 15-5 overall; 8-2 NW3A/4A.

WATAUGA 56, HICKORY 50

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SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTALS

WATAUGA HIGH 16 10 16 14 - 56

HICKORY HIGH 13 15 11 11 - 50

WHS: HARRILL 10, GAILES 6, DOBBINS 14 (13 REBOUNDS), EBAUGH 4, BAKER 14, LAMBERT 8. FG: 22, 3FG: 0, FT: 12.

HHS: WALKER 9, CREECH 7, FULLER 13, ABERNATHY 2, SIPE 3, WASHINGTON 11, BOLICK 3, CLONTZ 2. FG: 9, 3FG: 9, FT: 5.

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HICKORY GIRLS 70, WATAUGA 42

The Watauga High girl's basketball team suffered a 70-42 loss at Hickory on Senior Night Saturday night at Craft Gymnasium. The loss leaves WHS in sixth place in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference, and the Pioneers (7-16 overall; 5-8 NW3A/4A) will travel to South Caldwell in the opening-round of the conference tournament Tuesday night.

The Red Tornadoes (20-0; 13-0) jumped out to a 6-0 lead and never looked back. Hickory, which led 23-10 after the opening quarter, led by as many as 30 points just before halftime. A pair of free throws by A'mya McClain with 1:34 left in the first half gave the Red Tornadoes a commanding 44-14 lead.

"I'm very disappointed with the way we started the game," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "We were very lethargic, and Hickory came out very aggressive. We turned the ball over way too many times, and we did a terrible job breaking their press. That poor start put us behind in a very tough venue. I'm proud that we didn't quit, but Hickory was in complete control tonight."

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Denasia Witherspoon and Yazman Hannah did most of the damage in the first half. They combined for 28 points in the first half.

"And most of those were uncontested layups," Anderson said. "The last time we played them (January 31) at our place, we put them in a lot of difficult situations. They had to work for their points. But tonight, we turned the ball over too many times in our own end. It gave an explosive team just 30 feet to attack the basket. We just gave up too many easy looks."

The lead eventually grew to 43 points in the third quarter. Victoria Eckard, who came off the bench and scored 11 points, made it 62-19 with 2:11 left in the period. The Pioneers made it respectable as they outscored Hickory 16-6 in the fourth quarter.

Hannah led three Hickory players in double figures with 18 points. Witherspoon finished with 12 points. Savanna Wood led the Pioneers with ten points. Ryan Loflin had eight points.

The NW3A/4A Conference brackets will be released Sunday afternoon around 3 p.m. A decision concerning the South Caldwell game will also be made on Sunday afternoon. St. Stephens nailed down the No.4 seed and home-court advantage in the opening-round of the conference tournament. The Indians, who defeated Fred T. Foard Saturday night, and the Panthers both finish the regular season with identical 7-7 records. But the Indians win the

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tie-breaker because they beat Patton twice during the regular season. Patton lost its season finale at Freedom.

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HICKORY 70, SOUTH CALDWELL 42

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SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

WATAUGA HIGH 10 7 11 14 - 42

HICKORY HIGH 23 23 18 6 - 70

WHS: MILLSAPS 5, WOOD 10, DERRICK 2, HARRIS 6, CARROLL 3, LOFLIN 8, McNEILL 2, STAPLETON 2, JONES 2, FOUTZ 2. FG: 10, 3FG: 3, FT: 13.

HHS: McCLAIN 6, SETZER 2, ECKARD 11, WITHERSPOON 12, HANNAH 18, DIXON 6, MERVIN 5, TIPPS 6, MILLER 4. FG: 26, 3FG: 3, FT: 9.66, F

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NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

SATURDAY'S GAMES

GIRLS:

HICKORY 70, WATAUGA 42

ST. STEPHENS 66, FRED T. FOARD 26

FREEDOM 62, PATTON 48

BOYS:

WATUAGA 56, HICKORY 50

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FRED T. FOARD 69, ST. STEPHENS 54

FREEDOM 68, PATTON 55

Photo Courtesy: Cameron Baker, Mark Branch

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