

Give Me Your Best Shot....

Written by Mike Kelly

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That's the best way to describe Watauga High football coach Ryan Habich. Since he got the job last spring, Habich has brought a championship attitude to a program that's produced only five winning seasons since 1982.

The Pioneers (6-1 overall; 2-1 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) are off to their best start since 2006, and they're in the hunt for their first conference championship since 2007 (WHS shared it with A.C. Reynolds and East Burke) and only their second conference championship since 1981.

And Habich, who has displayed an aggressive personality in his game-calling, isn't one to back down from a challenge. Last week, the Pioneers pushed the mighty Freedom Patriots to the limit before they bowed out in overtime. This week, the Pioneers, who begin the week just one game behind Hibriten and Freedom for first place, hope to bounce back against a powerful Hibriten team that's currently undefeated, and the perennial favorite to win the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference crown.

"Unlike Freedom, Hibriten has more experience," Habich said. "They have a lot of guys that have been playing in this system the last four years. They have Freedom-like speed, and they're athletic like Freedom, but I think they're stronger than Freedom. It's another challenge for us. But the kids are excited about this game."

The Panthers (7-0; 3-0) are averaging 49-points a game. They have a strong running game that's averaging a league-best 373-yards a game, and the Panthers have scored a league-high 37 rushing touchdowns. They led by quarterback Jacob Copper, who also plays free safety on defense, a deep running game that features up to eight different ball carriers, and an offensive line that returns four starters, including three-year starters Jon Minton and Trevor White.

"They've got size up front like Freedom, but I really think their line is much stronger," Habich said. They can drive block, and they also have big backs. (Copper) is a big guy (6-foot-1 and weighs 205 pounds) that can really be tough to handle coming around the corner. They run the triple option like we do. The only difference is that they do it out of a pistol. We just have to play assignment football."

The Pioneers coughed up more than 500 yards in their loss to Freedom last Friday night, But they also matched the Patriots offensively. WHS racked up 423 yards. And that concerns Hibriten coach Clay Lewis.

"Coach Habich has done a great job at Watauga," he said. "He's got them playing so efficiently. They don't make mistakes, and they are tough to stop. Plus, (Habich) makes it tough on you by giving you all those different formations, and he's not afraid to take chances. He forces you to stop him. The guy is constantly attacking."

And that's Habich's style. Like the relentless fighter that he is, Habich likes to back his opponents into a corner, and force them to make mistakes. It's worked to perfection this season. The Pioneers are plus four in turnover ratio. They forced six turnovers last week against Freedom.

"And we should have won the game," Habich said. "They put it on a platter for us. But we made some big mistakes of our own. This is still a young team, and I'm not making excuses. They have a great attitude, and they're working their butts off in the weight room. They're willing to pay the price to get better, and we're going to get there."

"Playing for coach Habich is a lot of fun," said WHS junior T.J. Poulos. "He believes in us, and we believe in him. He told us from day one that we could be contending against the good teams in our conference. Yeah, we lost last week, but we're not hanging our heads. We're getting ready for this week's game against Hibriten, and our goal is to win."

Poulos and Aaron Dobbins have been the heart-and-soul of the Pioneers this fall. Dobbins has completed 61% of his passes (44-72) for 1,101 yards with 16 TD passes and only four interceptions; Poulos, who has been a versatile player for WHS this season (offense., defense and special teams), ran for 104 yards on just eight carries against the Patriots last week. He also blocked the extra point on Freedom's final TD, pushing the contest into overtime. And for the year, he's caught 19 passes for 455 yards with five TDs.

"Dobbins is the guy that makes them go," Lewis said. "He's their leader, hands down. But they have so many weapons around him. Watauga is a very good team, and a very confident team. Those are tough ingredients to compete against, especially on the road."

And Lewis, who is 2-1 lifetime against the Pioneers, knows how tough it can be to win at Jack Groce Stadium. The Pioneers upended Hibriten 28-10 in 2011, avenging a 45-0 blowout loss the previous year.

"We feel good about our chances Friday night," Habich said. "I really feel our kids can compete with this team. Look, we're not big and we're not as strong as I would like us to be right now, but we do have one advantage, we can scheme on offense."

"We like to run a lot of different formations, and we have talented players like Dobbins, Poulos, (Cam) Baker, that we can score points. That allows us to hold our own against teams like this. We're excited to be in this position. We're excited to be playing in a big game like this Friday night."

This is the 28th meeting between the schools. The Panthers own a 14-13 advantage in the series, and they've won three of the last four meetings. Hibriten defeated WHS 38-18 in Lenior last season. Dobbins made his varsity debut in that game. The WHS sophomore played the entire second half and was 19-29 for 170 yards with a TD pass in the loss.

And keep in mind, the Panthers were very generous against the pass last year. Opponents completed a league-high 107 passes against Hibriten last season and they completed 56% of

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their passes. The Panthers have stepped it up a bit this season. They're second in the NW3A/4A against the pass, and they lead the league in total defense. The Panthers are also second in the league in turnover ratio at plus 7.

But they haven't seen a quarterback as good as Dobbins.

"We want to be aggressive, and we want to force the other teams to make mistakes," Lewis said. "We're not big, but we have tremendous speed. In all my years here, as an assistant (under Chuck Cannon) and now as head coach, this is the fastest defense I've ever seen at Hibriten."

The strength of the defense is at linebacker, where the Panthers, who line up in a 3-3-5 alignment, are led by Jamal Grier and Zac Walker.

"And those guys are pertty physical," Habich said. "And they've got great speed on defense. I'm a little concerned about our pass blocking, but I feel we can run the ball against them. And we can throw the ball, so that might loosen things up a bit. It's going to be a fun game. We're ready."

Coverage Friday night begins at 6:30 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBluerige.net.

Photo Courtesy: Aaron Dobbins, WHS Athletics