

UPDATED: Harrill Leads WHS Over No.1 Freedom

Written by Mike Kelly

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Watauga High senior Jay Harrill was in a zone Friday night. Harrill, who is averaging a team-high 16.6 points-per-game, buried a career-high 32 points, including seven trifectas, as the Pioneers knocked off Freedom 75-65 Friday night in a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference game at Lentz-Eggers Gym.

The Patriots (17-1 overall; 8-1 NW3A/4A Conference) were undefeated and ranked No.1 in the state in the Class 3A NCPreps.com Media Poll coming into Friday night's game. In turn, the Pioneers (13-7; 4-6) picked up their biggest win since beating Hickory on Senior Night in 2011. It's also WHS' first win against the Patriots since 2007, and their first win against Freedom at home since 1999 (when WHS won the old Northwestern 4A Conference championship---its last conference championship in boy's basketball).

"And it's well deserved for these guys," said WHS coach Rob Sanders, whose had his share of marquee wins with the Pioneers during his ten-year tenure. "We weren't angry about (Thursday) night's loss against Fred T. Foard, we were ashamed. We just played a terrible game. But these guys are so resilient. Coach (Jerry) Moretz told our guys before the game that there's just five games left in the regular-season. And as of tonight, we're undefeated (at 0-0). This was a huge win for us with the conference tournament (February 17) just a couple of weeks away."

Harrill took matters into his own hands in the second quarter. With the Pioneers leading 23-19 with 3:10 left before halftime, Harrill, who scored 17 points of WHS' 23 points in the second quarter, went on a tear as he scored 12 consecutive points, handing WHS a 16-point advantage

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at 35-19. He buried three trifectas, including a rare four-point play, during that explosive run.

"When Jay's on, you can't shut the guy off," Sanders said. "He's done it time and again for us the last two years. He's a shooter. And he was in a huge zone tonight."

"The basket looked twice as big tonight," Harrill said. "I just felt it. I'm a shooter, and it's my job to make those shots. That's why coach has me out there. He has a lot of confidence in me. The guys did a great job getting me the ball in a good area on the floor, and I could just feel it was going in when it left my hands."

And it was Harrill, who foiled Freedom's comeback hopes in the second half. After WHS built its biggest lead at 43-24 early in the third quarter, the Patriots, who held their last lead at 12-11 late in the first quarter, went to a zone press and came charging back, cutting the lead to five points at 47-42 on a pair of free throws by Jeron Hemphill with 1:26 left in the period.

But a pair of free throws by T.J. Poulos, who had another strong game off the bench, and a three ball by Harrill gave WHS a nine-point lead entering the fourth quarter.

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WHS extended its lead to 12 points to start the final stanza on a three by, guess who, Harrill, but the Patriots kept chipping away and narrowed the gap to three points at 63-60 on a bucket by Hemphill with 3:15 left to play. The Pioneers, however, went on a 10-0 run to put the contest away. The Patriots never got any closer than eight points the rest of the way.

"Like I said before, Watauga is a dangerous offensive team," said FHS coach Casey Rogers in a disappointing tone. "I've told our guys all year that we're going to get everyone's best shot. We've answered that 17 times this season, but tonight, we didn't defend, and we weren't tough enough. You can't fall behind like we did tonight and hope to come back. Give Watauga a lot of credit. They made their shots, and they gave us their best. We just didn't respond."

"I'm tired of losing," Harrill said. "The season hasn't turned out like we thought it would. But this is a huge win for us. And it's nice that it happened on my mon's birthday. It's a deserving win for us. We've lost games this season, we really shouldn't have. They made a run at us, and we knew they would. But we weren't backing down. We worked too hard to win this game. It's feel so good to beat a great team like Freedom. You don't get a lot of chances to beat a No.1 team."

Harrill also had six rebounds. Cameron Baker, who buried a three ball that put WHS on top to stay with five seconds left in the first quarter, finished with 14 points and seven rebounds. Utah Jones finished with ten points. He ignited WHS' ten-point run at the end of the game with a pair of free throws that made it, 65-50. Poulos had eight points.

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"I told our guys at halftime that this (Freedom) wasn't going away," Sanders said. "Their zone press gave us a lot of problems. They wanted to turn up the tempo. They wanted to make this a layup drill. But we slowed things down with our zone. We saw how affective it was the last time we played them (on January 7). We cut a huge lead down to four points. Tonight, we forced them to shoot from the outside, and they weren't comfortable with that."

"It's awesome," Baker said. The players, the coaching staff, we've got each other's back. We weren't backing down against these guys. It's a huge win, a big boost for us, with the conference tournament not too far away."

Chris Bridges led the Patriots with 18 points; Hemphill finished with 13 points; Gabe Logan had 15 points, and Austin Butler came off the bench and poured in ten points, including three treys.

The loss also leaves Freedom just one game ahead of Hickory for first place. The Patriots play Hickory at home Wednesday night in a make up game that was postponed last week due to inclement weather. The Red Tornadoes (8-8; 7-2) survived a scare of their own as they knocked off South Caldwell (who beat them last year) 57-49 Friday night in Sawmills.

"Like I said, this thing isn't over," Sanders said. "The majority of the teams in this conference are logged jammed together. It's a challenging conference. We're all definitely battled tested. But

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we may also be worn out come state playoff time from beating each other up all season."

The Pioneers travel to Hibriten Tuesday night. Coverage begins at 6:05 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

NOTES: Harrill leads the Pioneers with 50 trifectas....Trevor Eggers is second on the team with 24.....WHS coach Rob Sanders has beaten Freedom three times in his career---2005, '07 (both those wins came in Morganton), and Friday night's win at LE Gym....Ironically, the Pioneers last beat a Rogers' led team in 1989, when they knocked off Freedom in Morganton. Casey's father, Terry, was coaching the Patriots....Freedom beat the WHS junior varsity girls, 34-32. Karson Hamrick led WHS with nine points; Olivia Reese had five....The WHS JV boys defeated Freedom, 58-38. Jeremy Ringler led WHS (14-5; 6-1) with 12 points,. Caleb Bryson had nine, Nick Sherman and Zach Valet each had seven points apiece.

WATAUGA 75, FREEDOM 65

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SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

FREEDOM HIGH 12 11 19 23 - 65

WATAUGA HIGH 14 23 18 24 - 75

FHS: J.HEMPHILL 13, BUTLER 10, T.HEMPHILL 4, GARDIN 2, WILSON 3, LOGAN 15, BRIDGES 18. FG: 17, 3FG: 7, FT: 10-17.

WHS: HARRILL 32 (6 REBOUNDS), EGGERS 3, GAILES 4 (12 ASSISTS, 3 STEALS), POULOS 8, DOBBINS 4 (9 REBOUNDS), JONES 10 (3 ASSISTS), BAKER 14 (7 REBOUNDS). FG: 13, 3FG: 10, FT: 19-29.

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FREEDOM GIRLS 58, WATAUGA 42

The Watauga High girl's basketball team gave it a good try. But in the end, Freedom foiled WHS' upset bid by knocking off the Pioneers 58-42 in a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference game at Lentz-Eggers Gym Friday night.

The teams exchanged five lead changes in the opening stanza, and the Pioneers (6-14 overall; 4-6 NW3A/4A), who trailed by five at halftime, came charging out of the gate to start the second half. Trailing 28-23, WHS went on a six-point run and led 29-28 on a bucket by Ryan Loflin with 6:42 left in the third quarter.

But the Patriots (13-5; 8-1), who began the night in second place, one game behind first-place Hickory, turned on the jets and jumped on top for good on a bucket by Amaryah Corpening a little moer than a minute later. That bucket ignited an 19-4 run and the Patriots held a commanding 47-33 lead early in the fourth quarter.

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Krissy Surratt, Freedom's only returning starter from last year, scored six points in an 11-point run that broke the game open in the third quarter.

"They really hurt us with their post presence," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "We did a poor job of blocking out, and Surratt just took over. We did a good job of attacking them in the first half. But when we stopped scoring, we got frustrated, and you could see it in our defensive play. Just because we're not scoring, you can't stop defending. But we gave them way too many easy looks."

The Pioneers were looking for their first win against the Patriots since the 1999-2000 season, when WHS rallied from a huge halftime deficit and beat the Patriots in Morganton. WHS hasn't beaten Freedom at home since 1996-97.

"A lot of the girls on both teams weren't even born then," said Anderson, who was a sophomore at Appalachian State University in '96-97. "But it's a mental thing when you play someone like Freedom. They have such a great tradition, and they've been blessed with some great Division I players over the years. But I liked our game plan going in. You must attack a team like this, and our zone stopped their dribble dive penetration. But we went into an offensive lull in the third quarter, and they pulled away."

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Freedom extended its lead and went up by 18 points, 54-36, with 3:56 left to play on a bucket by Ariyana Williams. The Pioneers never got any closer than 15 points at 56-41 on a three-ball by Savanna Wood.

Loflin led the Pioneers, and she tied a NW3A/4A career-high, with 16 points (she had 16 against Hibriten on 10). She was WHS' only player in double figures. Wood, Tori Derrick and Clare Harris each had eight points apiece. Williams led the Patriots with 19 points. Surratt finished with nine, all in the second half; Corpening, AkiQula Mills, and Taylor Gardin each had eight points apiece.

"I'm proud of my girls," Anderson said. "For the most part, we played well. But the turning point of this game was early in the third quarter. We went on that (six-point) run, and then they turned us over four or five times after that. Those turnovers led to easy layups and we struggled to score the rest of that quarter. But we stayed in the game early, and if it wasn't for our scoring slump, I really think we would have been there in the end."

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FREEDOM 58, WATAUGA 42

SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

FREEDOM HIGH 16 7 10 9 - 42

WATAUGA HIGH 17 11 14 16 - 58

FHS: CORPENING 8, WILLIAMS 19, PEARSON 2, MILLS 8, GARDIN 8, SURRATT 9, RHONEY 4. FG: 15, 3FG: 4, FT: 16-22.

WHS: WOOD 8, DERRICK 8, HARRIS 8, LOFLIN 16, McNEILL 2. FG: 15, 3FG: 2, FT: 6-9.

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NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

FRIDAY'S GAMES

GIRLS:

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FREEDOM 58, WATAUGA 42

HICKORY 38, SOUTH CALDWELL 30

ST. STEPHENS 60, PATTON 57

HIBRITEN d. FRED T. FOARD (CONFIRMED, BUT NO SCORE REPORTED)

BOYS:

WATAUGA 75, HICKORY 65

HICKORY 57, SOUTH CALDWELL 49

FRED T. FOARD 53, HIBRITEN 51

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PATTON 77, ST. STEPHENS 62

MONDAY'S GAMES

(BOYS & GIRLS)

SOUTH CALDWELL @ PATTON

ST. STEPHENS @ HIBRITEN

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NORTHWESTERN 3A-4A STANDINGS

GIRLS

Conf. All

Hickory 9-0 16-0

Freedom 8-1 13-5

S. Caldwell (4A) 6-3 13-6

St. Stephens 5-4 10-9

Watauga (4A) 4-6 6-14

Patton 3-6 7-11

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Hibriten 1-8 2-14

Fred T. Foard 1-9 2-16

BOYS

Conf. All

Freedom 8-1 17-1

Hickory 7-2 8-8

Fred T. Foard 6-4 11-8

Patton 5-4 11-7

St. Stephens 4-5 12-7

Watauga 4-6 13-7

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Hibriten 3-6 7-8

S. Caldwell (4A) 0-9 1-17