

ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ATHLETICS

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Contact: Ben Greenberg, SID (479) 968-0645

FOOTBALL SET TO OPEN GULF SOUTH CONFERENCE PLAY THURSDAY AT WEST ALABAMA IN FRONT OF REGIONAL TELEVISION AUDIENCE

RUSSELLVILLE, Arkansas – Arkansas Tech Football is set to open its quest for a Gulf South Conference championship on Thursday, Sept. 10, when the Wonder Boys travel to Livingston, Ala., to face West Alabama in a 7:05 p.m. contest at Tiger Stadium.

Thursday's game will be broadcast live on television regionally by CSS (Charter Sports Southeast) and Cox Sports as part of the "GSC-TV Live" Game of the Week package. In Russellville, the game will be shown on SuddenLink Digital Cable channel 119 and also on SuddenLink Cable channel 2.

"We are excited to get the opportunity to play West Alabama on television as part of the conference's live television package," Tech Head Football Coach and Athletic Director **Steve Mullins** said. "The power of television certainly helps things in from a lot of standpoints in our league.

"Hopefully we can go out and put on a good show Thursday night."

Tech enters Thursday's GSC opener sporting a 2-0 overall record after opening the home portion of its schedule last Saturday with a 40-10 win over Incarnate Word in its final non-conference tune-up. In fact, Tech enters Thursday's game having won three straight games dating to the final game of the 2008 season.

"Every team builds for this time of year," Mullins said about beginning conference play. "All 11 teams in the league share the same goal of winning the GSC title and that quest starts Thursday for our team."

Like Tech, West Alabama enters Thursday's contest also sporting a 2-0 record after concluding non-conference play with a 33-19 home win last Thursday over Harding in the first "GSC-TV Live" Game of the Week. The Tigers opened its 2009 season with a 47-3 win over Belhaven on Aug. 27.

Mullins said that UWA has several advantages heading into Thursday's GSC opener.

"UWA played on Thursday at home on television and has had several extra days of rest and preparation," the 13th-year Tech coach said. "Additionally, it is a short week for us as we had Sunday, Monday and Tuesday to prepare for our first GSC game and used Wednesday as a travel day.

"It sets up a challenge for our team, but it is what it is. I'm not complaining," Mullins added.

Mullins said that this year's Tigers team is much improved over the last season's squad.

"UWA will be the best team we've seen so far this season," Mullins said. "I have a lot of respect for Coach (Bobby) Wallace for what he's done in the past and what he's doing now."

Leading the way for UWA is redshirt junior quarterback Deon Williams. Williams, who is this week's GSC Offensive Player of the Week, enters Thursday's match-up with Tech leading the league in passing yards (302.0 yards/game), total offense (311.0 yards/game) and passing efficiency (211.7). Williams, who is completing 68 percent of its passes, suffered a season-ending knee injury on the next to last play of the game in Tech's 26-24 win last season.

"Williams is the complete package," Mullins said. "He likes to throw the ball more than he likes to run it, but he uses his feet to get out of trouble."

One area that makes UWA's offense dangerous is its speed at wide receiver.

"They have a lot guys that can really go," Mullins added. "Their tight end (Jason Hawkins) is a very good player and they do a lot of things to get the ball in his hands."

Hawkins, who is a transfer from the University of Mississippi, has caught five passes for 124 yards and has scored two touchdowns.

While UWA's offense possesses a lot of speed, Mullins said the Tigers defense has speed all over the place.

"Their defense is built off of speed," said Mullins, who is now the winningest coach in Tech history thanks to the Wonder Boys win over Incarnate Word. Mullins has won 78 games at Tech, one more victory than **E.O. Brown** (1920-32) and **John Tucker** (1933-41 & 1945-47). Both Brown and Tucker each won 77 games as Tech's coach.

One area where UWA's defense has excelled at early in the season is getting to the quarterback as the Tigers are second in the league in quarterback sacks with five through two games. On the other hand, Tech's offensive line hasn't allowed a sack in two games this season and in fact, hasn't allowed a sack in its last 230 offensive plays since the fourth quarter of last year's game against Delta State.

"They run certain blitzes that will be a challenge for our line. We have to make sure we're set properly to make sure we can handle it," the Tech coach said. "They are a good zone team and doesn't blitz as much as we do, but their (defensive) coordinator has a knack for calling it at just the right time."

Tech's offense enters Thursday's game averaging a GSC-best 496.5 yards per game and is scoring 42 points per game through two games. In the win last Saturday over UIW, Tech amassed 533 yards of offense, including rushing for 207 yards. The Wonder Boys offense is spearheaded by senior quarterback **Nick Graziano** (Moraga, Calif.). On the season, Graziano, who is a transfer from the University of Nevada, is third in the league in passing (278.5 yards/game), third in passing efficiency (169.5) and is second in total offense (308.0 yards/game). In addition to Graziano, senior receiver **Landon Turner** (Destrehan, La.) leads the league in receiving at 99.5 receiving yards per game, while senior receiver/return specialist **Frantz Simeon** (Belle Glade, Fla.), who is this week's GSC Special Teams Player of the Week, leads the league in all-purpose yards (162.5 yards/game).

Thursday's game will feature a battle between the two winningest active coaches in league in terms of victories as UWA's Bobby Wallace is the winningest active coach with 95 win, while Mullins is the second winningest active coach with 78 victories. Entering Thursday's game, Wallace, who won three NCAA Division II titles at North Alabama in the 1990s, is the second all-time winningest coach in GSC history, while Mullins is the fourth winningest coach in league history and is also the winningest coach in Tech history after last Saturday's win over Incarnate Word.

Tech leads the all-time series, 11-4 and the Wonder Boys have won 10 straight games in the series since the Tigers posted a 38-24 win in Livingston, Ala., in 1996. Tech leads the series 6-1 in Russellville and leads 5-2 in Livingston, while UWA leads 1-0 on a neutral field. The team's first meeting was in the 1971 NAIA National Championship Game at Legion Field in Birmingham, as game UWA (then known as Livingston State) won 14-12.

Since joining the GSC in 1995, Tech is 9-5 all-time in league openers and the Wonder Boys have won six straight GSC openers. In addition, Mullins is 9-3 in his Tech career in league openers.

Following Thursday's game, Tech will take 16 days off before returning to action on Saturday, Sept. 26 at home against Arkansas-Monticello. Kick-off is set 6 p.m. in Thone Stadium at Buerkle Field and will mark Family Day on the Tech campus.

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