

ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ATHLETICS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 14, 2009

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

WONDER BOYS OPEN NCAA DIVISION II PLAYOFFS WITH IMPRESSIVE HOME VICTORY OVER 11TH-RANKED UNC PEMBROKE, FACE FIFTH-RANKED AND REGION TOP SEED NORTH ALABAMA NEXT SATURDAY

RUSSELLVILLE, Arkansas – Arkansas Tech Football began its quest for a national title here Saturday afternoon by posting an impressive 41-13 victory over 11th-ranked UNC Pembroke in front of 4,200 fans in the first round of the NCAA Division II Playoffs in Thone Stadium at Buerkle Field.

Tech, who is seeded fourth in Super Regional Two and ranked 21st in the latest AFCA D-II Coaches' Top 25 Poll, outscored UNCP, 24-7 in the first half to cruise to its second NCAA D-II Playoff win in school history and its first since picking up a 24-20 win over Catawba in Russellville in 2004 and earn a second game playoff game next Saturday at fifth-ranked and the region's No. 1 seed, North Alabama.

"It was a wonderful day for Arkansas Tech University. Defensively, we played excellent as we were able to hold them (UNCP) in check," Tech Head Football Coach and Athletic Director **Steve Mullins** said following the win that improved the Wonder Boys to 9-2 on the season. "I told the team to enjoy tonight and let's get back to work on Sunday. We know the nature of the beast in front of us and so does our team."

It is Tech's first nine-win season since picking up 10 wins during the 2004 season and the third 10-win campaign in Mullins' 13-year tenure as Tech's coach.

On the afternoon, Tech's high-powered offense was dominant, especially in the first half, as the Wonder Boys gained 372 of its game-high 554 yards in the first 30 minutes of the contest. In the first half, senior quarterback and Gulf South Conference Offensive Player of the Year **Nick Graziano** (Moraga, Calif.) was 23-for-40 passing for 351 yards, which was 195 yards more than the Braves gained in the first half combined. For the game, Graziano finished 33-for-54 passing for a school-record 456 yards and added four yards rushing on six carries. It was his fifth 400-plus yard passing game of the season and his sixth 400-plus yard game in total offense.

"They (Tech) always found a way to keep going on offense, when we put them into 3-and-long situations, Tech seemed to always get a first down," UNCP Head Coach Pete Shinnick said. "Tech played nearly a perfect football game and I congratulate them on that."

Graziano, who is a candidate from Super Region Two for the Harlon Hill Trophy, which is given annually to the Division II Player of the Year, said he hopes his team's hot streak can continue next week at North Alabama. Tech has won six straight games since suffering a 42-17 loss at UNA on Oct. 3.

"We are definitely riding high after winning six straight games, we're hoping that success continues next weekend," said the University of Nevada transfer. "But we understand it will be a tough game. UNA is a very good opponent."

Tech opened game's scoring on a 43-yard touchdown pass from Graziano to senior receiver **Landon Turner** (Destrehan, La.) with 11:11 left in the first quarter. The lead grew to 14-0 on Tech's next possession as junior running back **Cody Burns** (Pine Bluff, Ark.) scored on a 4-yard run with 5:59 left in the first period.

The Wonder Boys lead grew to 21-0 on the first play of the second quarter as Graziano connected with senior receiver **Rolaundo Wright** (Sulphur Springs, Texas) for a 12-yard touchdown. Wright finished the game with eight catches for 106 yards.

After another three-and-out by UNCP's offense, Tech drove 44 yards in eight plays and pushed in front 24-0 following a 41-yard field goal by senior kicker/punter **Travis Cockerham** (Bryant, Ark.). The 41-yard field goal was a career-long for Cockerham, who moved past former Wonder Boy **Mark Ewersmann** for 14th in career scoring with 153 points.

UNCP, who finished with a 9-2 record this season, finally found end zone midway through the second quarter as Cory Smith hit Jamelle Banks for a 49-yard touchdown pass with 7:08 left in the first half. Banks' score came one play after Rashon Kennedy rushed for a six-yard gain to give the Braves its initial first down in the contest.

The Braves entered the game as one of the top rushing teams in the Division II as they were averaging 237.6 yards per game, but Tech held them to 79 yards on the ground in the first half and 173 for the game, its second-lowest rushing total of the season. UNCP was held to a season-low 295 yards in the loss.

"We knew we had to stop the run in order to win the game," Tech junior linebacker **Danny Martin** said. "We were able to bring more pressure in the passing game once we were able to bottle up their running game."

Tech increased its advantage to 27-7 just a little over three minutes into the second half thanks to a 32-yard field goal by Cockerham. The field goal was Cockerham's 11th of the season, which are the most field goals in a season since **Paul Peletz** connected on a school-record 15 in 1999. In addition, it was the eighth time in 11 games this season that Tech scored points on its first drive of the second half.

"We knew they (UNCP) was ranked nationally in several categories defensively and offensively, so we knew it wouldn't be an easy game," the Tech coach said. "I'm glad we were able to control both sides of the ball."

Following Cockerham's field goal, UNCP responded by driving 71 yards in nine plays and completing the drive with a 19-yard touchdown run by Travis Daniels. The ensuing extra point attempt by Taylor Baskett was blocked by junior defensive back **Eric Taylor** (Chicago, Ill.) to make the score, 27-13, with seven minutes left in the third period.

On Tech's ensuing possession, which was set up by a 41-yard kickoff return by senior receiver **Frantz Simeon** (Belle Glade, Fla.), the Wonder Boys pulled out to a 34-13 lead thanks to a 24-yard touchdown pass from Graziano to redshirt freshman receiver **Gionni Harris** (Fayetteville, Ark.).

"We felt we were in reach once we pulled within 27-13, but we were unable to get a stop on defense and Tech goes in and scores and that was difference," Shinnick said in regards to Harris' touchdown that put the Braves down three scores.

Tech closed out the game's scoring on its first possession of the fourth quarter as Graziano connected with Simeon for a 4-yard touchdown. The score came after Tech has driven 75 yards in nine plays, including a 34-yard pass from Graziano to Simeon on a third-and-six play.

Simeon caught nine passes for 175 yards in the win and in the process became the school's single-season leader in pass receiving yards, passing former Wonder Boy **Steve Daniels**. Daniels had gained 1,084 receiving yards during the 1996 season, while Simeon has now caught a school-record 75 pass for 1,254 yards this season. In addition to Simeon, Turner finished the game with seven catches for 110 yards as the Wonder Boys had three receivers gain over 100 yards in a game for the first time in school history.

Keith Gore led the Braves with 88 yards on 10 carries, while Daniels had 74 yards on nine carries to become the first UNCP running back to rush for over a 1,000 yards in school history. Tech held Smith to 6-for-17 passing for 122 yards.

In other Super Two Region action on Saturday, West Alabama picked up a 24-22 win at Albany State and now advances to a second round match-up next Saturday at 10th-ranked Carson-Newman, who is the No. 2 seed in Super Region Two and earned a first round bye.

-- Tech Athletics --