

ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ATHLETICS

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WONDER BOYS SET FOR REGULAR SEASON FINALE AT HARDING, NEEDS ONE MORE WIN TO SECURE PLAYOFF BERTH

RUSSELLVILLE, Arkansas – Arkansas Tech Football heads into his final regular season game on Saturday at Harding in prime position to earn its third berth into the NCAA Division II Playoffs in the past 10 years. Kickoff for Saturday's Gulf South Conference match-up is set for 2 p.m. at First Security Stadium in Searcy, Ark.

Tech enters Saturday's game with Harding currently sitting sixth in the latest NCAA D-II Super Regional Two Poll and is sporting a 7-2 overall record and a 5-2 mark in the league after concluding its regular season home schedule last Saturday with a 35-23 win over Delta State. The win over the Statesmen was Tech's fourth straight since suffering a 42-17 loss at current top-ranked North Alabama on Oct. 3. The top six teams in the final NCAA D-II Super Regional Two poll will receive playoff bids.

"I hope this group is focused and concentrates on what it needs to do on Saturday for us to be successful," Tech Head Football Coach and Athletic Director **Steve Mullins** said. "A lot of our goals have been achieved already this season, from having a winning record, to being undefeated at home and on Saturday we have a chance to finish undefeated in the state. That is important to our program, to be the Arkansas State Champions.

"And of course the big prize out there is the opportunity to go to the NCAA Playoffs and to be one of the last 24 teams left standing."

Tech's opponent, Harding, who is 5-5 overall and 3-4 in the GSC, is seeking to finish the season with a winning record for the first time since 2007 when the Bisons finished with a 6-4 record.

"It will be an emotional game for Harding because they are playing to finish the year with a winning record," Mullins said. "We have to be ready to play. This game seems to always draw a lot of emotion from both teams."

One of keys to Harding's success this season is its ability to create turnovers as the Bison are tied for the GSC lead and are tied for ninth nationally in turnover margin (+10.0). On the season, Harding has picked off 16 passes and have forced 14 fumbles in 10 games.

"We have to be able to maintain possession of the football," Mullins said. "Harding plays with a lot of intensity on defense and they send a lot of people to the ball."

Leading Harding's defensive effort in the secondary is senior defensive back Josh Jones. Jones has picked up a GSC-best eight interceptions and leads the Bison with 84 total tackles and has recorded 4.5 tackles for loss and has broken up 11 passes.

"We have to be aware of where Jones is at on the field. Harding moves him around a lot," the 13th-year Tech coach said. "He is a fine, fine football player and he does a great job."

On offense, Harding has used four quarterbacks at times this season and is led by the play of senior Zac Ross, who leads the Bison in rushing, pass receiving and all purpose yards. Ross, who started at quarterback in last season's game against Tech, has played three positions this season for the Bison. As a quarterback, he is 36-for-63 passing for 416 yards and has thrown two touchdowns and one interception, while as a running back he has carried the ball 66 times for 284 yards and has scored four touchdowns and as a receiver, Rose has caught 37 passes for 391 yards and has scored twice. In addition, he is averaging 125.2 all-purpose yards per game as he is second in the league in kickoff returns (25.9 yards/game) and fourth in punt returns (9.8 yards/return).

"Much like Jones on defense, Harding will use Ross all over the place," said Mullins, who is now the third all-time winningest coach in GSC history with 83 career victories. "We will need to be aware of where he (Ross) is at on Saturday. He is hard to tackle."

In addition to Ross, Harding's offense is also led by quarterback Josh Powell and running back Dominic Blood. Powell, who has missed three games due to injury, but returned last week to help Harding to its 27-22 win over Henderson State, is 153-for-245 passing for 1,578 yards and he has tossed nine interceptions and nine touchdowns. In addition to Powell, Blood is averaging just 27.4 yards per game, but he leads the Bison with six rushing touchdowns and Harding has had nine different receivers catch 10 or more passes this season.

"Harding has an excellent screen game that we must be able to contain," Mullins added.

Harding's defense will be facing the league's top-rated offensive unit on Saturday as the Wonder Boys enter the game leading the league in passing yards (365.4 yards/game), total offense (524.3 yards/game) and passing efficiency (149.2) and they are second in the league and third nationally in scoring at 40.9 points per game. Tech ranks second nationally in total offense and third nationally in passing. Tech has gained 550 or more yards in its last three games and has had eight games of at least 450 yards of offense.

Senior quarterback **Nick Graziano** (Moraga, Calif.), the four-time GSC and two-time co-National D2Football.com Offensive Player of the Week, continues to lead the Wonder Boys offensive attack. Graziano, who holds nearly every single-season passing record at Tech, enters Saturday game ranked second nationally in total offense (378.3 yards/game) and third nationally in passing yards (334.8 yards/game) and has had three 400-plus yard passing games, which are the first-ever 400-yard passing games in school history.

Graziano, who repeated as this past week's GSC Offensive Player of the Week after his 546 yards of total offense in Tech's win over Delta State, which included an 82-yard touchdown run, enters Saturday's game needing just five pass attempts to better the school record of 372 set last season by **Cole Barthel**. Graziano already holds the school's single season marks in passing yards (3,013 yards), total offensive yards (3,402 yards), touchdown passes (27), touchdowns responsible for (32), pass completions (225), 300-plus yard passing games (6) and 300-plus yard total offense games (7). In addition to Graziano, senior receiver/return specialist **Frantz Simeon** (Belle Glade, Fla.) leads the GSC and is third nationally in all-purpose yards (198.1

yards/game) and he leads the GSC and is sixth nationally in receiving yards (101.7 yards/game), while senior receiver **Landon Turner** (Destrehan, La.) is tied for second in the league in receptions per game (7.1) and is second in the league and seventh nationally in receiving yards (101.4 yards/game).

Saturday game marks the 48th meeting all-time in the series between the two schools that dates to 1928. Tech leads the all-time series, 29-18-0 and the Wonder Boys have won six of the last nine games in the series. Tech leads the series 18-4 in Russellville, while Harding leads 13-11 in Searcy and also holds a 1-0 edge on a neutral field. Tech, though, hasn't won in Searcy since 2003 when the Wonder Boys picked up a 10-9 victory. In Tech's last visit to Harding in 2007, the Bison picked up a 62-55 win over the Wonder Boys.

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