

# ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**ATHLETICS**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 31, 2009**

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

## **WONDER BOYS FOOTBALL SET TO OPEN SPRING PRACTICE WEDNESDAY**

**RUSSELLVILLE, Arkansas** – Arkansas Tech Football is set to open its run of 15 spring practices with a non-pad workout Wednesday morning in Thone Stadium at Buerkle Field.

The Wonder Boys are set to open spring drills with a renewed enthusiasm after last season's disappointing finish. Tech finished last season with a 5-5 overall record and a 4-4 mark in the Gulf South Conference.

"We're excited to get to work on preparing for next season," Tech Head Football Coach and Athletic Director **Steve Mullins** said. "Our players established a good work ethic during our winter conditioning drills and are focused on continuing to get better."

This year's spring practice sessions will present a unique challenge to the Wonder Boys as midway through spring practice construction will start inside Thone Stadium at Buerkle Field. The field construction will improve the drainage, along with redoing the grass playing surface and adding landscaping around the stadium.

"The timing of the construction was necessary so the field will be ready for use come August," Mullins said.

Along with the field reconstruction this spring, the Wonder Boys will also conduct all of its practices in the morning, with the exception of the Green and Gold Scrimmage and the Senior Bowl Game.

"We tried this last spring and it seemed to work well, so we decided to once again conduct our spring practices in the morning," Mullins added.

Unlike last spring, when the defense entered with a lot of question marks, this spring the Wonder Boys defense returns a lot of experienced players, including seven starters and numerous others that saw significant action a year ago.

During the offseason, Mullins made several changes to his defensive coaches as he brought in **Jeff Byrd** as the team's new defensive coordinator and also brought back former Wonder Boy **Clint Reed** as the team's defensive line coach.

"Our defense brings back a lot of experienced players, but we have added two new coaches and new scheme for them to get accustomed to this spring," Mullins said.

The Wonder Boys will switch from the 8-man front alignment it used last season to a 3-3-5 scheme this upcoming season.

While its defense appears to be solid heading into the spring, Tech's offense heads into the spring with numerous question marks. The Wonder Boys must replace not only its starting quarterback, but also its backup from 2008, along with its two starting offensive tackles and its two of its top three receivers from a year ago.

Entering spring drills, the top candidates to replace three-year starter **Cole Barthel** under center are redshirt junior **Robert Sagerian** (Ramona, Calif.), senior University of Nevada-Reno transfer **Nick Graziano** (Moraga, Calif.) and redshirt

freshman **Kevin Puckett** (Vilonia, Ark.). In addition to those three, redshirt freshman **Mike Shouse** (Owasso, Okla.) will also be in the mix.

Sagerian redshirted last season due to an injury, while Puckett was listed as the back-up to Barthel, but never played in a game and Shouse was the scout team quarterback in 2008. Graziano threw for 1,436 yards in 19 games over three seasons with the Wolfpack.

"We will have a wide-open competition at quarterback," the Tech coach said. "Whoever takes the first snap under center at Northeastern State in our season opener, will have never taken a snap in a game at Arkansas Tech."

Along with finding a replacement at quarterback, Tech's offensive coaches will also need to find replacements for **Justin Ray** and **Tracey Stiger** at receiver. Those two combined to catch 102 passes for 1,234 yards and score a combined seven touchdowns last season. In addition, they also must find replacements for **Jeremy Ashcraft** and **Shannon Dixon**, its two starting bookend offensive tackles.

"We have several receivers returning that contributed a lot last season, but we need to develop some depth at those receiving spots," Mullins said. "On the offensive line, we are going to have some new faces and some position changes this spring."

One position that is solid on the offensive line is center where **Torrence Wright** (Sulphur Springs, Texas) returns for his senior campaign. Wright, who was an All-GSC selection the past two seasons, brings back a lot of experience to this year's line.

Another area of concern for Mullins entering the spring is the team's special teams unit as Tech lost both of its punters (Nick McCaskill and Michael Podobnik) from a year ago and returns just senior kicker **Travis Cockerham** (Bryant, Ark.).

"We lost both of our punters from last season, so our punting position is wide open this spring and we have several young men auditioning for that position," said Mullins, who is entering his 13th season with the Wonder Boys in the fall.

In addition, Mullins said that they will try and get in as many kicks as they can before the goal posts are taken down as part of the field reconstruction project.

The Wonder Boys will conclude spring ball with its annual 'Senior Bowl' on Tuesday, April 21. The Senior Bowl will be held in the afternoon on the practice fields adjacent to Thone Stadium at Buerkle Field. In addition to the Senior Bowl, Tech will also conduct scrimmages on April 10 at 7:30 a.m. and will have its annual Green and Gold Spring Scrimmage on Saturday, April 18 on the practice field beginning at 3 p.m. The Green and Gold Scrimmage will be held in conjunction with the celebration of Arkansas Tech's Centennial Birthday Bash on campus.

Listed below are the dates of all 15 of Tech's spring football practices.

**Wednesday, April 1** – 6 a.m. (non-pad)

**Thursday, April 2** – 6 a.m. (non-pad)

**Friday, April 3** – 6 a.m. (non-tackle)

**Saturday, April 4** – 9 a.m. (tackle)

**Monday, April 6** – 6 a.m. (non-tackle)

**Tuesday, April 7** – 6 a.m. (tackle)

**Thursday, April 9** – 6 a.m. (non-tackle)

**Friday, April 10** – Scrimmage #1 – 7:30 a.m. (Thone Stadium)

**Monday, April 13** – 6 a.m. (non-tackle)

**Tuesday, April 14** – 6 a.m. (tackle)

**Thursday, April 16** – 6 a.m. (tackle)

**Friday, April 17** – 6 a.m. (non-tackle)

**Saturday, April 18** – Green and Gold Game – 3 p.m. (Practice field)

**Monday, April 20** – 6 a.m. (non-pad)

**Tuesday, April 21** – Senior Bowl Game – TBA (Practice field)

**Friday, April 24** – Link-It-Up Golf Tournament – Chamberlyne Country Club

**-- Tech Athletics --**