

Soulek, Jacks Ready For MSU

BY JEREMY HOECK

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Kellen Soulek had to watch from the sidelines a year ago as his South Dakota State teammates made a run to the second round of the FCS playoffs.

As a redshirt true freshman, the Freeman native and Yankton High School graduate could do nothing but bide his time. His time would come.

A year later, Soulek is a key backup on the defensive line for the Jackrabbits, who play at Montana State today (Saturday) at 3 p.m. Central in the first round of the FCS playoffs.

This time, Soulek will see the field. "It's really special, actually, to be part of this," he said by phone this week.

"Just being able to compete for a championship, it's a great experience."

Standing 6-foot-5 and weighing 305 pounds, Soulek has played in 10

games this season for SDSU (8-4), and has made 20 tackles and is tied for the team lead with two sacks.

Entering the playoffs as an active member of the team is certainly different than simply watching, Soulek said.

"It's a lot more exciting to be part of it, be able to play and compete for the prize," he said. "It makes you appreciate it that much more."

The same is true with the entire SDSU program, which is making its fourth FCS playoff appearance in seven years of eligibility — since 2008.

Head coach John Stiegelmeier said this week that even he has trouble quantifying what his program has done at this level, keeping in mind that the Jacks made one playoff appearance (1979) in their entire history prior to 2009.

"It's a huge accomplishment," he said this week.

Now the Jacks turn their attention toward reaching the second round of the FCS post-season for a third consecutive year.

South Dakota State won at Northern Arizona a year ago before losing to Eastern Washington in the second round.

This year, the Jacks are again matched up with a Big Sky Conference opponent.

Montana State (8-4), coming off a blowout loss to Montana in the regular season finale, boast one of the nation's top offenses — ranking in second in rushing (248), third in total offense (488) and fourth in scoring per game (38).

The key to that output is sophomore quarterback Dakota Prukop, who has combined to amass over 3,000 yards with 30 touchdowns this season. He is, though, listed as questionable for today's game with injury.

"The quarterback run game surely presents a challenge," Stiegelmeier said. "Any time you use your quarterback like a running back, you need another guy to defend that."

Prukop's backup, Jake Bleskin, was intercepted five times and sacked three times last week, but the

Jacks know they have a challenge in defending a dual threat quarterback either way, Stiegelmeier said.

"A lot of programs try to do it, but this is a bigger commitment," he said. "Their leading rusher is their quarterback, that says something, and they're willing to do it."

Second-leading rusher Shawn Johnson (569 yards, 4 TD) is also listed as questionable.

"They have some weird formations that we're not used to," Soulek said. He referred to a lot of unbalanced looks and some shifts in the offensive line to open up the offense.

Today's forecast in Bozeman calls for highs in the mid-30s with a 90 percent chance of either rain or snow — perfect playoff weather, right?

"They have a big crowd, good showing each game, so it should be fun," Soulek said.

"It'll be a shoot-out"

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SDSU's Zenner Making Success Look Easy

BY TERRY VANDROVEC

Argus Leader

BROOKINGS (AP) — Zach Zenner isn't as complete as advertised. Can't be. That's the contrarian angle some NFL scouts quietly have chased during visits to Brookings.

This is where things stand after four seasons of outstanding production on the field combined with extensive tales of off-field efforts: Professional talent evaluators feel compelled to be next-level skeptical of the South Dakota State running back if only because he's not the norm. He's a well-rounded star in the era of the anti-hero athlete.

The fifth-year senior is fourth in FCS history for career rushing yards at 6,163. He's a biology/pre-medicine major with a 3.87 GPA and early acceptance into medical school. He's researched colon cancer and volunteered internationally. He testified before the state Legislature in support of a new stadium and has picked up piano lessons. Why? Doesn't every All-American ball carrier want to learn how to play movie scores?

Sure, the 6-foot, 220-pounder is athletic and smart. But so are many others. The thing that sets apart Zenner, according to those close to him, is discipline and precision, the Argus Leader reported (<http://argusne.ws/lyqgnY1>). He does the right thing all the time.

Zenner is a once-in-a-generation student-athlete, and he makes it look easy, almost clinical.

"We've been blessed with many, many guys that you'd say are the picture of a student-athlete - and I mean that," said his head coach John Stiegelmeier, whose program regularly leads the Missouri Valley Football Conference in academic distinctions. "And Zach's a notch above, a different level."

Zenner is in the stretch run of a storied college career: the second player in FCS history to rush for 2,000 yards in separate seasons; 30 times topping the 100 mark in a game; more than 1,300 yards ahead of anybody else in Valley history.

"That was his one dream in high school - to play at the college level, and everything else has been just amazing," said his father, Paul Zenner.

There's room to grow, too, as No. 14-ranked SDSU (8-4) has qualified for the FCS playoffs for the third year in a row, opening the 24-team tournament Saturday at No. 17 Montana State (8-4). This is the best postseason stretch in Jacks history - they totaled two playoff berths before this - and Zenner has been the driving force, the most consistent performer in a decorated senior class that has totaled a school-record 31 wins.

He's been the primary focus of practically every defensive scheme for the past three years. Zenner commanded that attention by rushing for 183 yards at Kansas to start his sophomore year. That included a 99-yard score, the former prep centerfielder answering questions about his speed by running away from a Big 12 secondary. He also reached triple digits at Missouri and Nebraska.

He's been the difference for SDSU in several games over the years, the player that separated two evenly matched sides. He's never missed a college game, while totaling 987 touches during the past three seasons.

"I hate when people say, 'Well, he's a freak' or 'He's superhuman.' That's a discredit to his work ethic, to his effort," Jacks strength and condition director Nate Moe said.

That work ethic isn't exclusive to athletics. In March, Zenner went to Jamaica to do mission work and build homes. He's a member of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee and active in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. This week, even as the Jacks are prepping for the playoffs, he's helping line up holiday donations for a local family.

Zenner is in the running

Big Foot For A Big Feat



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Dr. Scott Shindler holds up a giant chocolate foot that he presented to the 2014 Yankton Bucks football team after the Bucks won the Class 11AA championship game earlier this month. Shindler, a podiatrist, presented a chocolate foot to a player of the game after each Bucks game this season.

Huskers Survive Rough Start To Down Iowa In OT

BY LUKE MEREDITH

AP Sports Writer

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — Nebraska found itself down 17 points and starting at a devastating third straight loss.

Tommy Armstrong Jr. led the Huskers on one of the best comebacks in school history — and took some heat off of embattled coach Bo Pelini.

Kenny Bell caught a 9-yard touchdown pass in overtime and Nebraska rallied to beat Iowa 37-34 on Friday, snapping a two-game losing streak.

Tommy Armstrong Jr. had four TD passes for the Cornhuskers (9-3, 5-3 Big Ten), who trailed by as much as 24-7 before storming back in the second half.

Nebraska tied the school record for its largest road comeback.

"That is one of the gutsiest performances from a quarterback that I've seen in a long time," said Pelini, whose job status was again a hot topic this week, of Armstrong. "There isn't anybody who competes harder than he does."

Armstrong's impressive effort came during one of the wackier Big Ten games in recent memory.

Iowa scored a touchdown on offense, defense and special teams and still couldn't hold off the Huskers.

Jordan Canzeri caught a 5-yard touchdown pass with 1:49 left in regulation to put Iowa ahead 31-28. But Drew Brown's 20-yard field goal with 8 seconds left forced overtime.

Armstrong threw TD passes to Taariq Allen and Bell, and De'Mornay Pierson-El's 80-yard punt return for a

touchdown put Nebraska ahead 28-24 with 12:06 left in the fourth.

Jake Rudock had 230 yards and two TD passes for Iowa (7-5, 4-4). The Hawkeyes closed the regular season with back-to-back home losses and will head to its bowl game without a single win over an FBS team above .500.

"We had our opportunities. No question about it," Iowa coach Kirk Ferentz said. "The two things that really cost us were turnovers and then errors, misgivings in the special teams area."

Iowa seemed poised to blow out the Huskers early in the second half, jumping ahead 24-7.

In reality, the game was just getting interesting.

Nebraska responded behind Armstrong, who brought the Huskers back within 24-21 on a 34-yard TD pass to Allen and a 32-yarder to Bell early in the fourth quarter.

Pierson-El had been stopped by Iowa punter Dillon Kidd on his previous return. But he blew past Kidd and the rest of the Hawkeyes to give Nebraska the improbable lead with three TDs in less than 5 minutes.

"Once they kicked it to me again, I was like, 'Seriously?' Thanksgiving was the other day and that is what I'm thankful for," Pierson-El said. "I said to Coach the other day that if they give me one I'm going to be thankful for it."

Rudock answered right back though, finding Canzeri alone in the flat for the touchdown.

Armstrong wasn't done either, finding Brandon Reilly for a crucial 35-yard completion to set up the

game-tying kick.

Marshall Koehn hit a 25-yard field goal in overtime, briefly giving Iowa a 34-31 lead.

Bell's game-winning catch by the pylon was reviewed, but the call on the field was upheld.

Ameer Abdullah had 106 yards rushing and Bell caught two TD passes for Nebraska.

"I've been around a long time and coached a lot of years and I don't know if I've ever been more proud of a group of guys," said Pelini, who has led Nebraska to at least nine wins in each of his six seasons as coach.

The Hawkeyes dominated the first half, and John Lowdermilk took an interception back 17 yards for a touchdown. But they only led 10-7, largely because of four turnovers.

But Rudock caught Nebraska in a cornerback blitz early in the third quarter and hit Tevaun Smith, who raced 37 yards to put the Hawkeyes up 17-7.

Nebraska Punter Sam Foltz then dropped a snap. He recovered in time to get the punt off, but it ricocheted off lineman Zach Hannon's back. Drew Ott happily scooped up the loose ball, giving Iowa a 24-7 point lead with 8:45 left in the third quarter.

But the Hawkeyes couldn't hold the lead. They wound up finishing fourth in the Big Ten West, a division many thought it could win this season.

Mark Weisman had 82 yards rushing for Iowa.

"We lost five games. Each one is a different story," Ferentz said. "There's no way to predict this in August."

Tourney Champs



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Yankton Heat won its division in the Yankton Bulls youth basketball tournament that was held at the Summit Center on Nov. 23. Team players include (front) Miles Carda, Owen Feser, Michael Frick, Cole Sawatzke, (back) Jack Raab, Rex Ryken, Ethan Wishon and Nick Kurtenbach.

Gophers, Badgers Meet For Axe, Big Ten West Title

BY GENARO C. ARMAS

AP Sports Writer

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — For once, elusive running back Melvin Gordon got stuck in a crowd on the field. It happened at Minnesota on Nov. 23, 2013, a 20-7 victory for Wisconsin. The Badgers won their 10th straight in the not-so-friendly Big Ten rivalry. Some pushing and shoving ensued after Wisconsin claimed Paul Bunyan's Axe for another year.

Expect another chippy affair Saturday when No. 22 Minnesota (8-3, 5-2) and No. 14 Wisconsin (9-2, 6-1) meet again — and not just for that old-fashioned trophy.

The winner claims the Big Ten West crown and a berth in next week's league title game against East Division champion Ohio State.

"It's a rivalry game, neither of us like each other. ... Let's not try to sugarcoat it," said Gordon, the Badgers' Heisman Trophy candidate.

Tensions reached a new level after the Badgers' victory last year in Minneapolis. Wisconsin went over to ceremoniously "chop" down the goal post in front of the Minnesota student section.

That's where memories start to get a little blurry,