

NATIONAL CHAMPIONS!



SECOND-HALF MOMENTUM SPURS RED RAIDERS TO NAIA FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

By DOUG CALSBEEK
Co-Editor

DURHAM, N.C. — As is fitting for a championship game, both Northwestern College and Keiser University gave fans of football a game to remember in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Football Championship Series.

Each squad came into the contest in Durham County Memorial Stadium with a winning streak. The NAIA third-ranked Red Raiders took the field with 12 straight Ws after a season-opening narrow loss to Morningside. The 12th-ranked Seahawks had nine straight wins after three season-opening losses to NCAA teams.

The game was the tightest for Northwestern since the 29-30 loss to Morningside and the last of four Seahawk contests in the season with differences of 10 points or less.

After winning an at-large bid, the Red Raiders blew through three teams in the championship series on their home field by substantial margins. The Seahawks battled their way to the

championship, never on their home field, taking down number-four Bethel University of Tennessee, coming from behind from a 21-3 deficit against number-one Morningside in Sioux City with a 29-28 win and sitting number-two Grand View down with a 38-21 victory in Des Moines.

Each team had a lot to play for in their first-ever meeting in Durham, North Carolina. The Seahawks, after a program start in 2018, qualified for four straight NAIA play-off series under the leadership of the program's first coach, Doug Soucha. The more seasoned Red Raider program came into the championship series for the 24th time, with national titles won in 1973 and 1983 and appearances in five previous championship games, the last one in 2020.

On Saturday, Dec. 17, in front of a noisy group of former Red Raider players, parents of former and present players, cheerleaders, Northwestern College pep band and a good contingent of NWC students, the Raiders prevailed 35-25, bringing home the NAIA championship banner and trophy, a first for head coach Matt McCarty. The teams played in 46-degree temperatures under mostly sunny skies, the Seahawks bringing to bear sustained drives, the Raiders countering with big plays to secure the win.

"It was awesome," said Raider coach Matt McCarty. "It was such a good win for our players, for our program, for all of our former players, for northwest Iowa. It was an awesome win for everyone."

McCarty also noted a contingent of northwest Iowa starters for the championship game, West Lyon graduates heavily represented with Jalyn and Korbyn Gramstad, Noah Van't Hof, Gavin Lorenzen, Tanner Oleson and Jaden Snyder. Caden Moser and Cody Moser hail from Rock Valley, Michael Storey from Spencer. Tanner Schouten and Jacob Dragstra are Unity Christian graduates. Starting on the offensive line were Darlin Marquez of Ireton, Travis Grover of Spencer and Greg Will of Spirit Lake.

"We've always recruited with the idea that we can win the national championship with kids from northwest Iowa," McCarty said of the mix of players.

Defensive stand-off

The first quarter was marked by each squad's defense preventing the other from the red zone. Each squad had three possessions, Keiser not able to extend a drive with a first down,

the Raiders getting the closest to a touchdown at the Seahawks' 23-yard line, before Keizer held and forced a field-goal try, which missed.

Late in that quarter, two Raider plays signaled that NWC was capable to uncork big plays. Senior Van't Hof, looking very much like an intended receiver, intercepted an overthrow by Seahawk quarterback Shea Spencer. From their own eight-yard line, Konner McQuillan broke free on the sidelines after a hand-off from Raider quarterback Jalyn Gramstad and galloped 92 yards for an apparent touchdown. The play was called back on a Red Raider block-in-the-back penalty.

The Raiders piled up 107 yards, limiting Keiser to 20 in that first quarter of play.

"We were a little anxious," said McCarthy. "It took us a little while to get settled. Our defense played really well. They did an outstanding job limiting them to three and outs."

One each

The Raiders closed the first quarter with the ball and opened



Red Raiders Noah Van't Hof (5), Jacob Dragstra (97) and Parker Fryar (43) brought down Keiser running back Marques Burgess.



Point after kicker Eli Stader of Northwestern nailed five kicks after missing an early field-goal try.

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