

12-17-16

GRAMBLING EDGES NC CENTRAL 10-9 IN CELEBRATION BOWL

ATLANTA, GA – Grambling State’s Joseph McWilliams blocked a potential game-tying extra point by North Carolina Central’s Brandon McLaren with 2:14 remaining and the Tigers of the Southwestern Athletic Conference held on for a 10-9 win over North Carolina Central of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Saturday in a wild finish at the Georgia Dome before a crowd of 31,096.

The Eagles, hindered by poor field position most of the second half, drove 59 yards in five plays, with quarterback Malcolm Bell linking up with a wide open Quentin Atkinson from 39 yards out to pull NCCU within 10-9 with 2:14 on the fourth-period clock.

Atkinson, in his exuberance after scoring, removed his helmet while still in the field of play and was assessed a 15-yard unsportsmanlike penalty, making the ensuing extra point try by McLaren a 35-yard attempt. McWilliams, a reserve defensive back, broke through up the middle to block the attempt, which was recovered by linebacker De’Arius Christmas, leaving the score at 10-9 in favor of the Tigers, who had to survive two on-side kick attempts by NCCU before securing the victory. The Eagles recovered the first attempt, however, they were whistled for offside and penalized five yards. On the second attempt, Grambling recovered at the Eagle 42-yard line, however, 2:13 still remained on the clock.

NCCU’s defense stopped Justin Kelly for no gain but Coach Jerry Mack’s team was forced to call its third and final timeout at the 2:07 mark. Grambling lost yards on second down, but on third down from the NCCU 44, quarterback DeVante Kincade connected with Verlan Hunter for 12 yards and a first down, enabling Coach Broderick Fobbs’ team to run out the clock.

Grambling’s win evened the postseason event that matches the SWAC champion against the winner of the MEAC, evened the two-year series at 1-1. The Aggies of North Carolina A&T defeated Alcorn State 41-34 in the inaugural event in 2015.

Unlike that contest – an offensive show -- the 2016 Celebration Bowl was a defensive struggle for most of the contest, despite some solid numbers by both starting quarterbacks. The Tigers’ Kincade completed 15 of 31 attempts for 149 yards but had a costly pick in the end zone on Grambling’s first possession. GSU finished with 345 yards total offense, with 228 yards coming on the ground. Martez Carter, named the Outstanding Offensive Player of the game, led the ground game with 12 carries for 109 yards, including a 32-yard scoring run that put Grambling ahead 7-3 midway the third. Hunter, whose catch sealed the Tiger victory, had four catches for 35 yards, while Chad Williams snared three passes for 40 yards for the SWAC champions.

NCCU’s Bell completed a Celebration-record 18 passes in 32 attempts for 240 yards and a score, however, he was picked off twice, killing potential Eagle scoring drives deep in Grambling territory both times. Bell was also the top runner for Coach Fobbs’ squad with 13 carries for 31 yards.

NCCU, which dropped to 9-3 with the loss, got on the scoreboard first, when the Eagles got a 23-yard field goal from McLaren on their first possession of the game. McLaren's boot put the MEAC Champion ahead 3-0 with 6:05 left on the first-period clock.

The score would remain that way until the Tigers' Carter raced 32 yards to the end zone to complete an eight-play, 70-yard march with 9:14 on the third-period scoreboard. Jonathan Wallace added the extra point for a 7-3 Grambling lead.

The Tigers padded their lead to 10-3 when Wallace, who earlier missed a field goal attempt, nailed one from 26 yards out with 2:11 remaining in the third.

The scored remained that way until Bell's scoring toss to Atkinson in the closing minutes, which pulled NCCU to within 10-9, the final margin.

Grambling's Jameel Jackson was named the Outstanding Defensive Player, after recording five unassisted tackles and a key interception in the contest.