

CONQUEST IN ROLLER COASTER SEASON

by Ed Weaver - The Troy Record



CONQUEST PLAY TOUGH D

ALBANY -- Albany Conquest fans may be a confused group today as the arenafootball2 season nears its stretch run.

After three weeks of promise, the team has reverted back to its dismal, early-season form.

After four games, Conquest backers feared they the campaign would be a long one. A losing one. A season without much fun.

The Conquest lost a home game in the final 3.9 seconds. They were blown out twice.

Mistakes, penalties and long touchdown passes allowed were common.

Then came two big changes -- and plenty of hope.

First-year head coach Steve Matthews resigned, eventually replaced by former Albany Firebirds head coach Rick Buffington.

In the meantime, interim head coach Dave Bochette inserted D Bryant at

quarterback and the winless Conquest responded to the more mobile Bryant by beating then-unbeaten Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, 52-45.

Buffington took over the following week and the Conquest posted a tough, 60-56 road win at 4-1 Louisville, then trounced Macon, 56-37.

Despite still being just 1-3 within the Northeast Division -- a division the Conquest dominated in their first two seasons -- Albany fans were talking playoffs.

Now, they're puzzled, wondering just what's happened to the team's once powerful passing game in consecutive, one-sided defeats.

So poor was the team's play during the puzzling 44-24 loss to the Peoria Pirates that Buffington went on live television immediately afterward and apologized to Conquest fans for the 'ugly' performance.

The Conquest bounced back on June 12th trouncing The Arkansas Twisters 66-54 in Little Rock. "Touchdown" Tony Locke scored 4 more touchdowns, QB D Bryant threw for 6 YD and Cy Bulter ran for 2 scores. It was the best overall offensive performance for the team this year and



JAMIE WARE GOES FOR 6



"TOUCHDOWN" TONY LOCKE

brought the Conquest record to 4-6, within striking distance of the playoffs. In addition, Jeff Higgins returned a kick off 52 yards for TD and Kicker Vinnie Cirrincione hit a 38 yard field goal. In an earlier contest against

the Cape Fer Wildcats Vinny "C" set a Conquest record when he booted a 56 yard field goal.

Yet, only a complete turnaround building momentum from the Arkansas Victory and a long winning streak, much better than 3 games can save the Conquest playoff hopes.

Back to the many positives, though.

Bryant and Tony Locke have developed into one of the top passing combinations in the league. The defense has improved tremendously.

Win or lose, Conquest fans can be confident they'll enjoy an entertaining time during a game at Pepsi Arena, as well as a one-hour concert.

Conquest general manager Robert Zeig spoke of the tough decision regarding the head coaching change.

"Steve Matthews and I had long conversations (following the 51-34 Game 4 loss at Manchester) and we both said, that for whatever reasons, his message was just not getting across to the players," Zeig said. "For whatever reason, he just wasn't able to communicate. He knew his football, he was very well organized ... but part of it is, it's still a game and you've got to have fun."

"We're more relaxed and guys don't feel as pressured," lineman Dave

Mahoney said.

"Buff reminds guys," Zeig said, "that, 'yeah we're still a business but we're fun.' I remember after the (Game 7 victory over Macon), I went into the lockerroom ... I walked in at the postgame prayer".

"Then Buff stands up and he says, 'You remember (former Rams and Redskins coach) George Allen, and how he had everybody jumping up and down, win, win, win, win?' I want everybody on their feet, jumping up and down".

"Buff's 59 years old," Zeig continued, "and he's jumping up and down, all the players, he's looking at me and he's got me jumping up and down ... the assistant coaches, the trainers jumping up and down shouting the words win, win, win." It brought a little bit of levity to it."

As Bryant put it, *"I love talking coach Buff. He reminds me of my grandfather."*

The Conquest still have two games remaining with 6-2 Wilkes-Barre. The combined record of the opponents in the other six games is 12-18.

"This is still a very talented football team," Buffington said. *"We're going to win more games. Can we make the playoffs?"*

"Yes, I think we can," he said.

Can the Conquest split the Wilkes-Barre games and win five of the other six to finish 9-7? Will they get the help they need in other games to reach the playoffs with a 9-7 mark?

Can they finish at 10-6?



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