Troy Mitchell and Michael Johnson rushed for a pair of touchdowns apiece while rookie tailback Darius Ramsey racked up a career-best 120 yards on the

ground as Western Carolina pulled away from Mars Hill, 42-14, Thursday night in the season opener for both squads at E.J. Whitmire Stadium / Bob Waters Field.

The win snapped a nine-game losing skid for WCU that dated back nearly a full year. It also extended the Catamounts' winning streak in the head-to-head series to 14-staight.

But overall, the night seemingly belonged to the new faces as first-year Mark Speir earned his first collegiate win as a head coach. Prior to the opening kickoff, over 600 students representing this year's freshman class were led through the Catamount tunnel in the second-annual freshman run.

"No. 1, we won. That's our objective every time we come out: to win," opened Speir in his post-game comments with the media. "Our players came out and worked their butts off since January, and they went out and had a hard-fought victory against a good football team."

Seventeen-straight points in the fourth quarter allowed the Catamounts to stretch what was just a 10-point lead through three quarters out to the final score - the largest margin of victory for a WCU squad since 2008.

Capitalizing on short passes to settle the rookie QB into a groove early, Troy Mitchell completed 20-of-29 pass attempts - 68.9-percent - for 149 yards to accompany his two rushing scores in his collegiate debut. The Mobile, Ala., native found eight different receivers including all four running backs which saw action in the Catamounts' new spread formation offense.

Senior Jacoby Mitchell led the way with six catches for 43 yards while freshman Spearman Robinson hauled in five passes.

Finishing just shy of the 500-yard mark in total offense, the Catamounts chewed up 344 yards on the ground, paced by Ramsey's 120. Sophomore Shaun Warren - the workhorse for WCU in last year's meeting with the Lions - tallied 75 yards on 12 carries while Johnson ran six times for 69 yards and the two scores. Senior Michael Vaughn toted the ball a dozen times for 43 yards.

The two teams played to a scoreless tie through the first 15 minutes of the game before WCU put 24 unanswered points on the board in the second and start of the third quarter. Troy Mitchell rushed in from three yards to give the Catamounts a lead they would never relinquish with Richard Sigmon splitting the uprights from 25 yards out for a 10-0 lead midway through the second quarter. Johnson stormed in from five yards out to give WCU three-score lead.

Clinging to a 17-0 lead after halftime, the Catamounts got the ball to bounce in their favor on the first play from scrimmage in the third quarter. MHC's Josh Young rushed around the left end, but bobbled the handoff in the backfield where the WCU defense had pinched up the field. Redshirt sophomore Trevor Taylor was able to tap the ball away from Young and into a better situation for him, gathered the bouncing orb and rumbled in from nine yards away to lead, 24-0.

The Lions wouldn't go away, though, and managed to trim the Catamount advantage down to 10 points, 24-14, late in the third quarter. Quarterback Jon Richt tossed a 17-yard scoring strike to Dimitri Holmes to put Mars Hill on the board with Richt punching in a one-yard TD run plunge to bring the Lions back within 10, 24-14.

WCU responded with a 31-yard field goal by Richard Sigmon- his second score of the night -

early in the fourth before getting a 38-yard romp by Johnson and a seven yard score from Mitchell to stretch the advantage back out.

Defensively, the Catamounts forced four turnovers including three fumbles and an interception. Linebackers Rock Williams and Courtland Carson were both credited with forcing a fumble while defensive back De'Von Richardson recovered the fumble he knocked loose in the waning moments of the fourth quarter.

Williams led WCU with 10 tackles while Carson had six stops including 2.5 tackles for loss. Redshirt sophomore Ace Clark posted eight tackles and came away with his first career interception.

Mars Hill (0-1) got a 100-yard rushing performance from Shaikel Davis who finished with 111 yards on 18 carries. Sophomore Dimitri Holmes led six receivers that caught passes with five receptions for 71 yards and a touchdown. Jasper Mason led five Lions with double-digit tackles on the night with 16 while Rudy Cabral was credited with 14 stops.

Western Carolina returns to action on Saturday, Sept. 8, as it rekindles an old Southern Conference rivalry that has lain dormant since 1996 as it travels to Huntington, W.Va., to face the Marshall Thundering Herd. The all-time series between the Herd and Catamounts stands tied at 9, but WCU has dropped four-straight - and nine of the last 10 dating back to 1987. Kickoff from Jones C. Edwards Stadium is set for 7:00 pm before a live Fox College Sports television audience.

Photo Courtesy: Troy Mitchell, WCU Athletics