

Eagles Fall at North Dakota State

Written by Barrett Gilham

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Brock Jensen scored on a 5-yard touchdown run with 3:05 left in the game to lift No. 1 North Dakota State to a 23-20 victory over No. 6 Georgia Southern in the semifinal round of the NCAA Division I Football Championship Friday night in the

Fargodome. A 40-yard pass from backup quarterback Ezayi Youyoute to Zach Walker on 4th-and-11 moved the ball into Bison territory, and the Eagles set up a 50-yard field goal try with 31 seconds left. Drew Ruggles, a Georgia Southern soccer player who joined the team this week, had his kick blocked by Carlton Littlejohn to seal the Bison win.

The Eagles see their season come to an end with a 10-4 record, while NDSU (13-1), the defending FCS champion, moves on to the finals, where they will play the winner of Sam Houston State and Eastern Washington.

Jerick McKinnon posted his seventh consecutive 100-yard rushing game with 168 yards and a touchdown on 31 carries, and the junior quarterback threw for 91 yards and a touchdown. Dominique Swope finished with 77 yards on 14 carries and caught a 49-yard touchdown pass, while Youyoute was 3-for-3 for 68 passing yards.

Jensen completed nine passes for 76 yards and ran 10 times for 58 yards and a touchdown. Sam Ojuri logged 71 yards and a touchdown on six carries, and John Crockett rushed 13 times for 60 yards and a score.

Trailing 20-16, the Bison took over at their own 47-yard line with 5:49 left in the game after the Eagles were flagged for a personal foul following a punt. Jensen rushed twice for 33 yards, and the Eagles were flagged for roughing the quarterback to move the ball to the GSU 12-yard line. Facing 4th-and-3 from the GSU 5, the Bison called timeout to talk over their fourth-down play. Georgia Southern countered with a timeout once the Eagles saw the formation but had to take its final timeout because of substitution issues. Jensen scored the winning touchdown on a quarterback keeper, and Adam Keller added the extra point to put the Bison on top, 23-20.

"It was a great football game; we just didn't make enough plays down the stretch to win it," said Georgia Southern head coach Jeff Monken. "We had opportunities. We had the two foolish penalties on one drive and had a chance on fourth down and just couldn't get the stop we needed."

J.J. Wilcox, GSU's starting safety who played on the offense his first three seasons, punched it in from 4 yards out on 4th-and-1 to open the scoring in the game. It was Wilcox's first carry since last season's FCS semifinal game against North Dakota State and the first rushing touchdown allowed by the Bison in the playoffs this year. NDSU blocked the point after attempt, leaving the score at 6-0.

The score capped a methodical 14-play, 79-yard drive that ate up 7:26 of the clock after the Eagle defense forced a three-and-out on the first Bison possession. Youyoute came off the bench to convert a 3rd-and-long with a 15-yard pass to Kentrellis Showers, and McKinnon rushed nine times for 48 yards.

Jensen's 26-yard run keyed a North Dakota State scoring drive on its ensuing possession, and Crockett scored on a 1-yard run to tie the game. The Eagles returned the favor when Brent Russell blocked the extra point, and the game remained tied 6-6 at the end of the first quarter.

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McKinnon threw to Swope over the middle for a 49-yard touchdown pass early in the second period, and Alex Hanks added the point after to open a 13-6 lead for the Eagles. On 3rd-and-7, McKinnon faked a pitch to the left, circled to his right and hit Swope in stride. Swope bounced off a would-be tackler at the 12 and stumbled into the end zone on his first reception of the season.

Jensen used the two-minute offense to drive the Bison down the field at the end of the half, but on 3rd-and-8 from the GSU 19-yard line, Darius Eubanks got pressure on Jensen, forcing an incompleteness. Keller kicked a 36-yard field goal, and the Eagles led 13-9 at halftime.

Jensen completed five passes for 49 yards, and the Bison converted three third downs during the drive. A 14-yard pass from Jensen to Trevor Gebhart, and a 15-yard pass interference penalty on the Eagles keyed the drive. The Eagles finished the day with 13 penalties for 103 yards, both season highs.

Georgia Southern drove into NDSU territory on its first possession of the second half thanks to a 16-yard carry by McKinnon, but he fumbled two plays later at the Bison 41-yard line. NDSU took advantage of the miscue as Ojuri rushed over the right side and broke free for a 53-yard touchdown on the second play from scrimmage to give the Bison their first lead of the game at 16-13.

The Eagles went three-and-out on their next possession and had to punt from deep in their own end zone, but the Bison were flagged for roughing the punter, giving GSU new life. A 42-yard pass from McKinnon to Johnathan Bryant on 3rd-and-3 set up a McKinnon 25-yard touchdown run later in the drive, and the Eagles took a 20-16 lead with 5:02 left in the third quarter.

After Dion DuBose sacked Jensen on 3rd-and-4 to force a Bison punt, the Eagles milked 4:45 off the clock, sending the game into the fourth quarter, by moving the ball from their own 5-yard line to the NDSU 35. On the next Bison possession, Kyle Oehlbeck got the Eagle defense off the field by pressuring Jensen into an incompleteness on 3rd-and-6 from the Bison 40. Ben LeCompte's 58-yard punt was downed at the 2, and the Eagles took another 3:34 off the clock by moving the ball out to their own 20 before having to punt it back to the Bison.

"We have a great bunch of kids," said Monken. "They fought so hard and worked so hard to get to this point, and we just came up short."