

Comeback Falls Short in Home-Opening Loss

Written by Mike Flynn

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Trailing by 18 points with less than six minutes to go, Appalachian State University football rallied to pull within three points but a would-be game-tying field goal missed wide left in the waning seconds and the Mountaineers dropped a heartbreaking 24-21 decision to North Carolina A&T on Saturday evening at Kidd Brewer Stadium.

North Carolina A&T (1-0) led 24-6 following Cody Jones' 27-yard field goal with 8:11 to play but Appalachian State (0-2) scored two touchdowns in a span of 4:59 to cut the deficit to 24-21 with 24 seconds to go. The Mountaineers then recovered an onside kick and moved 20 yards in three plays to set up a 46-yard field-goal attempt with seven seconds remaining. However, senior Drew Stewart's (Gastonia, N.C./North Gaston) attempt sailed a couple of feet wide of the left upright to dash Appalachian's hopes of a miraculous comeback.

"I'm disappointed, of course," said ASU coach Scott Satterfield. "But the kids fought until the end. We never got anything started offensively. Their punter (Dominic Frescura) kept us pinned in all day. We never could get into a rhythm, and that was a big part of it."

Appalachian dominated in most phases of the game, outgaining N.C. A&T, 378-233, and picking up 23 first downs compared to the Aggies' 12. However, A&T scored two non-offensive touchdowns on a 91-yard kickoff return and a 57-yard interception return that proved to be the difference in its first win over App State since 1993.

D'Vonte Grant's 57-yard interception return for a touchdown with four seconds to go in the second quarter capped a disastrous opening half for the Mountaineers, who trailed 21-6 at halftime despite surrendering only 100 yards of offense over the first two periods.

"YOu can't lose the turnover battle, and we lost the battle in field position," said Karl Anderson, who finished with 11 tackles. "We gave up a kick-off return for a touchdown, we had a punt blocked, we gave up 14 points without their offense on the field. The defense played hard, the offense played hard, and nearly pulled off a great comeback in the fourth quarter. But at the end of the day, we can't keep spotting teams like we did today."

The score remained 21-6 until Jones' field goal stretched the Aggies' lead to 18 points nearly midway through the fourth quarter. Behind backup quarterback Kameron Bryant (Cary, N.C./Panther Creek), who replaced starter Jamal Londry-Jackson (Atlanta, Ga./North Atlanta) at the beginning of the second half, Appalachian answered with an 11-play, 65-yard drive that was capped by a 10-yard touchdown pass from Bryant to tight end Barrett Burns (Woodstock, Ga./Etowah) with 5:23 left in the ballgame. A two-point conversion pass from Bryant to Simms McElfresh (Charlotte, N.C./Charlotte Christian) pulled the Apps within 10 points at 24-14.

After a failed onside-kick attempt, Appalachian's defense forced a three-and-out but a 41-yard punt pinned the Mountaineers at their own one yard line. They were able to move out from the shadow of their own goal post but N.C. A&T seemingly iced the victory when Appalachian turned the ball over on downs at its own 14 yard line with 3:01 remaining. However, instead of kicking a field goal on fourth and five from the App State nine yard line, the Aggies elected to go for what would have been a game-clinching first down. The strategy backfired when Patrick Blalock (Asheville, N.C./A.C. Reynolds) and Dante Blackmon (Covington, Ga./Eastside) stuffed A&T running back Dominique Drake for a three-yard loss and the Mountaineers took over on their own 12 with 1:53 to play.

From there, Bryant engineered a textbook eight-play, 88-yard drive. After an incomplete pass on the first play of the series, Bryant completed his final six passes of the drive, including a nine-yard touchdown pass to freshman running back Marcus Cox (Dacula, Ga./Dacula) that

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drew the Mountaineers within three points with 24 seconds left in the game.

Stewart followed with a textbook onside kick that was recovered by Kevin Walton (Greensboro, N.C./Grimsley) at midfield. An 11-yard completion to Andrew Peacock (Durham, N.C./Northern Durham) and a nine-yard run by Cox set up Stewart's heart-wrenching miss with two seconds left on the clock.

"It was just a lack of execution on our part," said wide receiver Andrew Peacock. "And sometimes, that's how it is. They played an awesome game. Everything finally started coming together in the fourth quarter. That's the way we usually play. That's our style of game."

In just one half of work, Bryant completed 21-of-31 passes without an interception for 191 yards and two touchdowns to nearly lead what would have been perhaps the most improbable comeback in program history. Senior Tony Washington (High Point, N.C./T.W. Andrews) had a career-high 11 receptions for 101 yards to lead all receivers while Peacock also hauled in 11 catches (matching a career high) for 93 yards. Cox caught three passes for 49 yards and two touchdowns and also rushed eight times for 36 yards (4.5 avg.).

"We're use to both of those guys," Peacock said. "We work with them everyday in practice, and we have a rhythm with both of them. Kam came in and had to get comfortable, and we had to get comfortable with him. These first two games have definitely been learning experiences. We've made a lot of mistakes these last two games. It's our job to correct them and come out and be the App State football team we can be."

Defensively, Appalachian forced five three-and-outs and limited N.C. A&T to 18 yards or less on nine of its 13 possessions. Redshirt freshman John Law (Atlanta, Ga./Grady) led the way with 14 tackles and fellow inside linebacker Karl Anderson (Pilot Point, Texas/Pilot Point) added 11 stops and a pass break-up.

Appalachian State gets a bye week to regroup before opening its final season of Southern Conference competition at Elon on Sept. 21. Kickoff is set for 6 p.m. at Elon's Rhodes Stadium.

NOTES: Appalachian State dropped to 5-2 all-time versus North Carolina A&T ... the loss was its first to the Aggies since a 22-10 defeat in Greensboro, N.C. on Sept. 4, 1993 ... Appalachian is 0-2 or the first time since 2009 and only the third time in the last 20 seasons ... in 2009, Appalachian reeled off 11-straight wins after the 0-2 start before losing at Montana in the semifinals of the NCAA Division I Football Championship ... the Mountaineers fell to 24-2 in their last 26 games that immediately followed a same-season loss ... the last time Appalachian had lost back-to-back games in the same season was in '09, when it dropped the first two decisions of the campaign to East Carolina and McNeese State ... the home-opening loss was also Appalachian's first since the '09 loss to McNeese State ... the loss snapped the Mountaineers' 32-game home winning streak versus in-state opponents ... the Apps' last previous defeat at home to an in-state foe was a 34-7 loss to Western Carolina on Oct. 6, 1984 at then-Conrad Stadium.

Photo Courtesy: Marcus Cox, ASU Athletics