



sports

Looking back upon the Eagles historic season

STEVEN SHRENKEL
@AUCollegian

From a huge win on national television, to breaking numerous records, to winning their first outright GLIAC title in five years, the Ashland Eagles football team has a historic season to look back upon.

It was a year full of many triumphs for the Ashland football team, but ultimately ended in bitter defeat as the Eagles loss in the NCAA Division II Super Region Three semifinal to Harding, 34-24.

This was the second super regional semifinal that the Eagles have played in of all-time. They came into the second round of the playoffs as the No. 3 seed. Harding was the No. 7 seed.

The loss was only the second time in four years that the victory bell wasn't rang by the Ashland football team at Jack Miller Stadium/Martinelli Field.

The Eagles senior class, led by quarterback Travis Tarnowski, finished 38-7 overall and 37-5 in the regular season throughout their four years at Ashland. They contributed to three Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference South Division titles along with two overall conference championships.

Eagles head coach Lee Owens was disappointed with the season ending when the team had been on a roll, but reflected on just how special the group of players was.

"It's hard for our guys to put this whole thing in perspective right now," Owens said. "They have been here four years and it's only been twice they have walked off the field without ringing the victory bell. And those were both post-season games. Someday we'll have a better perspective of what this group did and the games they've won. But today wasn't our day."

Ashland finished their 2017 at 11-2, which tied for the program record for wins in a campaign and most consecutive victories in one season. The Eagles also went an undefeated 9-0 in the GLIAC conference. They were ranked No. 9 in the country.

Three teams of Ashland's eleven opponents in the season were ranked in the top 12 in the final 2016 American Football Coaches Association poll. Seven of those eleven teams that the Eagles faced this year had winning records in 2016.

The Eagles were coming into the 2017 season with high expectations as they were coming off of a 2016 campaign where they finished 9-2 overall and 7-2 in the GLIAC. That season had ended in disappointment as they were not selected for postseason play.

The Eagles journey started back on April 22 as they played their annual Purple and Gold Spring Game.

AU came into the 2017 season slotted third by the GLIAC pre-season coaches' poll. With national attention focused on them along with the motivation from last season's failures, the Eagles looked to start off their season on the right foot.

Their first game of the 2017 season would not turn out the way they had hoped, as they fell to No. 9 ranked Indiana University of Pennsylvania in a road game shootout 26-23.

That game was just a taste of what was to come for Ashland's defense as they held the Crimson Hawks to just 29-yards in a 15-play span when the game was tied at 23 in the second half. The offense couldn't capitalize, however, as the go-ahead field goal was blocked, and IUP hit a game winning field goal.

Week two kicked off Ashland's home opener and a better result than the first week. AU smashed the Ohio Dominican Panthers 47-21 in a non-conference matchup at Jack Miller Stadium/ Martinelli



The football team after accepting the GLIAC Championship trophy after their win over Saginaw Valley State University.

Field.

That game saw the Eagles offense catch on fire, putting up 563 total yards for the game. Tarnowski led the attack with his 10th career 300-yard passing game.

Owens put into perspective just how dominant Ashland in when they play home after the game.

"We're home," Owens said. "When we play here, we play at a different level."

Ashland continued to display its' dominance in week three as they buried the Northwood Timberwolves 42-14 in their first GLIAC matchup on the road.

The game was another display of dominance for Tarnowski as he put up 339 yards and five touchdowns in the first two quarters of the game, setting a new program career record and tying a program single-game mark.

It also marked another milestone as Owens earned his 100th win leading the Eagles, becoming just the second head coach in program history to do so.

Owens, after the win, talked about the great people in the Eagles organization, foreshadowing the historic season to come.

"You can't have success unless you surround yourself with great people," Owens said. "We've been fortunate to have great people here."

Week four saw the Eagles take on their biggest challenge of the season thus far.

At home, in a nationally televised game at ESPN 3, Ashland got their biggest victory of the season with a 20-3 win against the Ferris State Bulldogs in another GLIAC matchup.

Ferris State came in to that game as the nation's leader in both total offense and rushing offense.

That was shut down by the Eagles defense as held the Bulldogs to just 228-yards of offense and 127-yards on the ground. They also forced three turnovers for the game.

The win was an important one as it vaulted AU to be tied for second in the GLIAC standings and a half-game behind first place ranked Grand Valley State.

The Eagles hit the road and went into week five with all the momentum against the Davenport Panthers in another GLIAC faceoff. They came into the game ranked No. 20 in the country.

The game was another defensive masterpiece as they shut out the Panthers 38-0. It was the first time that Ashland pitched a shutout on the road since 1994.

AU continued GLIAC play on the road in week six against the Northern Michigan Wildcats. The Eagle "D" had come into the game allowing just 16 points in the last three games. Their defense again set the tone for the game and didn't look back.

They earned their fifth consecutive victory 38-13.

Week seven saw Ashland take on the Michigan Tech Huskies in a

Homecoming GLIAC matchup at Jack Miller Stadium/Martinelli Field. In front of family, friends, and alumni, the Eagles defensive got yet another shutout for the season as they topped the Huskies 48-0.

The defense collected four interceptions, a fumble recovery, five tackles for a loss, and a sack.

Tarnowski had a big game as it was the fourth time that he had thrown a school-record-tying five touchdowns in a game. Tarnowski also reached another milestone as he became the first Ashland player to reach both 100 career passing touchdowns and 10,000 passing career yards.

The Eagles went into week eight facing a bigger challenge and remembering the heartbreaking loss from the Tiffin Dragons back in 2016. They went into the Dragons territory on the road and stole a 38-24 victory.

The Eagles got lead the lead 24-10 going into halftime for the game. This was before the Dragons started to come back in the third quarter when they connected on a 60-yard touchdown pass.

Ashland responded to this with a nine-yard rushing touchdown from junior running back Andrew Vaughn to help put the game out of reach. He had a career high 175 rushing yards and two touchdowns on 26 carries. AU ran for a season-high 294 yards in the game.

Week nine saw the Eagles outlast the Wayne State Warriors 30-10 in their final GLIAC regular season road game. In the game, Vaughn saw his fifth 100-yard rushing game of the season and his third in a row.

For Week ten, the Eagles returned to Jack Miller Stadium/Martinelli Field to take on the No. 19 ranked overall Grand Valley State Lakers. AU came into the game ranked No. 11.

The teams traded blows throughout the game before senior kicker Aidan Simenc got the chance to be a hero in front of the home crowd. Simenc nailed a 29-yard field goal as time expired to give Ashland 34-31 victory.

Vaughn again had a career night as he posted three touchdowns on 23 carries.

The win was important as it gave the Eagles at least a share of its Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference championship.

Senior Day, the final week of the regular season for the Eagles, saw many records broken for AU. The defense dominated yet again in front of their home crowd. They finished the game with seven sacks, ten tackles for a loss, and seven pass breakups.

Junior defensive end James Prater Jr. tied the program single-game record, set by College Football Hall of Famer Bill Royce, with 312 sacks and setting a new team single-season 1912 tackles for a loss.

Freshman wide receiver had a huge part in the game as he fin-

ished with a career high nine catches and 94-receiving yards. He also went into the game catching a touchdown pass in three of the last four game.

The Eagles came into the game ranked No. 10 and finished their regular season with a 10-game winning streak to go with a 31-19 victory.

Tarnowski set a new conference record for the game, throwing 92 touchdown passes in GLIAC games, and passing former Grand Valley State quarterback Curt Anes.

With the game, AU's senior class finished its career having never loss a home regular- season game. Owens after the game talked on the accomplishments for the senior class.

"We've got some warriors in our senior class," Owens said. "It was fun. To go 9-0 in this conference, it's such a tribute to that group of players. It's a big-time accomplishment."

The win was a cause for celebration as it gave them their first outright GLIAC championship in five years and guaranteed them a spot in the postseason.

At their end of the season awards banquet, the Ashland football team patiently awaited the news of who they would play in the upcoming week.

The national committee chose the Eagles for postseason play and slotted them at No. 3 in the NCAA Division II Super Region three playoffs. The game was chosen to played at Jack Miller Stadium/Martinelli Field.

Everything seemed to be picturesque for Ashland as they were headed to the NCAA Division II postseason for the seventh time in program history. They were rolling with a 10-game winning streak.

That was until they found out the uphill battle they would have to conquer known as Northwest Missouri State.

The Bearcats were the two-time defending national Division II champions and was selected to face Ashland in the Super Region Three quarterfinal.

The Eagles would step up to the challenge, however, in a game heavily influenced by a rain-drenched first half. It was a sloppy game, but Ashland held on and came out on top in an exciting 21-18 victory.

The victory gave Ashland 11 straight wins at home while being 21-1 at home since the 2014 season.

The Eagles marched on to the Super Region semifinal the next week, back at home taking on one of the top rushing teams in the country, Harding. The Bisons came into the game running an offensive attack that AU had not had a lot of time to prepare for.

In the first half, Harding carved up Ashland's defense running the triple option, the Eagles not able to put on their normal defensive dominance. The game stood at 17-7 going into the half.

The second half was when Ashland's defense began to figure out Harding's offense and put the Eagles defense in position to start a comeback.

Tarnowski helped the Eagles cut the deficit 31-21 with 9:24 left to go into the fourth quarter with a 17-yard touchdown pass.

It was too little, too late, however, as the Bisons answered right back and shut Ashland down for the 34-24 win.

Even with the disappointing loss, many records were broken and history was made for the whole Ashland University football team.

20 players earned 2017 GLIAC season-ending honors. Owens earned the 2017 GLIAC coach of the year while senior center Dominic Giunta earned the 2017 GLIAC offensive linemen of the year.

Senior wide receiver Matthew Wilcox earned the 2017 GLIAC Jack H. McAvoy Award. The award was presented to a player who combined outstanding character and leadership not only on the field, but the classroom and community as well. He finished the season with 37 receptions, 707 receiving yards, and five touchdowns.

Tarnowski finished off his career at Ashland with another outstanding season. He completed 59.5 percent of his passes for 2,756 yards, 29 touchdowns, and just four interceptions. He also finished the season with 128-rushing yards and one rushing touchdown.

Through the first round of postseason play, he was tied the third-fewest interceptions thrown and was tied for eighth in touchdown passes.

Tarnowski was the 2017 GLIAC player of the year. He was also the third Eagle to be nominated for the Harlon Hill Trophy twice, the Division II Player of the Year award.

The Ashland Eagles offense finished first in the GLIAC conference with 238.6 passing yards per game. They also finished fifth in the conference with 173.4 yards per game. They scored 34.2 points against GLIAC teams.

The defense proved to be one of the best yet again as they finished first in the GLIAC conference, only allowing 14.9 points against the team.

While the Eagles may be losing 20 seniors, they will always remember and cherish the historic performances that they put on while at Ashland. They finish with a school-record of 38 wins over a four-year period.

Owens put into perspective how special this group of players was this season for the Ashland Eagles after the tough loss to Harding.

"They've inspired me," Owens said. "They're champions, literally. The team wasn't ready to stop playing. It's what makes it so tough. This group ranks up there, as good as any group I've ever coached, for many reasons. They're going to continue to win in life."