

Southern Miss earns share of C-USA title

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With about 15 seconds left on the clock at M.M. Roberts Stadium Thursday night, Southern Mississippi football fans around the field began spilling over the concrete wall and onto the field.

With their eyes on the south goal post, the mob was ruly enough to stay behind the sidelines — although it infiltrated the Golden Eagles' team bench — as the clock stopped at 0:08. But once TCU ran its final play (and about two ticks before three zeros showed), the fans stormed the turf and surrounded their target.

The fans hung on the goal post — aided at first by USM player Seth Cumble, and egged on by several Golden Eagles — swaying and rocking. Two minutes and 20 seconds after the final buzzer, the south goal post

Up next for USM

The University of Southern Mississippi Golden Eagles close out regular season play Nov. 29 against the East Carolina Pirates in Greenville, N.C. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m.

support gave way, and the yellow poles went from vertical to horizontal, into the crowd's waiting arms.

The celebratory destruction was fueled by a 40-28 Southern Miss win against No. 10 TCU — the Golden Eagles' first-ever win against a ranked opponent in Hattiesburg, the Horned Frogs' first loss of the season and the Eagles' first conference championship since 1999.

"I came in a champion," said USM sixth-year senior defensive back Corey Yates, "and right now I'm going out as champion."

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Golden Eagles grab share of C-USA title

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Two minutes and 52 seconds of game time before the goal posts hit the ground, USM senior defensive back Greg Brooks wrought some destruction of his own. Sprinting untouched into TCU's backfield, Brooks took TCU quarterback Brandon Hassell from vertical to horizontal, bringing Hassell to the ground. The football hit the ground a split-second later and a few yards away, where USM senior linebacker Rod Davis pounced on it.

"I fell on it, and I paid a price," said Davis. "(Defensive lineman) Eric Scott came and smashed my shoulder."

That play ended a TCU run of touchdowns on three straight possessions, and the Eagles' subsequent touchdown iced the win after a frantic fourth quarter.

Southern Miss' win against previously-unbeaten TCU clinched at least a share of the C-USA title, although the Liberty Bowl berth is not guaranteed.

"We're going to let them play it out on the field," Liberty Bowl executive director Steve Ehrhart said. "It would be unfair, with a week to go and a regular season game coming up, to make a decision."

The Eagles will win the championship outright, and guarantee a trip to the Liberty Bowl, with a win at 1-9 East Carolina on Nov. 29.

"We're not going to take (East Carolina) for granted, we're not going to take this championship for granted," USM quarterback Dustin Almond said. "Our confidence is going to be high, and we're going to play the best we can to win that game."

Almond threw for three touch-

downs and 227 yards on 14-of-23 passing against the Horned Frogs. As if enough wasn't on the line against TCU, Almond also had to deal with the death of his grandfather earlier this week. Milton Almond suffered a heart attack before Saturday's 28-14 win against Tulane, and died Monday morning.

"It's been a hard week," said Almond, who wore a wristband with his grandfather's initials — D.M.A. "Saturday and Sunday, it was hard to hold my head up. But all year, he's been talking about playing TCU. That means the world to me. We won, and I know he was watching from heaven."

The performance continued a remarkable turnaround for Almond. After struggling earlier this season, going 4-of-24 in his first start of the year against Nebraska and losing the starting spot, Almond has been brilliant as the starter during Southern Miss' five-game winning streak.

In the past four games, Almond has completed 66.3 percent of his passes, and has thrown for 10 touchdowns against one interception.

Almond has had at least two touchdown passes in each of the past five games, for a total of 12. Southern Miss had 11 passing touchdowns as a team all of last season.

"I think it was a hard position for Dustin to be in at the Nebraska game," USM junior receiver Marvin Young said. "Since then, he's had more poise in the huddle, he's been more confident, and he's practiced harder."

Almond's passing and USM's defense gave the Eagles a big early lead against the Horned Frogs.

There were 30,141 fans at Thursday's game, the Eagles' largest crowd for a conference game since

2000. And the crowd was rocking along with the Eagles from the beginning of the game.

TCU scored first, converting three third-down plays as the Frogs drove from their own 9-yard line to the Southern Miss 4 on 16 plays. But TCU had to settle for a field goal.

The Eagles didn't need nearly as long to get their first score. On the fourth play of the next possession, Almond danced in the pocket long enough to find a wide-open DaRon Lawrence down the right sideline for 50 yards and a touchdown.

The teams traded field goals in the next few minutes, until Eric Pruitt intercepted Hassell midway through the second quarter and returned the ball 32 yards to the TCU 24-yard line.

It was the first of four TCU turnovers, and Southern Miss took advantage on running back Anthony Harris' 3-yard touchdown.

The next series, Pruitt again picked up good field position after a 52-yard punt return by Marvin Young. Almond capitalized by zipping a ball in between defenders to Antwon Courington for a 9-yard score.

At halftime, the score stood at 24-6, Southern Miss. After another TCU interception in the third quarter, Almond and Young connected for a 21-yard touchdown pass. The Eagles led 31-6, and all of TCU's dreams seemed dashed.

But the Frogs had some fight left in them. As the fourth quarter opened, Hassell tossed a 43-yard pass to Cory Rogers when Brooks stopped early in coverage.

"I take full blame for that drive, because I misjudged the ball, and that's when they seemed to gain their momentum" Brooks said. "His eyes just got big, and usually when a receiver's eyes get big the ball's coming down."

The pass put the Frogs at the 2-yard line, and Kenny Hayter took a 1-yard run into the end zone for TCU's first score. It was the start of a Frog flurry — TCU didn't give up possession for five minutes and 43 seconds as the Frogs recovered two inside kicks and scored two more touchdowns.

All of a sudden, the score was 31-28 and the Frogs were the team with momentum.

"(On the first inside kick) we didn't think they'd be paying any attention," TCU coach Gary Patterson said. "So we tried our little inside kick where we just kick it, 'Gomer Pyle.' They played back at the 50 and we were fortunate enough to get that, and all of the sudden we got a ball game."

"And I don't think they realized that until we kicked what we called a Hurricane Kick. We caught it and we got another score and here we go."

As the Horned Frogs stayed on the field, the USM offense was forced to stay on the sideline and watch.

"It was hurting for a little bit," Almond said. "But I believe in our defense. Everybody believes in our defense."

And in the second half of the season, the offense has been deserving of faith as well. When the Eagles finally got the ball, a 45-yard pass from Almond to senior Kenneth Johnson, his only catch of the game, set up a field goal.

Then came Brooks' forced fumble, and the USM offense took the ball from the TCU 11-yard line to the end zone for the final score. Goal posts

down, Bower doused with water, TCU's BCS dreams turned to nightmares.

"You have a dream," Patterson said. "You have a focus, you have everything in front of you. But all of us know life's not fair. And you have to understand that other people dream, too. USM wanted to win a

conference title and they made more plays tonight to do that."

TCU came in dreaming of an undefeated season and a BCS payout. They left with an entirely different reality — as Courington walked off the field to the locker room, he held a fan's sign spelling it out for the Frogs: "TCU — GMAC Bowl, 2003."



Pruitt