

FCS PLAYOFFS

ETSU-Kennesaw State matchup harkens back to memorable day

By John Bednarowski
Marietta (Ga.) Daily Journal

Kennesaw, Ga.

Kennesaw State coach Brian Bohannon said he has great memories from the program's inaugural game in 2015 at East Tennessee State.

It was the inaugural victory, but more than that, it was the culmination of 2 1/2 years of preparation.

"Just the buildup to the first game, and I'm sure they had the same thing on their side," Bohannon said of facing East Tennessee State, which was playing its own inaugural game after restarting its program following its 2003 shutdown. "I think we figured it up. We had something like 75 practices before we ever played a game."

And now Kennesaw State (11-1) and East Tennessee State (10-1) will meet in the second round of the Football Championship Subdivision playoffs at 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 4, in Kennesaw, Georgia. The winner will move on to face the winner of Southern Illinois and North Dakota State in the quarterfinals.

That first game was played at Kermit Tipton Stadium on the campus of Spring Hill High School in Johnson City, Tennessee. East Tennessee State used the stadium for two years until the completion of its new home, the 7,964-seat William B. Greene Jr. Stadium in 2017.

"There was a huge buildup. We had no idea what was going to happen," Bohannon said. "I remember, they had the ball the nearly the whole first quarter, and then we got some things going."

With 6:42 left in the



Christopher Hanewinkel / USA Today Sports

East Tennessee State Buccaneers tight end Nate Adkins (44) catches a pass as he is hit by Vanderbilt Commodores safety Maxwell Worship (21) during the first half of an early September game at Vanderbilt Stadium in Nashville, Tenn. The No. 7-seed Buccaneers host Kennesaw State in the second round of the FCS playoffs on Saturday.

second quarter, Kennesaw State trailed 13-7, but that is when the flood gates opened with 49 straight points by the Owls. The deluge was highlighted by a 19-yard interception return by defensive lineman Nick Perrotta, a 69-yard touchdown pass from Trey White to Justin Sumpter and a 63-yard run by Darnell Holland.

Kennesaw State ran for

416 of its 512 total yards of offense, leading to a 56-17 victory.

"It was a great win and great memories," Bohannon said. "I don't think you will ever take that away. It was a big night for us, obviously, because we never had football here."

Fast forward seven seasons and the teams will meet again Saturday, but this time there is a little more on the

line.

Kennesaw State is in its fourth trip to the playoffs and, each time, has advanced to at least the second round. The Owls defeated Davidson 48-21 last week in the opening round.

For East Tennessee State, it is the second time since the program was reborn that it has made the playoffs, following a 2018 appearance. This year, the Buccaneers

are the Southern Conference champion, the No. 7 national seed and earned a bye into Round 2. It is a testament for both programs to have become playoff teams so quickly.

"It speaks volumes for East Tennessee State, their administration and coach (Randy Sanders)," Bohannon said. "Obviously, on our side, it's huge to be in this position, and I'm sure it's the goals and aspirations of their program, as it is ours. To do it the right way, to build it the right way, to get these opportunities, that's what you aspire for. I think that's the goal of both programs."

After Kennesaw State won the 2015 game in Johnson City, East Tennessee State returned the favor the following season in Kennesaw State. In the season opener at Fifth Third Bank Stadium, the Buccaneers beat the Owls 20-17 in double overtime.

Both games were spirited and it seemed like a natural rivalry was brewing considering the teams are only about a four-hour drive apart, but they have not faced one another since.

"I'm sure along the way there has been conversation," Bohannon said of scheduling East Tennessee State. "We've probably had that conversation with everyone, as you can imagine, but when it comes to scheduling, I don't remember any of the particulars. Nothing has really happened since we played the initial games in 2015 and 2016."

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