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(Neb.)-Eagles Meet 4-0 ThunderWolves For Homecoming

By: Dennis and Kathi Brown Posted at: 09/29/2011 09:16 AM

CHADRON – Nothing has come easy for the Chadron State College football team this fall and now it's really crunch time for the Eagles. Each of the next three opponents—Colorado State-Pueblo, Nebraska-Kearney and New Mexico Highlands—is 4-0 for the season.

The first test comes Saturday when the Eagles host the Pueblo ThunderWolves during the featured attractions of CSC's homecoming and centennial celebration. Kickoff is set for 1:30 at Elliott Field.

The ThunderWolves, who are ranked No. 14 in the most recent American Football Coaches Association Top 25 Poll, are rolling. After edging perennial power West Texas State A&M in Canyon 26-24 in the season-opener, they have defeated Northwestern Oklahoma 41-0, Adams State 20-11 and Fort Lewis 47-0.

Pueblo has won 24 of its 36 games, including 18 of 29 in the RMAC, since reviving football in 2008 after the sport had been discontinued in 1984 at what was then known as the University of Southern Colorado.

The ThunderWolves have been coached by John Wristen, once a star player and a graduate of the school, since the program was revived. Overall, they went 4-6 the first year, were 7-4 in 2009 and 9-2 last fall. In the RMAC, they've improved from 3-6 to 6-3 to 7-2 last fall.

Chadron State won the first game in 2008, 32-0, but Pueblo has won the last two, 28-17 in 2009 and 33-30 last year when the donnybrook went into triple overtime. Pueblo's Kyle Major, now a senior, kicked a 34-yard field goal in the third extra session after the Eagles had failed to score a touchdown despite having a first and goal at the four.

"They're a very good team," CSC coach Bill O'Boyle said. "They're extremely physical on defense, have a very good offensive line, have a heck of a running back and are well-coached. If we play the way we should we'll be fine, but, like always, we'll have to play well."

The running back is Jesse Lewis, a 5-foot-7, 180-pound senior who has carried 58 times for 350 yards and four touchdowns this season. He led the RMAC in rushing last fall with 1,391 yards and 14 TDs while averaging 7.9 yards a carry.

Lewis is one of six ThunderWolves who were placed on the RMAC's preseason all-star team by the coaches this summer. The others are tight end Toby Wittek, offensive tackle Ryan Jensen, defensive end Grant Jansen, inside linebacker Lee Meisner, strong safety Josh Costa and Major.

Meisner was selected as the conference's preseason Defensive Player of the Year.

After pitching two shutouts, the ThunderWolves lead the nation in scoring defense. They also have scored 15 of 16 times after reaching the red zone with Major kicking 12 field goals. In addition, they have intercepted 10 passes while not throwing any. However, the Wolves have lost nine fumbles.

Chadron State also has had some bright spots despite losing both of their non-conference games on fourth quarter rallies by the opponents and surviving 14-13 against Adams State last Saturday.

O'Boyle said he is particularly pleased with the way numerous young players, several of whom were expected to see just limited action this fall, have performed while filling in for regulars who have been injured.

"This is a credit to our coaching staff," O'Boyle said. "They've worked hard to get more players ready and the players have responded well."

(Courtesy Chadron State College)