

# Bearcats pummel Bulldogs 49-0

BY JACK NICHOLL  
Assistant Sports Editor

Truman lost the Ol' Hickory Stick game in familiar fashion Saturday.

The Bulldogs were dominated in nearly every way en route to a 49-0 loss against Northwest Missouri State University at Stokes Stadium. The Bearcats have retained the stick every year since 2002.

"It's a really bad game," head coach Shannon Currier said. "It's the worst experience I guess in my time here because we didn't expect just to compete — we expected to win. And we just didn't come out and get the job done."

Since Truman's (1-2, 0-2 MIAA) 2001 win, they have lost to the Bearcats (3-1, 2-0 MIAA) by an average of nearly 26 points and they lost 54-6 last year. Northwest currently is ranked No. 9 in the country and has been the Div. II runner-up for three straight years.

The Bulldogs had 143 yards of total offense compared to 568 for the Bearcats. Truman gained just six yards and just one first down — by way of penalty — in the second half.

It was the lowest number of yards of total offense in Currier's tenure at Truman.

The Bearcats scored on seven of their 11 drives and ran off a string of six straight touchdowns from the first to third quarters. Northwest quarterback Joel Osborn was 17-for-23 passing with 285 yards and three touchdowns before he was subbed out midway through the third quarter.

"We just played a terrible football game, really in all areas," Currier said. "We had way too many penalties, period."

The game started out fine for the Bulldogs — they forced a turnover on downs and a punt before driving 39 yards into



The Bulldogs could not get any offense going in the 'Ol Hickory Stick game. They averaged 2.0 per rush on 25 carries and accumulated 143 yards of total offense. In the second half they had one first down, which came by way of penalty.

Joe Barker/Index

Northwest territory. But senior running back Phil Kenney made the only turnover of the game with a fumble that was returned to the Truman six yard line. The turnover stopped any momentum the Bulldogs might have had.

Northwest ran in the ball two plays later to begin the string of

touchdowns.

Senior quarterback Matt Tichich was 12 for 26 for 59 yards. He had to avoid pressure all night, as well as dropped balls by the receivers.

Truman also had eight penalties for 71 yards, and the 'Dogs never had the ball inside

the Northwest red zone.

"We beat ourselves basically," sophomore wide receiver Kendrick Blue said. "We had mental mistakes. It was basically mental mistakes. It was all on us."

The Bulldogs rushed for 50 yards on 25 attempts and they are yet to average more than

three yards a carry in a game in three games this season.

Truman's longest play from scrimmage came on an accidental fake punt. After mishandling the snap, freshman punter Max Kleckner threw a blind pass to freshman Adam Reynolds. The play went for

38 yards and accounted for 27 percent of Truman's offense.

"We got lucky in reality," Currier said of the play.

Currier said part of the problem is the offensive line, which is without injured senior offensive lineman Mike Devine, who started all 11 games last season. Devine is recovering from an elbow injury and should begin practicing next week.

"We're not having plays consistently enough where we're having all five guys win their blocks," Currier said. "... We're not getting a seam for our running backs really. That's the bottom line — running game."

He added that Northwest's offensive line was just the opposite of the 'Dogs', as the Bearcats were able to open holes for the running game and keep the quarterback protected.

If there was any category Truman might have had an advantage in, it was special teams. Kleckner continued his success, fighting a few bad punt snaps to average 33 yards for nine punts. The punt coverage gave less than five yards per return and the defense held Northwest to a 13-yard return on the opening kickoff.

Former Bulldogs wide receiver Rich Mason, who graduated in 2006 and is now an assistant coach for Northwest, said the Bearcats physical play was what separated the teams Saturday.

"It's something we preach day in and day out is being physical," Mason said. "We feel like if we go out and play our best and just be really physical we can hang with just about any team in the country."

The Bulldogs will attempt to get back on track this Saturday as they travel to Hays, Kan., to play Tigers (2-2).

"We have to come out and do something differently," Currier said. "We have to get busy. We have to come out to work."

## Special teams provides bright spot

**Kleckner, Masucci have been consistently strong compared to rest of squad**

BY JACK NICHOLL  
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While the Bulldogs were showing how much work they have to do to win the Ol' Hickory Stick game, they also might have found strength in an unexpected aspect of the team.

For the third straight game, the special teams continued to be solid. In Saturday's 49-0 loss against Northwest Missouri State University, special teams might have been the only positive from the game.

"The thing we did was we covered punts well, and we covered that one kick [off] well," head coach Shannon Currier said.

Northwest averaged just 4.8 yards a punt return and returned the opening kickoff, which was Truman's only kickoff of the game, only 13 yards to the 16.

The Bulldogs' punt return defense has been consistent all season, allowing only 4.8 yards a return and a long of 12 yards in a span of 11 returns, with one fair catch. Last season, opponents averaged 6.9 yards per return against the Bulldogs.

The strength of the punt game starts with freshman Max Kleckner, who is averaging 35.0 yards a punt and a net average of 32.3, both better than the Bulldogs' average in 2007. He also has pinned opponents

inside the red zone five times.

Kleckner has performed well despite having to adjust to multiple bad punt snaps.

"I work on it every day, like just catching bad snaps that bounce to me and then punting them off," Kleckner said. "You've got to hurry up because you only have [about 2.2] seconds to punt the ball."

Even when Kleckner was unable to handle a snap against Northwest, he made the best of the situation. Down 14-0 in the second quarter, Kleckner attempted to run and punt at the same time, but a defender got to him first.

He threw a blind pass, which resulted in a Truman game-high 38-yard gain after freshman Adam Reynolds made the catch. Reynolds was the only eligible receiver in the area.

"I was hoping that it would be incomplete so they would get the ball at the 15 instead of the two yard line, or a safety, or whatever it was," Kleckner said. "... I was looking on the ground. I just threw it up in the air."

Currier said senior long snapper Mike Phillips started pressing in the middle of Saturday's game, which resulted in snaps that short-hopped Kleckner but that Phillips still has been a very good long snapper.

"A lot of times when you have a little bit of a rut, it's kind of a psychological thing," Currier said. "So I guess we need to get our players to play one play at a time, and if there's a bad play, then to forget

about it and focus on the next one."

The strength of the punting game hasn't just been from the kicking side. In the third quarter against the University of Central Missouri on Sept. 13, with the Bulldog offense struggling to put points on the board, junior Eric Sternberg broke free for a punt block. Sophomore Anton Bernard returned the ball 43 yards for a touchdown.

"We called one of our blocks, and all game I had just been dropping back and I guess, I don't know, they thought I was going to drop back again," Sternberg said after the game. "I ran right by the center and I didn't get touched. It was pretty easy."

The blocked punt ignited the offense, which ended up scoring two touchdowns in the fourth quarter.

In Truman's win against Southern Arkansas University on Sept. 6, it was the kickoff return that starred for special teams. Although the 'Dogs only averaged 25.6 yards per return, two of the four returns set the Bulldogs up for excellent field position. They returned the opening kickoff to the Truman 48 yard line and they returned another kickoff to the SAU 47 yard line.

"We say every week whoever wins the special teams battle probably will win the game because it's such a huge shift in the field position battle," Sternberg said.

Senior kicker Mickey Masucci also has been solid, making 2-of-3 field goals, and he has been a perfect 8-for-8 on extra point attempts.

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Redshirt freshman Max Kleckner kicks one of his nine punts Saturday against Northwest. He is averaging 35 yards per punt this season.

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