Football falls 20-16 at Southern

Bulldogs score just nine points in four red zone opportunities

BY BRENT FOSTER
Assistant Sports Editor

For much of Saturday afternoon, Truman was in position to pick up its first conference victory.

But too many missed opportunities came back to haunt the Bulldogs, and Missouri Southern State University stopped the Bulldogs on two key fourth-quarter possessions to hold on for a 20-16 victory in Joplin.

The loss dropped Truman to 1-7 overall and 0-6 in the MIAA.

The Bulldogs trailed 20-16 early in the fourth quarter when they moved the ball to the Southern 8-yard line, before a plethora of miscues did them in. On second-and-goal from the 8-yard line, junior wide receiver Anthony Brown was flagged for offensive pass interference. On the following play, redshirt freshman offensive lineman Jason Ostrowski was called for holding, moving the ball back to the 32. Following a 7-yard completion, junior offensive lineman Shea Carr was flagged for a false start.

After the 30 penalty yards, the usually reliable senior kicker Mickey Masucci missed his third field goal of the game, coming up short on the 47 yard attempt.

The Bulldog defense gave the offense a chance to redeem itself. Truman got the ball back with 4:07 left, but did not pick up a first down. The 'Dogs elected to punt from their own 9-yard line with 2:38 left, and did not see the ball again. Southern picked up a first down on third-and-two, sending Truman to its sixth consecutive loss this season.

"Inside the 10-yard line and our lack of execution there was a big reason we were not able to win the football game," head coach Aaron Vlcko said. "There were certainly other plays throughout the game that could have resulted in some points for us, but ultimately when you get the ball inside the 10 as many times as we did we should have gotten more points on the board."

Truman's missed opportunities were not confined to the fourth quarter. The Bulldogs entered the red zone four times and came away with three field goals by Masucci.

All three of Masucci's missed field goals were made more difficult by Bulldog mistakes. After the defense forced Southern to go three-and-out on its first possession, the Bulldogs appeared to be in business at the Southern 23. But a bad snap cost the Bulldogs five yards, making Masucci's kick longer. His 43-yard attempt sailed wide right.

The Bulldogs missed another chance to take the lead later in the quarter. With the game still scoreless, Truman marched down to the Southern 12-yard line. But on third down the Bulldogs picked up a holding penalty, again making the field goal attempt more difficult. This time the kick went wide left.

"Great teams are able to overcome it, but we definitely do need to start [fixing] the mistakes we are making in the red zone and just start scoring when we need to," Mundwiller said. "We need to put the pedal to the metal and be able to punch it in when we are in the red zone."

Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Senior running back Phil Kenney tries to turn the corner earlier this season. The Bulldogs are 1-7 this season.

Truman ranks ninth in the MIAA with a 68 percent red zone scoring percentage. The Bulldogs have scored only nine touchdowns inside their opponent's 20-yard line, which is 10 less than the second closest team in the conference.

Truman's defense gave the offense plenty of chances and forced a season-high four turnovers. The four turnovers evened Truman's season turnover margin. The defense also sacked Southern quarterback Roland Thompson three times.

The loss put a damper on a big day from senior running back Vanness Emokpae. He finished with a career-high 150 yards on 17 carries and had 33 receiving yards. He scored the Bulldogs only touchdown with a three-yard run in the second quarter.

"We just weren't able to punch it in, looking back if we score a few times in the red zone we definitely come out on top in that game," Emokpae said.

Mundwiller became the fourth quarterback to start for the Bulldogs this season. Vlcko said redshirt freshman Taylor Breen will miss Saturday's game because of the injury he suffered in the Oct. 3 loss to University of Central Missouri and that starting junior quarterback Phil Davis is likely out while he recovers from a thumb injury. Vlcko said the battle this week will be between Mundwiller and redshirt freshman Caleb Roberts. Roberts started the Bulldogs 38-14 loss to Missouri Western State University on Oct. 10.

Mundwiller was not listed as a quarterback at the beginning of the season. He began the year as a defensive back and played the first seven games on defense this season, after being listed as a quarterback last season. Vlcko said Mundwiller made the switch back to quarterback after Breen's injury.

"Regardless who plays, we need to get more out of that guy," Vlcko said. "So I've challenged each one of those guys to step up their game and go out there and not really be afraid to make a mistake, go for it and let your natural skills and reaction skills take over and make some plays."

Truman continues its season Saturday against Emporia State University. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m. at Stokes Stadium. The Hornets are also 1-7 overall and 0-6 in the MIAA.

Emokpae has career day against Southern

Junior running back rushes for 150 yards in loss.

BY Brent Foster
Assistant Sports Editor

This time last season, junior running back Vanness Emokpae was watching the 2008 season tick away from the sidelines while he recovered from a torn ACL and MCL suffered during the season opener.

One year later, head coach Aaron Vlcko said Emokpae is back at full strength and as good as ever.

"He deserves the opportunities and the success he's had because he's worked so hard," Vlcko said. "I think that's something people sometimes don't recognize when you blow your knee out like he did. … It took him a while, but he's a better player now than he was a year ago."

Emokpae might have proved his coach right Saturday when he rushed for a career-high 150 yards and a touchdown. He also caught a pass for 30 yards during Truman's 20-16 loss to Missouri Southern State University. Emokpae's big day marked the first time this season a Bulldog had more than 100 yards rushing in a game and was the most rushing yards for a Bulldog since Jake Cunningham ran for 193 yards in a 2006 victory against University of Central Missouri.

As a team the Bulldogs rushed for 228 yards, the most since it gained 306 yards in a September 2007 victory against Missouri University of Science and Technology.

"I think we just went out there on Saturday and everybody who touched the ball as far as running backs go, we just decided we were going to run hard and the line was blocking well and everybody was taking the holes," Emokpae said. "It's something we've been trying to do all along, and we finally got it done."

Emokpae averaged nearly 10 yards per carry and broke a long run of 52 yards on a dive play in the second quarter, which set up the Bulldogs only touchdown. He took pressure off of sophomore quarterback Andy Mundwiller. The former defensive back made his first career start Saturday. Vlcko said that, because of the quarterback situation, he planned on Emokpae getting more carries. He also said the staff recognized during the game that Emokpae was carrying the ball well, increasing his load in the running game.

"It takes the pressure off everybody else on the team because you know you've got a guy that can make plays on the field,from catching to running, lined up at many different positions," Mundwiller said.

Vlcko said the offensive line had one of "its best game of the season," which was another reason the running game was so successful.

"They stepped up and just got after it," Vlcko said. "I think we play hard, but we played with just a little more aggressiveness up front which allowed us to pop through."

Prior to Emokpae's injury last season, former head coach Shannon Currier said he planned to use him in a receiver/back combo. Before this season started, Vlcko said that if Emokpae's knee recovery progressed, he would be used as a combination threat. He has progressed enough to allow the combination use, and Vlcko said Emokpae's ability to play multiple positions is valuable to the team because it forces defenses to place more emphasis on Emokpae, which should free up space for other players.

"I think it's certainly something that right now other defenses have to be prepared for where's No. 4," Vlcko said. "That certainly only helps some of our other players become more involved when defenses have to key on one player. We haven't really had that here for a couple years."

Emokpae leads the Bulldogs in rushing yards (332), yards per carry (7.1) and rushing touchdowns (three). He also leads the team with three touchdown receptions.

Emokpae's role in the offense this season has changed from week to week, Emokpae said it he's fine with being flexible in the offense and doesn't prefer running back or receiver more than the other.

"I just do whatever helps the team most," Emokpae said. "If it's running the ball then I run the ball. If it's playing receiver, then that's where I need to be."

The Emokpae factor

Vanness Emokpae became the first Bulldog to rush for more than 100 yards in a game this season when he ran for 150 yards Saturday against Missouri Southern State University.

Stats:

- Rushed for 150 yards and a touchdown on a **career-high** 17 carries Saturday.
- Leads the team with **332 rushing yards** and three rushing touchdowns.
- Averaging a team-high **7.1 yards per carry**.
- Bulldogs' **second leading receiver** with 16 catches and three touchdowns.

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