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Early showtime for Fresno St.

Bulldogs get opening night crack at WAC foe Nevada

By BRYANT-JON ANTEOLA
THE FRESNO BEE
Last Updated: September 1, 2006, 06:12:22 AM PDT

It's time to put that losing streak to rest. Avenge last year's loss against an opponent they were favored to beat — then and now. Get a head start in the Western Athletic Conference race.

The Fresno State Bulldogs can do it all in one shot — in front of another national television audience on ESPN.

The season opener: Fresno State vs. Nevada at 5 p.m. today at Bulldog Stadium.

It's Year 10 under coach Pat Hill, who has a team led by the Bulldogs' 2002 recruiting class that Hill originally praised as his best ever.

"We came in with the loudest bark," linebacker Dwayne Andrews said. "We want to leave with the biggest bite. This is our year to shine."



Fresno State running back and Pitman High graduate Anthony Harding, left, helps fellow running back Rich Owens stretch during practice Monday. Harding could see some action behind starter Dwayne Wright in the Bulldogs' season opener against Nevada today.

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It starts with Nevada, which a season ago upset Fresno State 38-35 in Reno. The loss was the Bulldogs' second during an infamous four-game losing streak that ended their season.

Win tonight, and Fresno State can put last season's meltdown to rest. The Bulldogs are favored by 11 points and are 11-2 in season openers at Bulldog Stadium.

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Lose, and Fresno State will have to count 295 days since it last won a game (27-7 against Boise State on Nov. 10, 2005).

Today's game marks the first time in school history that Fresno State begins its season with a WAC opponent. It's also the last chance for Fresno State's seniors to win their first WAC crown.

Half of the original 26-player signing class from 2002 remains, 11 are starters.

To name a few, there's Paul Williams and Joe Fernandez, perhaps the WAC's top receiving duo, and All-America candidate Kyle Young, entering his fourth season as the starting center and considered the WAC's top NFL prospect.

Marcus McCauley, a Jim Thorpe preseason watch list member, might have been paired with another shutdown corner if 2002 signing mate Richard Marshall had not left early for the NFL.

Fullback Roshon Vercher has been a key cog in the running game. And linebackers Andrews and Alan Goodwin have been consistent tacklers throughout.

"Our goal is to strengthen that bridge," Fernandez said. "So when we leave, it's in a better condition than what it was when we arrived. They have photos of past teams on the coaches' office walls. We have one more chance to have them hang our picture on the wall with 'WAC Champs' written under it. We have to finish what we started."

Nevada returns 15 starters from a team that finished as co-WAC champions with Boise State. The Wolf Pack is the WAC's only team to end its season with a bowl victory, defeating Central Florida 49-48 in overtime in the Hawaii Bowl.

Quarterback Jeff Rowe, a three-year starter, has been a handful for Fresno State to stop. Directing the unique "pistol" offense, Rowe completed 15 of 22 passes for 189 yards and a touchdown against Fresno State last season.

Balancing Nevada's attack is running back Robert Hubbard, whose last carry against the Bulldogs was a 27-yard run in which he intentionally kneeled at the 1-yard line rather than score.





Still need motivation, Fresno State?

"We haven't forgotten," Andrews said. "We want to get this season started on the right foot."

To do so, Fresno State will have to answer — or perhaps hide — some of its biggest questions going into the offseason.

The Bulldogs will be breaking in a new quarterback in sophomore Tom Brandstater, the former Turlock High star. Their most important player, running back Dwayne Wright, must show he can stay healthy after missing the past two seasons because of a knee injury.

"We're just playing forward," Hill said. "I don't think last year really has much to do with this year. This is 2006. It's a great opportunity to open the season."

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