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Jewell opponent comes from nowhere to playoffs

By Bill Richardson
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ALPINE, Texas — Deeper in the heart of Texas than most football players or teams would ever venture, Joe George has built Sul Ross State College into a small-college powerhouse.

In four years under George, Sul Ross State has compiled records of 4-6, 6-4, 9-1 and 9-0, and this year, the Lobos will make their first post-season football appearance in history. At noon today, Sul Ross will play William Jewell College, 9-1, in the quarterfinals of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Division II playoffs.

According to the NAIA, Sul Ross State has an 8-0 record. The NAIA regards the Lobos' victory over Nuevo Leon of Mexico as an exhibition game.

George says football talent is plentiful in Texas and there's enough to go around for Sul Ross and the four other members of the Texas Intercollegiate Athletic Association, a non-scholarship league.

"Evidently we've got the type program kids enjoy being in," George said. "Our major recruiting area is San Antonio, but we also get quite a few players from Houston, which is 11 hours from here by car, and from the Texas Valley."

The Lobos can't rely on getting players from towns close to Alpine. And for good reason, George explained.

"There is nowhere close to Alpine," he said.

Alpine, with a population of about 7,000, is characterized by its remoteness. It's situated in the Davis Mountains of South Texas, at the foot of the Rocky Mountain Range. There is no commercial airline service into Alpine. To reach the site of the game, the William Jewell team took a flight from Kansas City International to the Midland-Odessa airport and changed to chartered buses for a 140-mile drive to Alpine.

George takes a philosophical view of the remote locale.

"In Texas, we think nothing of driving 200 miles to get a cup of coffee," he said. "We play everybody in our conference home and away, and the shortest bus trip is six hours. It's nine hours to Austin College in Sherman, Texas."

The distance to the next level of football competition in Texas is also staggering. Sul Ross State, Austin, Tarleton State, McMurry and Lubbock Christian say they can't compete with the high-powered scholarship programs of the Lone Star Confer-

ence, a dominant force in National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II.

Southwest Texas State, the top team in the Lone Star Conference, is the NCAA Division II defending national champion and ranked No. 1 in the Division II poll.

George's team may not be powerful by Texas standards, but it's colorful by anybody's reckoning. The Lobos operate from a pro formation and like to pass.

"We don't mind throwing the ball from anywhere on the field," George said. "Our philosophy is that we are going to establish the passing game, then run according to what defense they will give us."

Pulling the trigger on the Sul Ross passing attack is quarterback Larry Hill, who has 156 completions in 259 attempts for 1,802 yards and 11 touchdowns. Hill ranked sixth in NAIA passing statistics.

Tailback Maurice Stephens ranks fifth in NAIA pass receptions with 56 for 643 yards and eight touchdowns. Sul Ross State ranks fifth nationally in NAIA team passing statistics.

The Lobos have five seniors on their defensive unit. Sul Ross, with an outstanding nose guard in David Wronsch, ranks 10th in the NAIA against the rush, one spot behind William Jewell.

George said of Jewell: "They look like a very physical team. Their players are bigger than ours. Their defense is very impressive. We haven't played against anybody as good as their defensive tackle (Guy) Weber."

"On offense their quarterback (Kelly Groom) is as good as any we've faced. Their backs (Steve Hodges and Scoop Gillespie) are pretty good runners. Their blockers are strong, and that receiver (Jimi) Reed looks like a good one. They're a different type of team than we're used to playing — much more physical."

Sul Ross State may have an ally in the home crowd. The stadium seats 5,500 and will be overflowing. George said tickets went on sale Tuesday morning and were all gone by that afternoon. The school is now selling standing-room only.

Other NAIA Division II playoff games today match St. John's (Minn.), 9-0, at Northwestern (Iowa), 11-0; Wilmington (Ohio), 8-1, at Westminster (Pa.), 8-1; and California Lutheran, 9-1, at Linfield (Ore.), 9-0. The semifinals are scheduled for Dec. 4 with sites to be determined. The Division II championship game will be Dec. 11 at a site to be determined.