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## Lumberjacks stun Wildcats early in lopsided rivalry victory

Nathan Ecker

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Redshirt junior cornerback AI As... against Weber State at Find  
Toyota Field, Nov 2.  
Jazelle Contreras

The third-annual Red Rock Rivalry was back at the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome on Saturday as the Lumberjacks stayed undefeated at home with a 27-6 victory against the Weber State University Wildcats.

NAU and Weber State entered the game jockeying for position in the middle of the Big Sky Conference standings. Fresh off their bye weeks, each team saw varied results on crisp legs. Defense stood out for the Lumberjacks as they held a team from scoring a touchdown for the

first time since Sept. 10, 2022 against **Sam Houston State University**.

Redshirt freshman quarterback Ty Pennington also continued his run of near perfect football, completing 18 of 21 passes while throwing for 212 yards and two touchdowns. He added 73 rushing yards to mix, which led the team.



Sophomore quarterback Ty Pennington (6) throws the ball to senior tight end Bryzai White (12) for a first down at the Big Sky Conference football game against Weber State on Findlay Toyota Field inside of the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, Nov. 2.

The Lumberjacks charged out of the gates like a Pamplona bull, scoring 21 points in less than seven minutes of game time. This effort was aided by a brick wall defense that forced two interceptions in as many Wildcat offensive plays.

Pennington opened up the scoring on the first play of action with a **75-yard rushing touchdown**, giving the Lumberjacks an early 7-0 lead following a successful point-after attempt. Pennington kept the ball on a fake handoff, drawing the Wildcat defense toward the left sideline and leaving an open gap in the line of scrimmage and wide open turf for the Oklahoma native.

NAU head coach Brian Wright commended strength coach Matt Summers as a reason why the team looked connected and strong in the first quarter, but also took a friendly jab at Pennington for his speed on the touchdown run.

“We might have to get back to some post-practice QB running though,” Wright said. “Ty looked tired at the end.”

Weber State’s offense was not as quick to turn on the jets during their first possession.

NAU senior cornerback **DJ VanHook** made sure of it, as his clutch plays continued following a game-sealing interception in the teams’ previous game against **Idaho State University**. VanHook swiped the football out of the air after batting it out of the hands of junior wide receiver Jayleen Record, putting the Lumberjacks offense in prime field position.

NAU took the field on offense after the interception and made steady progress over 28-yards to extend its lead to 14-0. This time it was junior defensive lineman **Tausagafou Ho Ching**, who was lined up at full back, hauling in a pass from Pennington on a 9-yard reception for the score. Ho Ching stood strong as the Weber State defender made a feeble effort at knocking down the 285lb pine tree of a player, only making enough of an impact to force Ho Ching to dive into the endzone to save the play.

Once again the Wildcats looked to get on track, but for the second defensive play in a row the Lumberjacks picked off sophomore quarterback Richie Muñoz, courtesy this time of redshirt junior defensive back **Mikale Greer**. Senior defensive lineman Chris Smith was a catalyst on the turnover, bringing intense pressure as an unblocked pass rusher from the right side of the line of scrimmage.





NAU's defense tries to block a field goal at the Big Sky Conference football game against Weber State on Findlay Toyota Field inside of the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, Nov. 2.

The Lumberjacks took full advantage of prime field possession after the interception. It took six plays and three minutes, 24 seconds of game time for **Pennington** to find the endzone with a 2-yard rushing touchdown, his second of the game.

After the first quarter NAU led 21-0.

Coach Wright said he was impressed with his team's ability to quickly take control after two weeks without a game, but understood that there is room to improve after a stagnant second and third quarter of play.

"Coming out of the tunnel to start the game as we did was critical, especially coming off of a bye week," Wright said. "We were anxious to get back out there, get back on the turf and get playing again. Our guys really showed that I think by how they executed. We have to understand and learn that the game is four quarters and more sometimes, so we just got to remain consistent throughout the course of that ball game."

Both offenses stalled in the second quarter with each team putting together just over 100 yards of offense.

Weber State was able to put points on the board in the form of a 39-yard field goal attempt off the foot of senior kicker Kyle Thompson late in the second quarter. It was their only points of the first half.

The Wildcats held the Lumberjacks to just two scoring opportunities in the second quarter and brought more pressure to Pennington in the backfield. Weber State recorded two first half sacks and held NAU to two of six on third down opportunities.

Both NAU scoring chances came on field goal chances from 48 and 49-yards that were denied from both human and inanimate forces. The 48-yard attempt was knocked out of the air by a leaping Jalon Rock, a junior cornerback out of Texas, while the 49-yard attempt hit the right side of the uprights as the final seconds of the second quarter ticked away.

At the half, NAU held a 21-3 lead over Weber State.





Junior linebacker Brandon Wong (35) and redshirt junior linebacker Quinlan Popham (48) both tackle the running back for Weber State at the Big Sky Conference football game against Weber State on Findlay Toyota Field inside of the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, Nov. 2.

The Lumberjacks continued to trend backwards in the third quarter, earning just 36 yards from scrimmage on a considerable difference in time of possession. Weber State controlled the ball for over nine minutes in the quarter, compared to NAU's five total minutes of possession.

Although drastic, Weber State's control of the ball resulted in just three more points in the quarter.

NAU eventually broke its funk three minutes into the fourth quarter.

With 20 yards to go in red zone territory, Pennington threw a lob into the right corner of the endzone where redshirt senior wide receiver **Ta'ir Brooks** pulled down the touchdown reception over man coverage. The scoring play ended what was the Lumberjacks longest scoring drive of the game at four minutes, 36 seconds split between the third and fourth quarter.

Pennington saw smooth connections with a majority of his receiving core, completing 11 total passes without a drop to his top three options in Brooks, redshirt junior wide receiver Kolbe Katsis and senior tight end Bryzai White. In a short time the group has grown a deep understanding of how to play with each other, a factor that Pennington said he believed grew over the bye week.

"It's just improved each week and we spent a lot of time in the bye week and this week just working on those one-on-one situations and that showed up today," Pennington said.

The Wildcats special team defense blocked the point after attempt with an echoing thud, but it was all for naught as NAU took a 27-6 lead.

Defense ultimately sealed the victory for the Lumberjacks as they forced a turnover on downs on each of the Wildcats final two offensive possessions. NAU held its opponent to 5-13 on third down chances and stopped the Wildcats short on all three fourth down opportunities.

Senior linebacker Tommy Ellis preached about the defensive connectivity that has grown since the new coaching regime took over in the offseason. For him, the Lumberjack's position in the rankings is the culmination of years of hard work, but now they understand the toughest battles are in front of them.



The Lumberjacks celebrate a victory against their rivals Weber State posing with the Red Rocks Rivalry Trophy at the Big Sky Conference football game against Weber State on Findlay Toyota Field inside of the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, Nov. 2.

“This is why we do it, this is what we work for,” Ellis said. “We’ve really stressed this sense of urgency this past week. These are playoffs games that we’re playing right now. To get where we want to go, we gotta keep winning these ones.”

With the victory NAU improved to 5-4 on the season, extended its winning streak to two, and now lead the Red Rock Rivalry series 2-1. The Lumberjacks now sit fifth in the Big Sky Conference standings, while the Wildcats fell to seventh following their third consecutive loss.

NAU will travel to San Luis Obispo, California for its next conference game against California Polytechnic State University on Nov. 9.

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