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THE BROOKINGS REGISTER | THURSDAY, JANUARY 4, 2024



The Road to Frisco: A game by game recap

BY ANDREW HOLTAN
The Register

South Dakota State went undefeated in the regular season for the first time in program history this season. Here's a game-by-game breakdown of the 14 victories heading into Sunday's National Championship.

Aug. 31 in Brookings ■ SDSU 45, Western Oregon 7

The Jackrabbits kicked off the 2023 season with a dominating win over Western Oregon. SDSU led 42-0 and the Wolves scored their lone touchdown late in the fourth quarter.

The win was highlighted by two interception returns for touchdowns. Colby Huerter had the first one in the first quarter and it was 54 yards. Tucker Large then took an interception 64 yards to the house early in the second quarter.

Sept. 9 in Brookings ■ SDSU 20, Montana State 16

This was the most thrilling game of the 2023 season for the Jacks. SDSU trailed 10-0 at halftime and then outscored the Bobcats 20-6 in the second half.

SDSU took a 13-10 lead early in the fourth quarter when Mark Gronowski found Zach Heins for a 16-yard score. Brendan Hall then kicked two field goals to put Montana State up 16-13 with just over two minutes to play.

Griffin Wilde would be the hero as he caught a screen pass and ran 35 yards to the end zone to give the Jacks a 20-16 lead with 1:30 to play. MSU's Sean Chambers would complete a 24-yard touchdown pass to Clevan Thomas Jr. with one second left, but after review the pass was ruled incomplete and the Jacks improved to 2-0.

Sept. 16 in Minneapolis at Target Field ■ SDSU 70, Drake 7

The Bulldogs scored the first touchdown of the game but SDSU then scored 70 unanswered

points. The Jacks led 35-7 at halftime and then scored 35 more points in the second half.

Backup quarterback Chase Mason and third string running back Angel Johnson capped off the win with touchdown runs of 69 and 66 yards, respectively. Mark Gronowski had five touchdown passes and one touchdown run in the win.

It was the largest margin of victory for SDSU since 2016 when it beat Arkansas-Pine Bluff 90-6.

Sept. 30 in Brookings ■ SDSU 42, North Dakota 21

The Jacks led 21-7 at halftime and extended the lead to 35-7 early in the fourth quarter. SDSU ran for 266 yards as a team. Isaiah Davis led the way with 132 yards and three touchdowns on 16 carries. Angel Johnson had a 50-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter.

Oct. 7 in Normal, Ill. ■ SDSU 40, Illinois State 21

The Jacks jumped out to a 27-7 lead and didn't look back. Jaxon and Jadon Janke got things started with touchdown catches in the first quarter. Jadon's was 31 yards and Jaxon's was 60 yards. Jadon also had a 22-yard touchdown in the second quarter.

Mark Gronowski was 11-of-17 for 171 yards and three touchdowns. Isaiah Davis had 197 yards and two touchdowns.

Oct. 14 in Brookings ■ SDSU 41, Northern Iowa

The Jacks exercised some Hobo Day demons this year as they took it to the Panthers, who had beaten SDSU three-straight times on homecoming.

SDSU led 24-3 at halftime and stretched that lead to 41-3 early in the fourth quarter. Mark Gronowski threw for three touchdowns and ran in a touchdown as well. He had 291 yards passing and 30 yards rushing.

Oct. 21 in Carbondale, Ill. ■ SDSU 17, Southern Illinois 10

This was the closest confer-

ence game for the Jacks this season. SDSU led 7-0 at halftime and the lone touchdown was a three-yard run from Isaiah Davis. Mark Gronowski then found Griffin Wilde for a 49-yard score to make it 14-0 early in the second half.

SIU cut the lead to 14-7 with 12 minutes left in the fourth but a Hunter Dustman field goal put the game out of reach with 2:41 to play.

Oct. 28 in Vermillion ■ SDSU 37, South Dakota 3

In what was dubbed the biggest game in the in-state rivalry's history, the Jacks took care of business and dominated the Coyotes. USD scored on its first possession and SDSU then scored the final 37 points of the game. The Jacks led 17-3 at halftime and added insult to injury in the second half.

SDSU ran for 266 yards as a team. Amar Johnson had 66 yards and two touchdowns. Angel Johnson had 52 yards and a touchdown.

Nov. 4 in Brookings ■ SDSU 33, North Dakota State 16

NDSU led 9-7 with 10 minutes left in the first half but the Jacks then scored 23 straight points to beat the Bison for a fifth straight time and retain the Dakota Marker.

Mark Gronowski hit Jadon Janke for touchdowns of 46 and seven yards. He threw for 213 yards on the day and Jadon Janke had 89 yards receiving. Isaiah Davis ran for 106 yards and a touchdown.

Nov. 11 in Youngstown ■ SDSU 34, Youngstown State 0

The Jackrabbits picked up their first shutout win of the season against the Penguins. SDSU led 20-0 at halftime and extended that lead to 27-0 with a 56-yard pass from Mark Gronowski to Jadon Janke.



Kevin Maiers/portraitmemories.net

South Dakota State's Griffin Wilde runs towards the end zone during a 20-16 win over Montana State on Sept. 9 at Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium in Brookings.



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Mark Gronowski throws the ball during a 70-7 win over Drake at Target Field in Minneapolis on Sept. 16.



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Jadon Janke runs away from a North Dakota State defender during a 33-16 victory on Nov. 4 in Brookings.

Continued on Page 4



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CHAMPIONSHIP BOUND: Jackrabbits heading back to Frisco

Continued from Page 2

Gronowski threw for 295 yards and three touchdowns. Jadon Janke had 166 yards and two touchdowns on seven catches, which was at the time a career-high. Isaiah Davis had 130 yards and a touchdown on 19 carries.

Nov. 18 in Brookings ■ SDSU 35, Missouri State 17

The Jacks took care of the business in the final regular season game and finished the first perfect regular season in school history.

SDSU led 21-3 at halftime. MSU scored the first touchdown of the second half but the Jacks then scored back-to-back touchdowns to push the lead to 35-10 and that put the game out of reach.

Mark Gronowski threw for 293 yards and had two passing touchdowns and a rushing touchdown. Jadon Janke set another career-high with 187 yards receiving and one touchdown. Isaiah Davis had 85 yards and a score and Amar Johnson had a rushing touchdown as well.

FCS Playoffs Second Round

Dec. 2 in Brookings ■ SDSU 41, Mercer 0

It was total domination from the Jacks in their first playoff game in the season. They led 24-0 and didn't slow down in the second half. Angel Johnson put an exclamation point on the victory with an 80-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter.

SDSU outgained Mercer 571-151. The Jacks had 346 yards on the ground and Isaiah Davis led the way with 117 yards and three touchdowns. Amar Johnson had 107 yards. Jaxon Janke had 106 yards receiving and

a touchdown.

FCS Playoffs Quarterfinals Dec. 9 in Brookings ■ SDSU 23, Villanova 12

SDSU struggled in the first half, leading just 10-9 at halftime, but the Jacks turned it on in the second half. It was tough weather conditions as there were over 40 miles per hour wind gusts.

There were two momentum shifting plays in the game. The Jacks trailed 6-3 with 4:23 left in the second quarter and Matthew Durrance blocked a punt and picked up the ball and ran 45 yards to the end zone to give SDSU a halftime lead. SDSU then led 17-12 in the fourth quarter and Isaiah Davis ran 66 yards to the end zone and that put the game away.

Davis ran for 192 yards on 27 carries. Jaxon Janke had two catches for 22 yards and a touchdown.

FCS Playoffs Semifinals Dec. 15 in Brookings ■ SDSU 59, UAlbany 0

Once again it was all SDSU in the playoffs as the Jackrabbits put together the largest shutout ever in the FCS semifinals and booked a trip back to Frisco.

The Jacks scored in all three phases of the game as Tucker Large had a 79-yard punt return for a touchdown and Jason Freeman had a 34-yard fumble recovery for a touchdown. Chase Mason also threw a 71-yard touchdown pass to Griffin Wilde.

SDSU had 556 total yards of offense. Mark Gronowski had 265 yards and three touchdowns through the air. Jadon Janke had 151 yards and a touchdown. Zach Heins had four catches for 50 yards and two touchdowns. Isaiah Davis had 107 yards and two touchdowns on the ground.



Chris Schad/Register

South Dakota State's Jaxon Janke dives towards the pylon during a 35-17 victory over Missouri State on Nov. 18 at Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium in Brookings. SDSU is 14-0 and will play Montana State in the National Championship on Jan. 7.



Chris Schad/Register

South Dakota State's Tucker Large jogs into the end zone during a punt return against UAlbany in the semifinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 15. The Jackrabbits won 59-0 and play Montana in the championship on Jan. 7 in Frisco, Texas.

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6 times SDSU's 28-game win streak was in jeopardy



Chris Schaad/Register

South Dakota State's Isaiah Stalbird hoists the Dakota Marker trophy after SDSU beat North Dakota State 23-21 in Fargo on Oct. 15, 2022. The Jackrabbits outscored the Bison 16-0 in the second half.



Courtesy Photo

South Dakota State's Malik Lofton intercepts the ball in the end zone during a 49-35 victory over North Dakota on Oct. 22 in Grand Forks. The Jackrabbits trailed the Fighting Hawks 21-7 in the second quarter.

By CHRIS SCHAD
The Register

BROOKINGS – While South Dakota State will be looking for its second straight national championship against Montana on Jan. 7, it will already enter Frisco with an impressive streak under its belt.

The Jackrabbits have won 28 straight games dating back to last year's season-opening loss to the Iowa Hawkeyes and haven't lost a Football Championship Subdivision game since falling to Montana State in the national semifinals on Dec. 18, 2021.

Like any streak, there have been times when it looked like SDSU could be in trouble, but they've been able to come out on top. Here's a look at some of the most notable times the streak was in danger and how the Jacks managed to keep it alive.

Oct. 15, 2022

■ SDSU 23, North Dakota State 21

The Jacks had earned back-to-back victories over the Bison in the Dakota Marker rivalry coming into this game but a comeback win in the FARGODOME established them as the team to beat in the FCS.

NDSU got on the board early on a 22-yard touchdown pass from Cam Miller to DJ Hart and the Jacks answered with a 24-yard touchdown run from Isaiah Davis. Ward put NDSU back in front with a six-yard touchdown run with 3:02 left in the first quarter and a 30-yard touchdown pass from Miller to Hunter Luepke put the Bison up 21-7 with 11:08 left in the second quarter.

The Bison were poised to add to the lead when Miller connected with Braylon Henderson for a 41-yard gain late in the second quarter but Miller was flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct for a "bow-and-arrow" celebration toward the Jacks' bench. Two plays later, Colby Huerter intercepted a halfback pass from

Cole Payton and it served as a turning point in the game.

Although Davis left the game due to injury in the second half, Amar Johnson carried the running game with 89 yards and a 16-yard touchdown run in the third quarter and Hunter Dustman knocked down three field goals including a go-ahead 18-yard field goal with 3:49 to go to help SDSU complete the comeback.

Oct. 22, 2022

■ SDSU 49, North Dakota 35

One week after the Jacks came from behind to beat the Bison, SDSU found itself in a similar hole at the Alerus Center.

The Fighting Hawks came out of the gate on fire as Tommy Schuster connected with Bo Belquist for a 10-yard touchdown pass on the opening drive of the game. Bellquist made another big play with a 61-yard punt return that set up Quincy Vaughn's one-yard touchdown run to put UND up 14-0 with 8:06 left in the first quarter.

The Hawks were coming back for more after getting another stop on the Jacks' second drive of the game but DyShawn Gales brought momentum back to the Jacks with a 31-yard pick-six that put SDSU on the board with 4:20 left in the first quarter.

Although Tyler Hoosman made it a 21-7 game with a two-yard touchdown run in the second quarter, Mark Gronowski caught fire, throwing a 32-yard touchdown pass to Tucker Kraft just before half-time and a 10-yard touchdown pass to Jaxon Janke with 11:48 left in the third quarter.

Gronowski continued to lead the Jacks with five total touchdowns in the game, hitting Zach Heins for a two-yard touchdown pass that gave SDSU a 28-21 lead with 7:11 left in the third quarter and running in a pair of touchdowns to build a 41-21 lead early in the fourth quarter.

Continued on Page 8



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JUST KEEP WINNING: SDSU avoids win streak ending



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Isaiah Davis celebrates in the end zone during a 42-21 win over Holy Cross in the quarterfinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 10, 2022 at Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium in Brookings.



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's DyShawn Gales tackles Montana State quarterback Tommy Mellot during a 20-16 Jackrabbit victory on Sept. 9 in Brookings.



Dave Eggen/Inertia

South Dakota State's Matthew Durrance blocks a punt during a 23-12 win over Villanova in the quarterfinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 9 in Brookings. Durrance scored on the play.

Continued from Page 6

Although UND added a pair of touchdowns to make things interesting Amar Johnson slammed the door with a one-yard touchdown run.

Dec. 10, 2022

■ SDSU 42, Holy Cross 21

The score may not indicate it but the Crusaders brought it to the Jacks in last year's FCS quarterfinal matchup.

Matthew Sluka was a problem for SDSU all afternoon, running for 213 yards including a 56-yard touchdown run that put Holy Cross on the board in the first quarter but Dustman kicked a pair of field goals to make it 7-6 in favor of the Crusaders at the end of the first quarter.

Bob Chesney dove into his bag for a 27-yard fake punt pass from Tyler Purdy to Sean Morris to put the Crusaders up 14-6 with 9:10 left in the second quarter but it would be the last time they would hold the lead after Davis tied the game with a three-yard touchdown run and a two-point conversion to tie the game at 14-14.

Jason Freeman's 37-yard pick-six gave the Jacks a 21-14 lead at the half but the Crusaders stuck around with a one-yard touchdown run by Peter Oliver that sent the game into the fourth quarter tied at 21.

This is where SDSU pulled away, using an 18-yard touchdown pass from Gronowski to Jaxon Janke on a nine-play, 78-yard drive to open the fourth quarter. Gronowski added to the lead with an 18-yard touchdown run with 2:39 left in the game and added a 21-yard touchdown pass to Jadon Janke with 39 seconds left to close the game.

Sept. 9, 2023

■ SDSU 20, Montana State 16

Coming off their first national title in school history, the Jacks hosted the Bobcats in what was a rematch of the past two national semifinal matchups.

Although the teams split the previous two meetings, Montana State came out with a purpose, using a Sean Chambers two-yard touchdown run and a Brendan Hall 27-yard field goal for a 10-0 halftime lead.

The Jacks responded with a seven-play, 75-yard drive that ended with a 20-yard touchdown run by Gronowski and SDSU took the lead on a 16-yard touchdown pass from Gronowski to Heins that ended an 11-play, 95-yard drive with 14:15 left in the fourth quarter.

The Bobcats blocked a punt and had a separate drive that led them deep into SDSU territory but a pair of goal line stands forced MSU to a pair of Hall field goals to take a 16-13 lead with 2:04 to play.

SDSU responded two plays later with a 35-yard screen pass from Gronowski to Griffin Wilde that went for a go-ahead touchdown but Montana State still had life. Although Chambers appeared to throw the game-winning touchdown at the final horn, the play was overturned via replay review and the Jacks extended their winning streak to 16 games.

Oct. 21, 2023

■ SDSU 17, Southern Illinois 10

There weren't many tense moments as SDSU claimed its second straight outright Missouri Valley Football Conference championship but the Salukis did their best during an October matchup in Carbondale.

The Jacks' offense was

held scoreless in the first quarter until Davis scored on a three-yard run to put SDSU up 7-0 with 3:38 left until half-time. Gronowski hit Wilde on a 49-yard pass before half-time but SDSU could never pull away thanks to a SIU defense that held the Jacks to 308 total yards of offense.

Nic Baker's 24-yard touchdown pass from D'Ante Cox with 12:07 to play made things interesting but SDSU ripped off a 15-play, 60-yard drive that included a key scramble on 3rd and 7 that led to a 44-yard field goal by Dustman to put the game away.

Dec. 9, 2023

■ SDSU 23, Villanova 12

The final tense moment in the streak came a few weeks ago as the Jacks hosted Villanova in an FCS quarterfinal matchup. With the wind gusting through Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium, SDSU took the lead on a 42-yard field goal by Dustman on the opening drive before Jalen Jackson gave Villanova the lead on a 25-yard touchdown run with 7:55 left in the second quarter.

Grahm Goering muffed the ensuing kickoff to pin the Jacks to their own three-yard line and Villanova used the field position and the wind at their back to drive into SDSU territory. With a 3rd-and-3 at the SDSU 34, a delay of game penalty and a sack by Quinton Hicks forced the Wildcats to punt which led to Matthew Durrance blocking and returning a punt 45 yards for a touchdown to give SDSU the lead.

Gronowski hit Jaxon Janke for a 20-yard touchdown to break the game open in the third quarter and Davis ran for 192 yards and a touchdown to extend SDSU's streak to 27 games.




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Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Isaiah Davis runs the ball during a 42-21 win over North Dakota on Sept. 30 at Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium in Brookings.



Chris Schad/Register

Quinton Hicks (48) celebrates with teammates after sacking Villanova's quarterback during a 23-12 victory in the quarterfinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 9 in Brookings.

5 key matchups for SDSU against Montana

By **CHRIS SCHAD**
The Register

BROOKINGS – South Dakota State is looking for its second straight national title but Saturday's matchup with Montana will have plenty of games within the game.

The Jackrabbits will need to manage these matchups as much as possible to come away with a win over the Grizzlies and here's a look at some of the key components that could decide this year's national champion.

Montana's Junior Bergen vs. SDSU's Tucker Large

Bergen and Large will be on the field together when Montana's offense matches up with SDSU's defense, but the bigger matchup could come on special teams where both players have become electric punt returners.

Large is averaging 18.8 yards per punt return this season and ripped off a 79-yard return for a touchdown in SDSU's semifinal win over UAlbany. Bergen has also thrived returning punts averaging 15.6 yards per return with three touchdowns this season.

Bergen's success has grown during Montana's run to Frisco,

returning a punt and a kickoff for a touchdown in the Grizzlies' quarterfinal win over Furman and returning another punt for a touchdown during a semifinal win over North Dakota State.

While both players could make an impact in a traditional sense, they could also swing the game if either player manages to rip off a long return.

SDSU's defensive line vs. Montana's offensive line

The Jacks' defensive line has been stout all season long but you wouldn't be able to tell by looking at their sack numbers. SDSU ranks 77th in the nation with 1.71 sacks per game this season but they've collected five sacks over their three playoff games.

Quinton Hicks has been a catalyst for that production with 2.5 sacks in SDSU's past two games, but they'll face a different challenge against a Montana offensive line that ranks 10th with just 0.92 sacks per game allowed.

Another challenge for the Jacks' defensive line will be stopping Montana's rushing attack, which features three players with over 600 yards rushing and eight touchdowns this season. With the

Grizzlies ranking 21st with 186.1 rushing yards per game, the Jacks' elite run defense, which ranks second with 92.6 yards allowed per game, will have its hands full in Frisco.

Montana's red zone defense vs. SDSU's red zone offense

SDSU's efficiency in the red zone has been near perfect this season, scoring on 52 of their 54 drives inside the 20. But it's been their ability to finish drives with touchdowns that have made the difference.

The Jacks have scored 47 touchdowns after entering the red zone, which accounts for 90.3 percent of their red zone scores and 87 percent of their trips to the red zone this season.

SDSU's efficiency will be put to the test against a Montana defense that is 21st in the nation with a 74.3 percent scoring rate inside the red zone this season but also goes both ways.

The Jacks have done a tremendous job of keeping their opponents off the board when they enter the red zone with a nation-leading 59.4 percent scoring rate allowed inside the 20 this season.

While SDSU will have their opportunities, they'll have to contin-

ue cashing in against the Grizzlies.

Montana's passing attack vs. SDSU's secondary

We talked a little bit about Bergen's ability to wreck the game with the ball in his hands but it's not the only weapon the Grizzlies will be bringing to Frisco.

Fellow top receiver Keelan White has been a downfield threat for Montana, catching 50 passes for 779 yards and four touchdowns this season. With Aaron Fontes catching 41 passes for 541 yards and five touchdowns, it's helped dual threat Clifton McDowell command the offense with 1,861 yards, 13 touchdowns and three interceptions.

SDSU has done a tremendous job containing opposing passing attacks in their run through the playoffs holding Mercer's Carter Peevy to 75 yards and two interceptions in the second round, Villanova's Carter Watkins to 74 yards and an interception in the quarterfinals and UAlbany's Reese Poffenbarger to 232 yards and three interceptions in the semifinals.

With all three times attempting to throw their way out of big deficits, the Jacks' secondary has been impressive throughout the season and have to continue its dominance

on Saturday.

SDSU's Isaiah Davis vs. Montana's defense

Davis has been so dominant during the playoffs, his "Playoff Zay" nickname has almost faded into a secondary storyline coming into the national championship game.

Davis has ran for 1,893 yards and 19 touchdowns in 14 career playoff games and already has two massive games in Frisco under his belt. Davis ran 14 times for 178 yards and three touchdowns against Sam Houston State in the 2020 spring championship game and carried the ball 22 times for 103 yards and a touchdown against NDSU in last year's championship game.

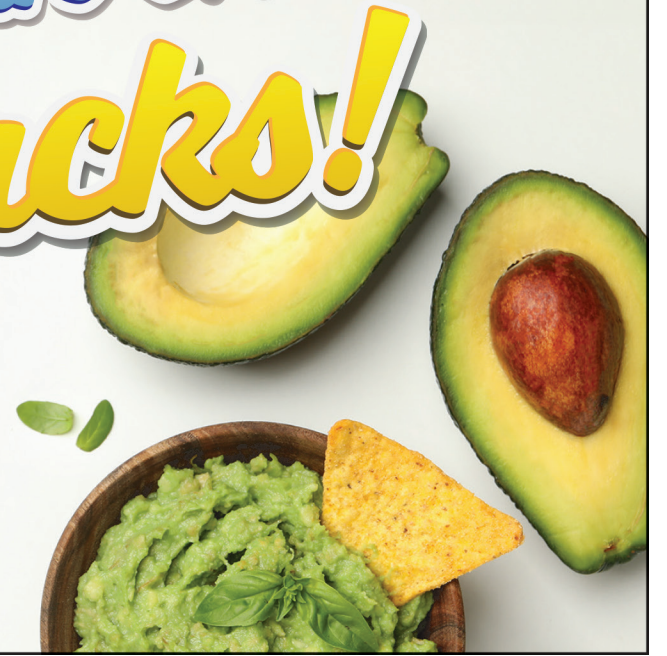
Montana ranks 12th in the nation with 102.8 rushing yards allowed per game but Davis could be their biggest threat. With 1,491 yards and 17 touchdowns this season, Davis is one of the biggest problems on an SDSU offense that also includes Mark Gronowski, Jaden and Jaxon Janke and Zach Heins in the passing game.

If Davis can continue his playoff success, the Jacks should be able to run their way to another national title.

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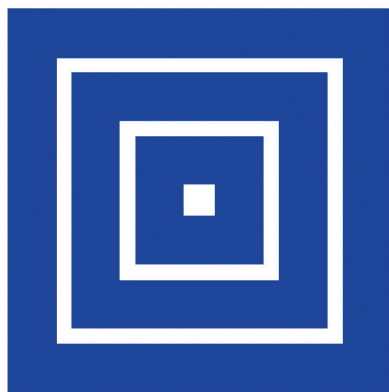
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Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Jimmy Rogers and players prepare to take the field before a game against Villanova in the quarterfinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 9. The Jackrabbit senior class will be playing in its final game on Sunday as the Jackrabbits play Montana in the championship game at Toyota Stadium in Frisco, Texas at 1 p.m.

One Last Game: Jackrabbit senior class leaves impact on the program

By **ANDREW HOLTAN**
The Register

BROOKINGS – When South Dakota State takes the field at Toyota Stadium in Frisco, Texas on Sunday it will be the final game for many of its starting players.

18 of SDSU's 22 starters are seniors and while a few players have another year of eligibility, many of them will be putting on the yellow and blue for the final time. The group of seniors helped win the program's first

national championship last season and will look to go back-to-back on Sunday when they take on Montana.

The senior class has helped the Jackrabbits win 28-straight games, which is the third longest win streak in FCS history.

"I think what they've done is incredible," said SDSU head coach Jimmy Rogers. "This will be the winningest senior group in school history."

It's a senior group that has worked hard to get to where

they're at. This was the 11th consecutive season that SDSU has made the playoffs but it wasn't until this group came along that the Jacks got over the hump in the postseason.

SDSU had made the semifinals in 2017 and 2018, but came up short in making the championship game. The Jacks finally broke through in the 2021 spring season and made the championship but fell to Sam Houston State in the title game.

They would make their way back to Frisco a year and a half

later and this time finished at the top of the mountain as they dismantled hated rival North Dakota State.

Rogers was a part of the first team that played Division I football at SDSU and played in the Jacks' first ever FCS playoff game. He said becoming an FCS power was something he set out to do when he played linebacker for the Jacks in the late 2000's.

"I envisioned being the best team in the country when I committed here. Does it take time? It took years of heartache

and a consistent effort and will and finding the right kids who want to compete day-in-and-day-out, we have that," Rogers said.

He added that it's special to be the one coaching the Jacks in the championship almost 20 years after they made the jump to Division I and the senior class deserves to keep the win streak alive and finish as two-time

Continued on Page 16

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LEAVING A LEGACY: SDSU seniors hope to go out on top

Continued from Page 14

national champions.
 "This means the world to me. It's been years in the making. It's not just this one team because a team year-to-year is an accumulation of years that they've put into this already. This senior class is special because of the years of work that has gone into this. It means the world to me to lead this senior class. It's one last game and we need to finish on the right note," Rogers said.
 When you talk to SDSU players and coaches they bring up culture a lot. Nothing showed that culture more than the offseason after the Jacks won the national championship. Many FCS players have taken the opportunity that the transfer portal has given them and moved up to the FBS level. Not the SDSU players. They all

decided to come back for a final season.
 "I think the grass isn't always greener on the other side," SDSU sixth-year offensive lineman Mason McCormick said. "You see a lot of these guys go into the portal and a lot of them go to be a depth guy and a bigger level. There's a ton of reasons [that we came back]. The community of Brookings is amazing, our coaching staff is great, our facilities are great and just the brotherhood that we have with each other, there's nothing like it. To take your chances in the portal to see if there's something better, I don't think that's something that somebody in this program should risk, because I don't think there is a ton better."
 The brotherhood that McCormick talks about stems from the head coach. Rogers has

gone through ups and downs of being student-athlete at SDSU and wants to make sure the Jacks continue down the right path. He said the legacy that the seniors leave won't be because of all the wins they've stacked up, but the way they've led the rest of the team throughout their time at SDSU.
 "I talk about this all the time with the guys, leaving your legacy," Rogers said. "And that has nothing to do with wins and losses, it has to do with your individual approach to impacting other people around you. I don't know if we will see their legacy, and hopefully we don't. Hopefully nothing changes."
 "That's how you'll know if they left their mark because our team will remember the experiences and the connection and what made those players great

and will mimic that to have the same type of success. They have talent, but there's a lot of people with talent. It's about how you work day-in-day-out to be at your best and concur with moments in your life, to not surrender to complacency and be average. This group has it. I think it's rare, but I hope in years to come we don't drop a beat because of what these individuals have done for this football team."
 Many of the seniors have taken that lesson to heart. One of McCormick's teammates on the offensive line, sixth-year senior Garret Greenfield, said there's an accountability factor between the seniors to make sure everyone is working to improve.
 "It's very cool to have such a veteran led team. I think we set an example every day that last

year doesn't matter. We say it all the time, what's been done in the past doesn't have anything to do with the future. So, no matter what has happened, there's so many guys who take that seriously and show up and don't let anything factor into how hard they work and how much they push themselves to get better," Greenfield said.
 When this group of seniors take the field for the final time on Sunday, win or lose, McCormick wants to make sure that everyone takes in the final moment of representing SDSU football.
 "For me, and some other guys, you're just trying to soak it all in and live up the last moments the best you can and enjoy the last ride. I've had a heck of an experience here and I wouldn't trade it for anything," McCormick said.

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Chris Schad/Register

South Dakota State's Mark Gronowski celebrates in the fourth quarter of a 59-0 victory over UAlbany in the semifinals of the FCS Playoffs on Dec. 15 in Brookings.



Chris Schad/Register

South Dakota State's Quinton Hicks celebrates with a fan after the Jackrabbits' semifinal victory over UAlbany on Dec. 15 at Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium in Brookings.

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SDSU, Montana ready for big game with different kinds of experience

By **ANDREW HOLTAN**
The Register

South Dakota State and Montana both have experience heading into Sunday's FCS National Championship.

It's two different types of experience though. The Jackrabbits will be playing in their third national title game in the past four seasons. Montana will be playing in its eighth championship game, but the first one since 2009.

Grizzlies head coach Bobby Hauck took Montana to three title games in his first stint as head coach from 2003-09 and lost all three of those games.

This will be Jimmy Rogers' first national championship game as a head coach as this is his first season as the head man for the Jackrabbits. He was the defensive coordinator in the Jacks' two previous championship appearances. Rogers said he's thought a little bit about how much of an accomplishment it is to make the national championship in his first season but it's more about the players.

"I think it's a special moment to look at and reflect that it is my first year, but I didn't get into coaching to make things about myself. My emotions stem from the experience that our players have. I'm blessed to coach here and blessed to have this team in place," Rogers said.

He added that having been to Frisco before will help him and his team as they prepare to attempt to win back-to-back championships.

"I think the routine part is a big deal, just because I believe in routine and habits. I don't know

if it's an advantage, but we'll feel comfortable having been down there a couple of times," Rogers said.

The Jacks are a senior laden group as 18 of their 22 starters are seniors. All but one of SDSU's starters have played in a championship game with the lone player not having championship experience being freshman wide receiver Griffin Wilde.

This will be the third national championship for senior linebacker Adam Bock and he said there's definitely a benefit of having played in this game before.

"I think [being in Frisco last season] takes away the uncertainty of what it's like being down there, being down there a couple times. We know the schedule by now and are going to have a pretty similar schedule to last year, so it will definitely be nice," Bock said.

With having so many seniors, this will be the last game for many of them. Sixth-year offensive lineman Mason McCormick said he and a lot of his teammates are looking forward to taking in their final college football game.

"I think it's cool to soak it all in and take in the moment. We're blessed to be in this position and want to take it all in and absorb, for me and some other guys, our last hoorah," McCormick said.

One of the starters that isn't a senior is junior quarterback Mark Gronowski. Gronowski has started two national championship games but has only finished one. In the 2021 spring season Gronowski started the title game against Sam Houston State but was unable to

finish the game due to a knee injury that caused him to miss the whole 2021 fall season as well.

SDSU went on to lose that game to Sam Houston, but Gronowski got his chance at redemption last season as the Jacks returned to Frisco to take on North Dakota State. Gronowski made the most of his opportunity as he went 14-of-21 for 223 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. He also ran for 57 yards and had a 44-yard touchdown run that helped the Jacks win their first ever title.

Gronowski said he will always be excited for the opportunity to play in Frisco for a national championship.

"I think [having been to Frisco] takes away the big awe factor, and we tried to minimize that as much as possible [last season], but obviously when the fans are all there you're kind of in awe a little bit. This year we know what it's going to take and know who's going to be there. ... Personally, I don't feel any difference. I'm like a kid in a candy store. I'm so excited for this game and ready to go back down there," Gronowski said.

Having not been to the title game since 2009, no Montana players have any FCS championship game experience. Hauck said he thinks the Jacks will have an advantage with experience, but he thinks his team is ready for the moment.

"I think [SDSU] having been there a year ago, there's certainly some benefit to that. I think the experience of being down there and knowing the process and the venue, everything from knowing



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State's Mark Gronowski (right) and Mason McCormick (left) celebrate with the national championship trophy on Jan. 8, 2023.

where the locker room is and how the lead up to the game time's out, that's a benefit to those guys. We didn't have that, but we'll try to mitigate that as a lot of us have played [in a game] like this before," Hauck said.

One of the unique caveats of playing in the title game is there is three weeks between the semi-finals and championship game. Hauck said the lay off is good for teams because it allows them to have extra time to prepare and his coaching staff has been in situations like this before.

"One of the things about this game is, we've had the ability to not rush into our preparation. ... Our preparation will be better. We're working on the prep and a lot of coaches have coached teams and prepared them for bowl games and the preparation for this is very similar," Hauck said.

The Jackrabbits are certainly

used to the big game feel and the environment of Toyota Stadium for the national championship, but Montana is used to playing in front of large crowds and big time atmospheres. Montana had an average of just over 25,000 fans at home games this season and played in back-to-back overtime games to get to the championship. Hauck said the crazy environment and close games helped prepare his team for the moment they take the field on Sunday.

"We've played in a lot of big games over the past few seasons and I think a lot of games that we have played in have prepared us for this game. Even in recent weeks, we've played against highly ranked teams in huge games," Hauck said.

Whether it's experience in championship games with players or coaches, there's going to be a lot of people that will rise to the occasion in Frisco on Sunday.

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Discussing the Jackrabbits' bid for another national championship

BY CHRIS SCHAD & ANDREW HOLTAN
The Register

BROOKINGS – South Dakota State will look for its second straight national championship when it battles Montana in the FCS National Championship Game in Frisco, Texas on Jan. 7.

To preview this matchup, Register sports editors Chris Schad and Andrew Holtan sat down and discussed the big game and gave their final predictions to see who will walk out of Frisco as national champions.

Chris Schad: So the Jacks are going back to Frisco. I don't know about you, but I think Jackrabbits fans could have booked their accommodations in July and still wouldn't have had to worry about if they were going to make it. Was there ever a question in your mind that the Jacks were going to make it back to the national title game?

Andrew Holtan: I would say there was a question after that after the Montana State game. I thought they would win that game more convincingly and they won after a touchdown was overturned on the final play. But after that not really. I think going into the [South Dakota] game...that was kind of the game where you saw that the gap between SDSU and the rest of the field is significant.

CS: That game was pretty funny because SDSU didn't score in the first quarter and the Jacks scored 37 straight points and left them in the dust. But that Montana State game was honestly the biggest challenge they've had all year but it's not like they played bad teams. The Missouri Valley Football Conference had six playoff teams and SDSU beat all of them.

AH: Yeah they went on a streak where they beat six ranked teams in the MVFC and none of those games were even close. They've only won by less than 10 points in two of their games. It's like they're impossible to totally defeat.

CS: When you look at Montana, is there anything about the Grizzlies that concerns you going into this game?

AH: I would say it's going to be a battle of special teams and turnovers. If Montana can win those two phases of the game, they'll have a chance. I don't think they'll win the game because SDSU has only lost the turnover battle twice. One of those games was against Drake and they won 70-7. The other was Missouri State and they won 35-17. Montana is 10th in turnover margin, so that could play a factor.

CS: Looking at Montana's offense, I really like their skill position players. Clifton McDowell has been really good at quarterback and they have two really good receivers in Keelan White (50 catches, 779 yards, 4 TD) and Junior Bergen (55 catches, 766 yards, 5 TD). Their backfield has three guys with at least 600 rushing yards and eight touchdowns as well as Eli Gillman (187 carries, 950 yards, 12 TD) won the Jerry Rice Award as the nation's top freshman and Nick Ostmo (126 carries, 637 yards, 8 TD) has been solid as well. Their only issue is that they've been inconsistent in the playoffs and that's a problem against SDSU's defense.

AH: Yeah, especially in the Furman game. That should have been a game where if Furman is on the Jacks' level, that's a game where you win by three touchdowns instead of winning in overtime.

CS: The red zone matchup is another one that I'm interested in. Montana's defense is 21st in the nation holding opponents to a .743 scoring percentage in the red zone and the Jacks lead the nation with a .963 scoring percentage on offense. 43 of their 52 red zone scores are touchdowns, so if Montana can hold them to field goals, they might have a chance.

AH: That would be huge for



Andrew Holtan/Register

South Dakota State players line up to sing the "Yellow & Blue" after beating UAlbany 59-0 in the semifinals of the FCS Playoffs on Sept. 15 in Brookings. SDSU will play Montana on Jan. 7 at Toyota Stadium in Frisco, Texas and is looking to win its second-straight National Championship.

Montana but that's a hard thing to do. On the flip side, I don't think SDSU's red zone defense gets credit. They're No. 1 in the nation in scoring percentage (.594) and I feel like there's been countless times this year where a team gets inside the [five-yard line] and you think they're going to score a touchdown and instead, they get a field goal and it's a different game. It happened against Villanova when the Jacks were up 17-9. They held Villanova to a field goal and Isaiah Davis breaks a long run and that's all she wrote.

CS: What do you think the atmosphere is going to be like in Frisco?

AH: I think it's going to be a great atmosphere, but I think it will be about 60 percent Jackrabbit fans because like you said, a lot of people should have booked their trips before the allotted tickets came out. But Montana has a great fan base too so I think it will be just as good of an atmosphere as it was last year. That being said, what's your prediction for the

game?

CS: I think what really grabbed my attention coming in was the way they dominated UAlbany in the national semifinals. If they had won by two scores, it may have been a battle in Frisco. They're going to play a Montana who is also really good and its going to be a fun game. But the way SDSU took the field and how locked in they were with that energy in the crowd...it just felt like this team was destined to win a national title. If this game were in Missoula, the Grizzlies might have had a chance because that atmosphere is awesome but so many fans are going to travel down I-29, wind up in Frisco and have another day in the office. I think SDSU wins 42-10. That's not a slight to the Grizzlies, that's just how good the Jacks are.

AH: I think the other thing that people haven't talked about is the experience factor. This is the third time in the last four years the Jacks are going to Frisco and it's a totally different experience than your game-by-game scenario. You get

three weeks off and have the hype around your whole team going down there. Once you get down there, it's not like everything is focused on football. You have to do a whole media circus and some fan-fest stuff. Montana hasn't been there since 2009, so I think the fact that every one of these starters on SDSU has played in this game before, I think that leans very heavily toward the Jacks because it's not a normal experience. I'm going 37-17.

CS: If SDSU wins, does that make them a dynasty? Only five teams have won back-to-back national championships in FCS history, so I think they have to be up there.

AH: It's such a tough thing to do. NDSU is the measuring stick for winning nine titles in 11 years but I think this SDSU team would be one of the best teams of all time. I think they'd have to win another one in the next three years to be a dynasty, but we could look back 10 years from now and nobody would be upset.


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