

Wheeling Jesuit Over VMI

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LEXINGTON, V.A. - The Wheeling Jesuit Cardinals opened their spring season with a gritty 33-26 last-minute victory over the Virginia Military Institute on the road in Lexington, Virg.

The Cardinals had to shake off the rust following a long winter's break and battled an expectedly physical VMI side to take home their first victory of the split fall and spring season. The win brings the Cards combined season record to 6-1-1.

Going into the match, WJU Coach Eric Jerpe knew the Cardinals would have a fight on their hands in the Keydets.

"Credit to VMI, as expected, they were very fit and very physical. Like any Military school, they make their physical training a profession." Jerpe said, "I'm very proud of our resiliency today though. We made it hard for ourselves, but kept the pressure on for all 80 minutes."

Though both teams suffered handling errors, a result of the cold weather and break between seasons, it wouldn't take the Cardinals long to get on the scoreboard. After applying consistent pressure, WJU outside center Jamie Barlow received a flat pass in space and took advantage of the overlap in the defense to race in 20 meters untouched for the first try of the match, and the first of his two tries on the day.

VMI made it known they would not roll over in this match however. Fifteen minutes after Barlow got the Cardinals on the board, WJU found their backs against the VMI line with the Keydet's physically imposing group of forwards inching the ball forward. Though the Cardinal defense was stout, their line couldn't hold off the constant battery of phases VMI strung together, resulting in a Keydet try in the 15th minute, tying the game at seven-all.

Following the try, VMI kept applying pressure again with their forwards, and again, WJU found

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themselves deep in their own territory. WJU's Dante Walters was then shown a yellow carded for a high tackle, just meters off the line. The referee awarded VMI a Penalty try for the infringement, and gave the Keydets a 14-7 advantage.

Though the Cardinals were generally undersized across the board, what they lacked in heft they made up for in speed and agility. After two VMI tries, The Cards would come storming back when Peter Malcolm, a Junior All-American nominee, broke away with the ball on the blind side of a maul. Once free, Malcolm sprinted 20 meters for the try, palming off defenders left and right on his way. The conversion kick missed however, and VMI held the 14-12 lead with only minutes to play in the first half.

"I thought Peter had an excellent game." Said Jerpe. "He is dangerous with ball in hand, and a hard runner. His work rate is very high, and he always finds a way to fight past the gain line."

WJU then put a stamp on the match with a well worked try by Luke Titus. Titus, playing in his first match after tearing his Achilles in June of last year, split a seam in the defense and muscled his way in for a try from ten meters out as time expired in the first half. The Cardinals went into the break with boosted confidence, and a 19-14 lead.

After the break, it was VMI who got the first strike however, driving over for another strong try to re-take the lead 21-19. The Cardinals were starting to move the ball better across the field however, at the same time wearing down the Keydet defense.

Freshman Michael Fitzpatrick then made a clean break and laid an excellent grubber kick down for Jamie Barlow to chase. Barlow dove on the loose ball as it entered the try zone and the Cardinals re-took the lead 26 – 21 with twenty minutes remaining.

Again, VMI's fitness and physicality kept WJU from putting the match out of reach. The Keydets would score another try in the corner with only 10 minutes left that tied the game 26 – 26.

With time running down, the Cardinals kept VMI pinned deep in their own end with some good line breaks and tactical kicking. Forwards Max Lum, and Zach Reichenbach would earn some

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hard yards to get the ball within inches of the VMI line, when Freshman Dennis Diza picked the ball from the back of a ruck and dove over for the game winning try.

“I think it was a little sloppy at times today with our decision making and ball handling, but it’s still early in the season.” Said Coach Jerpe “I’m really looking forward to the rest of the season though. I think this group is skilled, and I look forward to seeing them develop.”

Wheeling Jesuit will continue their spring break tour when then square off against East Carolina University on Wednesday, March 6 in Greenville North Carolina. The will finish their tour of North Carolina in Charlotte when they will face Notre Dame College in the College Rugby exhibition match at the North Carolina High School tournament on March 9.

WJU will return to Wheeling on March 30th when they will face the Ohio University Bobcats.