Written by Pat Clifton
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For the second-straight year, Arkansas State ended the St. Mary's Gaels' season, and for the second-straight year, the Red Wolves needed some excellent defense to stifle a second-half St. Mary's comeback bid. Arkansas State opened with a 10-point run, ignited when center Dean Gericke corralled a long-range Zac Mizell kick for a try. Flyhalf Patrick Sullivan added the next five points with a conversion and penalty.

The Gaels responded with pressure and had a lineout deep inside ASU territory, but the Red Wolves stole the set piece. They then promptly returned the favor when a mounting attack was halted by a Gericke knock on. St. Mary's didn't let the second lease on possession go to waste, as Kingsley McGowan touched down the first Gael try and Max Heath converted -- 10-7.

St. Mary's threatened twice more, but a knock on and turn over at the ruck turned the Gaels back. With Arkansas State's defense chipping in on the effort, St. Mary's had turned the ball over three times in scoring positions.

Nardus Wessels, the Red Wolves' All-American hooker, picked up a yellow card, and after Jerry McInerney was binned just three minutes later, Arkansas State was down to 13 men.

The Gaels' scrum was superior all day, and the two-man advantage strengthened it. Joe Brophy became the benefactor of the tight five's good work when he dove in off of a five-meter scrum to give St. Mary's a 12-10 lead just before the halftime whistle.

Wessels would remain in the bin for the opening six minutes of the second half, and McInerney for nine, but the Red Wolves administered a gut-check at halftime.

“Our guys kind of rallied and attacked at halftime,” said Arkansas State coach Matt Huckaby. “We talked about even if we‘ve got nine on the field, we had to keep playing defensively and get after it.”

Arkansas State didn’t yield another point during the power play, leaving St. Mary's to feel as though another precious opportunity was lost.

“I really think when we had them two guys down, they’re on the canvas, foot on the neck, and we just couldn’t pivot our foot to take them out,” said St. Mary’s coach Tim O’Brien. “They did a great job, and we just were hovering slowly, and they built up good pressure tactically and territorially.”

Arkansas State put St. Mary’s on their heels while Wessels was still in the bin. After both he and McInerney returned, St. Mary’s committed a costly knock deep in their own end, setting up a 10-meter scrum from which Red Wolves No. 8 Shaun Potgieter scored the go-ahead try.

11 minutes later, Robert Hayslip extended the hosts' lead with a try, which after a Sullivan conversion, put Arkansas State up 22-12. St. Mary’s drove to within Arkansas State’s 22, but committed a penalty, wasting yet another scoring opportunity, and on the ensuing possession, Sullivan slotted a difficult penalty to push the Red Wolves lead to 13.

St. Mary’s rebutted with McGowan’s second try, but Wessels nullified it with one of his own, making Arkansas State 30-17 winners.

The Gaels squandered half a dozen golden scoring opportunities, and O’Brien was at a loss for an explanation.

“We didn’t make good use of the ball. We just wanted to stay inside and get after them and we did, and sometimes we’d ship it, and whether it was a back or a forward, we had these untimely errors,” he said.

“Many of their primo field position restarts came from our misplays; our scrum running left to right, we have a three-on-one and our first receiver dropped the ball. What are you going to do there? I guess it’s just one of those days.”

Luckily for the Gaels, there are many more days ahead of them, as 14 of 15 starters return next season.

The Red Wolves, however, are still living in the present, as they reach the inaugural semifinals of the College Premier Division, where they’ll face BYU, who pounded Navy 64-12 Saturday, May 13 at Infinity Park.

Arkansas State
Tries: Gericke, Potgieter, Hayslip, Wessels

Cons: Sullivan (2)
Pens: Sullivan (2)

St. Mary's
Tries: McGowan (2), Brophy
Cons: Heath