

fcs week #4: turn your head & cough



for the first time since 2021, a fcs game has been cancelled due to fear of an outbreak of illness, and this time, it was not covid related. a player on portland state was diagnosed with whooping cough, which is a highly contagious lung infection. whooping cough is usually associated with very young infants, but as tdap vaccinations have dropped, it has begun to present itself more regularly in older children and young adults. though only one player tested positive for the disease, several others began expressing symptoms, leading the vikings to believe the infection was already far more widespread. their proactive decision to cancel the game was not met with applause from south dakota ad jon schemmel, who was not subtle in airing grievances. in fairness to schemmel, the vikings were aware of the issue and made their decision on thursday night but did not inform the visiting coyotes until they flew into portland the following day. that left schemmel's team with a big expense and trapped in a hotel all weekend with nothing better to do than take to social media.

cancellations for something other than weather are pretty rare but they have had playoff repercussions. just last season, the murder of a northwestern state player caused the demons to cancel the remainder of their season, which left incarnate word 1 win short of a playoff bid. infamously, both southeastern louisiana and southern illinois appeared to fall 1 win short of a playoff bid in 2021 due to multiple covid cancellations, when the teams decided to squeeze in an impromptu match against each other on the eve of the selection show. that planned worked, with southern illinois claiming both a win and the final at-large bid. for south dakota, a team with very serious playoff ambitions this season but a difficult schedule ahead, the trip to the not-quite-so-competitive vikings was likely one win they were hoping to have claimed early on.

this was the last game of the mo valley - big sky challenge. this pairing of teams out-of-conference was envisioned as giving both elite conferences some additional credibility when it was time to select the playoff field. it has been so one-sided by the mo valley since its inception 7 years ago that few believe it will be renewed.

sidelines

- it has been a wild start for the socon. mercer gutted out a single td game over chattanooga to give the bears an early lead. western carolina scored 2 tds in the final 4 minutes for a comeback win over elon. one of those came on a blocked fg attempt. the upset cuts into the caa's recent dominance over the socon.
- united champ austin peay surrendered 4 straight tds to end a blowout loss to central arkansas and essentially turnover control of the conference. the governors are still winless, and the last time they made it this deep into a full season without a "w" was 8 years ago when they finished 0 - 11.

- vengeance in the air? last weekend, two teams—idaho and duquesne—knocked off the opponent—albany and youngstown respectively—who ousted them from last year’s playoff. monmouth qb derek robertson threw for 400 yards in a win over his former team, maine. both schools that left the nec to go independent—sacred heart & merrimack—claimed their 1st win of the year over a member of the nec.
- in a weekend when 32k poured into mississippi veterans stadium to see jackson state, the team that may have sold the most tickets was actually rio grande valley, and they don’t even kickoff for another year. in anticipation of their 2025 inaugural season, the vaqueros hosted their first ever open practice where the 6000 tickets per game quickly scooped up by fans. the vaqueros have not even scheduled any games for 2025 yet, so enthusiasm must be running pretty high.

fcs game of week



last week: north dakota state bison (2 – 0, 67) rally past east tennessee state buccaneers (0 – 1), 38 – 35
 the bison may have just pulled off the comeback of the season. down by 12 with 2 minutes to go, the team rallied to score two tds with a recovered onside kick in between. the hero of the day was qb cam miller. he scored the game winning td with his legs in the final minute, his 2nd rushing score of the evening. on the drive prior, the bison were stuck at 4th & long with the game on the line. while being thrown to the ground, miller somehow managed to launch a 40 yard bomb to the buccaneer goal line to set up the 1st of those 2 tds. the performance was bookended by two big stops by lb logan kopp, who stuffed the bucs on 3rd & short to set up miller’s fireworks and cemented the win with a pick immediately after the bison took the lead. the bucs had taken the lead to the closing minutes thanks in large part to rb bryson irby, who racked up 150 yards on the ground and 3 td runs, including a 60 yarder that gave his team their first lead. also worth mentioning was lb ty anderson, who managed to penetrate the bison o-line on multiple occasions leading to a pass breakup and a couple sacks. he did double duty, entering the game in the backfield on a goal line stand and scoring a td on offense too.



next week: yale bulldogs @ holy cross crusaders (1 – 2)
 the crusaders under new coach dan curran already have their backs up against the wall. historically, this patriot league program schedules tough out of conference, and that strategy has more or less panned out, earning them a regular spot on the playoff bubble and even a seed in 2023. the catch is that the crusaders have to win those games, and two 4th quarter collapses this season against caa teams also with playoff ambitions is not going to help. the bulldogs are opening their season and expected to contend for the ivy title once again. though the crusaders have a reputation for a dominant running game, the dogs are pretty talented up front defensively. on the flip side,



bulldog rb joshua pitsenberger averages a td per game over the course of his career, one which has been mostly without starting snaps. the crusader d was leaky last year and looks leaky again this season, so the bulldog power running game may be enough to put them on the ropes. that said, the bulldogs are built for low scoring, methodical games, while the crusaders have always tended to get out ahead early.

richmond spiders (1 – 1, 11)



last week: shutout charleston southern buccaneers (1 – 2, - 113), 38 – 0

the spiders took control of this game from the outset. the defense was smothering, holding the buccaneers to a mere 130 yards total of offense in the shutout bid. the bucs made it to midfield 3 times all game and immediately turned it over on each of those trips. one of those resulted in an 80 yard return for a pick-6 the other way, meaning the spider defense alone outscored the bucs. with the game in hand pretty early on, the offense was mostly conservative in its playcalling, doing enough on the ground to call it a day and working the occasional big pass. of note, p aaron trusler booted the ball past two returners for a 70 yard kick. he averaged nearly 50 yards per punt with no returns from the bucs.



spider of week—jeremiah grant

while the d-line as a whole dominated, this tackle was the star of the show, racking up sacks on consecutive snaps early on to set the tone. he ended the day with 5 tackles and 3 tfls, knocking an offense that only went forward 130 yards on the day back 30 when he was involved.

next week: @ delaware state hornets (1 – 1, 32)



the hornets have already beaten 1 fcs team this season, which is 1 more than all of last year. the hornets may be improved, but this matchup still should heavily favor the spiders. the hornet d struggled badly up front and does not look ready to contain a qb like kyle wickersham who can threaten to run in any situation. (update: a lingering ankle injury may sideline wickersham with more pass heavy qb cam coleman expected to start in his place.) a bigger mismatch exists when the spiders are on d. the hornets are likely not going to be able to fend off grant and the d-line or establish a serious running threat against lbs wayne galloway and carter glassmyer. adding to that, the spiders are one of the most opportunistic in passing downs, and the hornets have been interception prone. last year's game was a complete rout, so the 2024 hornets would have to have improved by leaps and bounds to pull off the upset this time around.

northern arizona lumberjacks (1 – 0)



last week: decimate utah tech trailblazers (0 – 2), 45 – 17

the lumberjacks avenged their blowout loss to the trailblazers last season by putting up a crooked number on the scoreboard last weekend. the l-jacks controlled the game from the closing minutes of the 1st

quarter onward, dropping 42 unanswered points on the home team. rb darvon hubbard accounted for 150 all-purpose yards, including a 60 yard td dash early in the 2nd that would put the game out of hand. lb ammon allen led an all out defensive attack that managed to bring consistent pressure. the game was not even as close as the one-sided score implies. the blazers added two late tds to make this look less embarrassing. those drives—against l-jack depth players—accounted for nearly half of their total yards.



next week: @ incarnate word cardinals (1 – 2)

the lumberjacks have looked good in limited competitive play under new coach wright but face a significant challenge this week. the cardinals have a chip on their shoulder after being kept out of the playoffs despite a single fcs loss. (it did not help that, thanks to the cancellation of northwestern state's season, they also had fewer fcs wins than everyone else too.) that cardinals scheduled a far tougher out of conference this season and have suffered back-to-back losses to mo valley teams that routinely make the playoffs. they have threatened in each of those games, but without a big win, they could be in trouble even this early on, so expect a little more desperation this week. they are known for their high tempo passing game. qb zach calzada, who once was a starter in the big 12, brings a big arm and a level of accuracy not usually seen in the fcs. his top two targets, wrs jalen walthall and roy alexander, are both deep threats on every snap. less known but equally fearsome is the cardinal pass d. among the best in the fcs, s mason chambers leads a secondary that is lockdown in coverage and nabs far more than its fair share of picks. to pull off this upset on the road, the lumberjacks are going to have to conjure up a 60 minute gameplan and control the tempo throughout. this will be the first real barometer of how good this team might actually be.