

Northern Keeps Pace In Big East



NORTHERN NASH RUNNING BACK JAMARCUS ROBINSON
(Photo Submitted by Meryn Johnson)

Knights remain in chase for a league crown

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

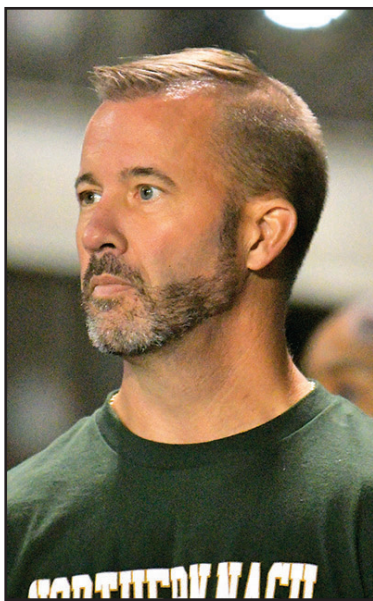
RED OAK -- It didn't take long for the Northern Nash High gridiron squad to assert itself as the superior team last Friday evening.

The Fighting Knights scored 28 points in the first quarter, 20 in the second frame and 14 more in the third period en route to a 62-0

Homecoming-night thrashing of Big East foe Southern Wayne, picking up their fourth straight win while improving to 5-2 on the season.

It took just one offensive

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NORTHERN NASH AD JOEY KEEFE

Coaching changes for NNHS

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

RED OAK -- A big change is coming for the Northern Nash High School baseball program this spring, as, for the first time in over a decade, Joey Keefe won't hold a spot in the school's dugout.



Keefe, who has been at Northern since the fall of 2014 and has served in multiple different capacities, announced that he is stepping down from the role of head baseball coach

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NCWU falls at Belhaven

From Staff Reports

JACKSON, MISS. — The North Carolina Wesleyan University football team put together several big-play moments and entered halftime even with Belhaven before the Battling Bishops fell 35-21 last Friday night at Belhaven Bowl Stadium.

NC Wesleyan finished with

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2026 NASH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL DAWGS GET IT DONE



CENTRAL COACH CARTER VARNELL

Bulldogs nab first victory of campaign

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

ROCKY MOUNT -- After six straight losses to start the 2026 football season, the first football victory of the Carter Varnell Era has officially arrived on the campus of Nash Central High School.

A hungry Bulldog squad rushed for a whopping 313 yards last Friday night in a 19-3 victory over Quad County Conference foe Roanoke Rapids – giving Central some



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NC'S TRISTIAN WHITLEY SCOOTs FOR YARDAGE VS. ROANOKE RAPIDS
(Photo Submitted by Meryn Johnson)

DIFFICULT STRETCH SN faces Big East challenges

From Staff Reports

STANHOPE -- They're getting better every week.

That's the theme at Southern Nash these days as the Firebirds are in the midst of their most challenging stretch of the 2026 gridiron campaign.

And with such a young squad, that can be a daunting process -- but the Firebirds continue to make progress on the field under the direction of veteran head coach Brian Batchelor.

Last Friday night at home, the Firebirds took Big East titan Wilson Hunt to the wire



SNHS PUNTER AYDEN MYERS

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SOUTHERN NASH SOPHOMORE QUARTERBACK LOVELLE WHITE
(Photo Submitted by Carl Copeland)



CENTRAL DELIVERS A TEAM SACK VS. ROANOKE RAPIDS

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much-desired revenge after the Yellow Jackets ended the Bulldogs' season in the grid playoffs last year.

Varnell – the school's first-year head coach – and his Nash Central squad picked up the team's first win of the year in large part due to the efforts of Tristian Whitley, a junior whose role has significantly grown as the season has progressed.

Whitley received 23 touches on Friday night – 22 carries and one reception – which resulted in a career-high 199 all-purpose yards. It wasn't just a big night, it was more than double Roanoke Rapids' entire offensive output that same evening.

The breakout game from Friday's focal point of the Bulldog offense included one touchdown of his own, with Elijah Dunn and Braylon Whitley each making one trip to the end zone apiece as well.

Dunn finished with 65 yards rushing while the younger Whitley, a

sophomore, added 45 of his own.

While a strong rushing attack was certainly a positive for Central, Varnell's group really found its stride on the defensive side of the ball.

Just 73 yards were generated by the Yellow Jacket offense, with the Bulldog defense totaling four sacks, eight tackles for loss and intercepted Roanoke Rapids quarterback Holden Ford once in a dominant, start-to-finish showing.

Taikeim Arrington tabbed his second interception of the season, while the younger Whitley contributed a team-best 10 tackles for NCHS – Avery Flowers and Tamari Tucker following closely behind at eight and seven tackles each, respectively.

Predictably, the three points allowed by Nash Central was the fewest surrendered by the team not only this season, but since a 42-0 shutout of Franklinton back in September 2024.

Similar to last season under former Bulldog

head coach Chris Lee, perhaps flipping the schedule over to conference play is exactly what Central needs in order to turn a slow start around.

Now that the metaphorical monkey of a first win is off the back of both the Bulldog roster and Varnell, perhaps a winning streak is on its way.

Nash Central will be taking the field tonight this week, traveling to 4-3 Bunn – last season's Quad County Conference champion who is off to a 2-0 start in league play this season.

The Wildcats are riding a three-game winning streak that includes conference victories over American Leadership Academy-Johnston and Wake Prep Academy, and are still unbeaten in league play since the inception of the Quad County Conference prior to the 2025 season.

Today's rare week-night gridiron matchup between Bunn and Nash Central will be held on the campus of Bunn High School at 7 p.m. on Thursday night.

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play for Northern to put points on the board, with star running back Myles Eatmon breaking the ice on a 55-yard touchdown run that came on the Fighting Knights' first play from scrimmage.

Northern once again worked quickly on its next drive – this time as quarterback Jaice Johnson connected with senior wideout Kam Freeman on a 35-yard touchdown pass that extended the lead to 14-0 after having run just three total offensive plays.

The remainder of the first quarter included yet another touchdown run from Eatmon and a defensive scoop-and-score courtesy of Derek Morris, putting the contest out of reach early on.

It wasn't just a high-scoring affair for the Knights, but it was an efficient one as well. All four of Johnson's completions produced touchdowns – each to a different receiver – which resulted in a season-high 108 passing yards for the team's offense.

Johnson delivered a touchdown to Freeman, a 12-yard score to Hassan Davis-McKinney and a 10-yard touchdown to Omare Porter on top of a season-long 51-yard pass to Zykeal Richardson, while also finding the endzone un his lone rushing attempt of the game – a 23-yard scamper in the second quarter

of action.

Eatmon finished the night with a game-high 153 yards on the ground, leading the way for the Knights in a whopping 327-yard performance on the ground as a team.

In addition to Johnson's 23 rushing yards, senior Preston McDaniel added 77 yards and a touchdown while Jacob Dozier and Jamarcus Robinson finished with 38 and 36 yards, respectively.

Northern averaged a staggering 23.4 yards per carry on the ground while adding 27 yards per play through the air, the two arms of its offense complimenting their way to one of the most one-sided performances you'll ever see.

The Knights' defense – which recorded its third shutout of the season and its second in as many games – wreaked havoc on a struggling, low-numbers Southern Wayne squad, one that generated no real momentum or rhythm throughout the entirety of the game.

Now 3-5 after suffering four-straight losses in conference play, the Saints will hit the road for the final time in 2026 this Friday as they face a breakout Fike squad in Wilson – a team whose only loss is to Northern Nash.

As for the Knights, perhaps the biggest game of

the season thus far awaits head coach Andrew Farriss' squad this Friday night.

Like Southern Wayne, Northern will travel to Wilson this week but the Knights will be across town at Hunt, Farriss' old stomping grounds where he spent many years as a longtime assistant.

Hunt, which reached the Class 5-A State Championship game last season and currently sits at 7-0, has already registered big wins over Tarboro, Martin County and Southern Nash – controlling its own destiny in the race for the Big East title.

This week marks perhaps the biggest matchup ever between Northern and Hunt – two schools that have a plethora of football history with one another not just as longtime conference rivals, but coaching crossover and much more.

Both of the Knights' previous coaches have deep roots at Hunt – and Hunt's current head coach Juan Jackson knows Northern well after having spent many years as an assistant at Nash Central.

Kickoff between the Knights and Warriors is slated for 7 p.m. on the campus of Hunt High School in Wilson – with a potential shot at the Big East Conference Championship hanging in the balance.

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at the school last week.

Following up on that, Keefe – also the school's athletic director – announced alongside Nash County Public Schools on Tuesday that Lane Butler, a 2019 Rocky Mount High School graduate who has served as an assistant coach in recent years and is currently a science teacher at Northern Nash, will take over as the program's head coach immediately.

A two-sport letterwinner who played both soccer and baseball for the Gryphons, Butler continued his education at NC State University and then began working with the Knights baseball program during the 2024 season as the head JV coach – a position he held for three seasons.

Earlier this year, Butler was announced as the head coach of the Roanoke Rapids Static – a first-year collegiate summer baseball organization that plays in the Old North State League alongside 23 other North Carolina ballclubs.

"I am honored to have the opportunity to serve as the next head baseball coach of Northern Nash High School," Butler said in a statement released by the school system.

"I am excited to build a team and a culture that can be defined by discipline, accountability and commitment."

The school's principal, Mike Girouard, spoke highly of Butler and the "renewed energy" he feels one of the youngest coaches in school history will bring to the program, stating that "Coach Butler brings a passion for the

game and a clear vision for the baseball program. He is getting a special opportunity in a special place. I am confident that Coach Butler will make the most of this opportunity and has my full support."

Both Keefe and Nash County Public Schools Special Assistant of Auxiliary Services, Operations, and Athletics Angie Miller offered high praise for Butler as well, each eager to see where the Knights' new manager will take a club they want to see centered on teamwork, discipline, sportsmanship and academic success.

Keefe, who Butler is taking the reins from, is stepping down from the head baseball coaching role after seven seasons leading the Knights.

Over that tenure – which began prior to the pandemic-shortened 2020 season – Keefe compiled an overall record of 79-49 on the diamond highlighted by a pair regular-season conference championships in 2022 and 2023, splitting a regular-season conference title with Bunn in 2024 and claiming two conference tournament championships in 2022 and 2024.

But after back-to-back seasons below .500 in 2025 and 2026, perhaps a shift in a younger direction that includes Girouard's aforementioned renewed energy could be exactly what Northern Nash needs to bring back some of the juice the program has had in recent years.

The Knights full 2027 schedule will be released in a future edition of *The Graphic*.



SN'S BRIAN BATCHELOR ADVISES JOSIAH VAN DUNK

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before dropping a tough 43-35 decision in a key conference gridiron showdown.

It was the second straight league setback for the Firebirds, who are now 4-4 overall to go with a 2-2 mark in Big East play.

But SN's defeats over the past two weeks came against strong foes Wilson Fike and Wilson Hunt, and the Firebirds were in both games before their inexperience eventually caught up to them.

Against Hunt, the score was tied in the fourth quarter before SN drove all the way down to the Warriors' 2-yard line -- only to be stopped on downs.

The Warriors, coached by former Nash Central assistant Juan Jackson, then drove downfield and took the lead for good courtesy of a 7-yard

touchdown scamper from Doryan Jones with two minutes remaining in the final stanza of action.

Jones' heroics capped a 98-yard drive that seemed to seal the victory, but SN quarterback Lovelle White drove the Firebirds into the red zone in the closing seconds, but the Warriors' defense eventually held to wrap up the emotional Big East Conference conquest.

Southern Nash was able to overcome a tough start as Hunt scored on its first play from scrimmage -- and then again not long after the Firebirds were unable to field a botched potential kick-off return.

But SN, with its traditional ground game revving, bounced back to claw within 35-28 at intermission.

A long drive in the

third quarter resulted in a 1-yard TD plunge from DJ Baker -- and the Firebirds had rallied to even the score at 35-35.

Southern Nash got the ball back and appeared on the verge of taking the lead, only to be stopped on fourth down just short of the Warriors' goal line.

Despite the loss, the Firebirds were sharp offensively, rushing for 348 total yards, with Baker (131) and freshman Kee'Brion Smith (164) combining for 295 of those yards.

Southern Nash now has two games remaining -- this Friday at home versus Rocky Mount High School and next Friday on the road at Northern Nash.

Both of those rivalry matchups should be stiff league tests for the Firebirds as they continue to develop as an underclassman-dominated unit.

NCWU

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357 yards of total offense, including 307 through the air, as the Bishops continued to battle throughout the USA South matchup.

Belhaven took a 7-0 advantage late in the opening quarter, but North Carolina Wesleyan answered with an explosive play early in the second.

Braden Selvage connected with Jimmie West III for a 70-yard touchdown with 9:31 remaining in the half, and Jorge Hernandez-Lara converted the extra point to pull the Bishops even at 7-7.

The Wesleyan defense then provided one of the biggest plays of the night.

With less than one minute remaining before halftime, Devin Jones intercepted Matthew Dial and returned it 48 yards for a touchdown, giving the Bishops their first lead of the game at 14-7.

Belhaven answered in the final sec-

onds of the half, sending the teams into the break tied at 14-14.

North Carolina Wesleyan moved the football effectively throughout the third quarter and put together a pair of lengthy drives.

After falling behind 21-14, the Bishops drove 72 yards on nine plays and reached the Belhaven five-yard line before coming away without points. Wesleyan finished the night with 20 first downs and converted seven of its 11 third-down opportunities.

Belhaven added two touchdowns in the fourth quarter to extend its advantage, but the Bishops continued to fight.

Wesleyan responded with a 75-yard scoring drive late in the period, with Selvage finding West III for a 27-yard touchdown with 2:16 remaining. Hernandez-Lara's extra point brought the final margin to 35-21.