2026 SOUTHERN NASH HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL SEASON

THE BIRDS ARE BACK!



SOUTHERN NASH'S KEE'BRION SMITH HAD A BIG GAME AGAINST ROCKINGHAM COUNTY
(Photos Submitted by Carl Copeland)

Southern Nash earns impressive playoff victory

From Staff Reports

STANHOPE -- So much for the theory that momentum in a necessity for any club hoping to make a dent in the high school football postseason.

After closing the regular season with a four-game losing streak, the Southern Nash Firebirds -- after a much-needed week off -- returned to the gridiron last Thursday night and rolled past Rockingham County by a 41-25 margin in the opening round of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association's Class 5-A State Playoffs at historic Firebird Stadium.

For the young Firebirds, the victory was a much-needed tonic after they closed the regular season portion of their campaign with a quartet of setbacks against a series of strong

See BIRDS, Page 2B



DJ BAKER SCORED A TRIO OF TOUCHDOWNS FOR SOUTHERN NASH



NORTHERN NASH'S SANTREVOR SILVER

Knights ready for playoffs

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

RED OAK -- After watching each of their Nash County counterparts in action last week, the football team at Northern Nash High will take a stab at their first playoff contest of 2026 on Friday night in Death Valley.

The Knights, who were awarded the No. 3 seed in the Class 6-A Eastern Region, will play host to 7-4 Westover this week, whic is seeded 14th in the same region.

A quality regular season that included wins over

See KNIGHTS, Page 2B



NORTHERN QB JAICE JOHNSON



HEAD COACHES (L TO R) ANDREW FARRISS (NORTHERN NASH) AND BRIAN BATCHELOR (SOUTHERN NASH) BOTH HAVE THEIR CLUBS INTO THE SECOND ROUND OF THE NCHSAA STATE FOOTBALL PLAYOFFS



NASH CENTRAL'S BRAYLON WHITLEY (LEFT)
(Photos Submitted by Meryn Johnson)

A SUPER SEASON

NCHS wraps up campaign

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

ROCKY MOUNT -- A quick glance at the 4-7 record posted by the Nash Central High football team doesn't even begin to tell the full story of this year's Bulldogs.

While some may scoff at a record that winds up three games below .500, it doesn't take much context to understand how special the 2026

See DOGS, Page 2B



TRISTIAN WHITLEY

STATE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF SKED

From Staff Reports

NASH COUNTY -- Here are the North Carolina High School Athletic Association's brackets for the Class 4-A (Nash Central), 5-A (Rocky Mount and Southern Nash) and 6-A (Northern Nash) State Football Playoffs:

Class 4-A
East Regional
First Round

Last Week

- East Duplin (1) Bye
- Washington 34, Eastern Wayne 28
- SW Randolph (8) Bye
- Fairmont 58, Carver 6
- Reidsville (5) Bye
- Randleman 48, Burlington Cummings 24
- West Craven (4) Bye
- Ledford 42, Jordan-Matthews 6
- Clinton (3) Bye
- SW Onslow48, NorthPitt 6
- SW Edgecombe (6) Bye
- Central Davidson 28, Nash Central 21
- Morehead (7) Bye
- Lexington 23) at Roanoke Rapids (10)
- Anson 15, Bunn 9
- High Point Andrews (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

- Washington (16) at East Duplin (1)

See SKED, Page 2B



SOUTHERN NASH'S JOSIAH VAN DUNK IS ON THE MOVE

PLAYOFFS

continued from page 1B

• Fairmont (9) at SW Randolph (8)
• Randleman (12) at Reidsville (5)
• Ledford (13) at West Craven (4)
• SW Onslow (19) at Clinton (3)
• Central Davidson (22) at SW Edgecombe (6)
• Lexington (23) at Morehead (7)
• Anson (18) at High Point Andrews (2)

West Regional
First Round
Last Week

• Hibriten (1) Bye
• East Burke 36, North Surry 14
• Lake Norman (8) Bye
• R-S Central 62, Lincoln Charter 28
• Mount Pleasant (5) Bye
• Wilkes Central 22, Bandys 3
• Burns (4) Bye
• Bunker Hill 44, East Gaston 6
• West Iredell (3) Bye
• West Stanly 28, Salisbury 7
• West Stokes (6) Bye
• South Rowan 42, Forbush 31
• Stuart Cramer (7) Bye
• Fred Foard 38, Pisgah 24
• Maiden 29, Newton-Conover 27
• Tuscola (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

• East Burke (16) at Hibriten (1)
• R-S Central (9) at Lake Norman Charter (8)
• Wilkes Central (12) at Mount Pleasant (5)
• Bunker Hill (13) at Burns (4)
• West Stanly (14) at West Iredell (3)
• South Rowan (11) at West Stokes (6)
• Foard (23) at Stuart Cramer (7)
• Maiden (15) at Tuscola (2)

Class 5-A
East Regional
First Round
Last Week

• Southeast Alamance (1) Bye
• West Carteret 21, Currituck 14
• Havelock (8) Bye
• Rocky Mount 38, CB Aycock 20
• Seaforth (5) Bye
• South Granville 31, South Brunswick 29
• Croatan (4) Bye
• Western Alamance 56, Southern Wayne 0
• Wilson Hunt (3) Bye
• Montgomery Central 48, Oxford Webb 7
• Wilson Fike (6) Bye
• St. Paul's 33, Roxboro Person 32
• Eastern Alamance (7) Bye
• Hillsborough Orange 35, Richlands 21
• Southern Nash 41, Rockingham County 25
• Northside-Jacksonville (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

• West Carteret (16) at Southeast Alamance (1)
• Rocky Mount (9) at Havelock (8)
• South Granville (12) at Seaforth (5)
• Western Alamance (13) at Croatan (4)
• Montgomery Central (14) at Wilson Hunt (3)
• St. Pauls (11) at Wilson Fike (6)
• Hillsborough Orange (10) at Eastern Alamance (7)
• Southern Nash (15) at Northside-Jacksonville (2)

West Regional

• Shelby Crest (1) Bye
• Parkwood 42, Erwin 27
• Oak Grove (8) Bye
• Hickory 56, Hunter Huss 14
• Monroe (5) Bye
• North Lincoln 50, Northwest Cabarrus 44
• South Point (4) Bye
• Smoky Mountain 58, North Buncombe 34
• Jay M. Robinson (3) Bye
• North Davidson 50, East Rowan 7
• West Rowan (6) Bye
• Enka 30, North Henderson 15
• East Lincoln (7) Bye
• Forest Hills 48, Forestview 25
• West Henderson 56, Carson 27
• Franklin (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

• Parkwood (16) at Shelby Crest (1)
• Hickory (9) at Oak Grove (8)
• North Lincoln (21) at Monroe (5)
• Smoky Mountain (13) at South Point (4)
• North Davidson (14) at Jay M. Robinson (3)
• Enka (11) at West Rowan (6)
• Forest Hills (10) at East Lincoln (7)
• West Henderson (15) at Franklin (2)

Class 6-A
East Regional
First Round
Last Week

• Greenville Rose (1) Bye
• South Johnston 55, Felton Grove 22
• Middle Creek (8) Bye
• Fayetteville 71st 48, Lee County 7
• Union Pines (5) Bye
• Fayetteville Terry Sanford 54, Franklinton 43
• Scotland County (4) Bye
• Swansboro 19, Jacksonville White Oak 6
• Northern Nash (3) Bye
• Fayetteville Westover 44, West Johnston 0
• Southern Alamance (6) Bye
• Harnett Central 54, Western Harnett 14
• Burlington Williams (7) Bye
• Erwin Triton 28, Hope Mills South View 24
• Gray's Creek 49, Northern Durham 20
• Jacksonville (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

• South Johnston (16) at Greenville Rose (1)
• Fayetteville 71st (9) at Middle Creek (8)
• Fayetteville Terry Sanford (21) at Union Pines (5)
• Swansboro (13) at Scotland (4)
• Fayetteville Westover (14) at Northern Nash (3)
• Harnett Central (11) at Southern Alamance (6)
• Erwin Triton (10) at Burlington Williams (7)
• Gray's Creek (15) at Jacksonville (2)

West Regional
First Round
Last Week

• Asheville (1) Bye
• AC Reynolds 10, Statesville 7
• Greensboro Dudley (8) Bye
• Sun Valley 41, St. Stephen's 7
• Winston-Salem Mt. Tabor (5) Bye
• Gastonia Ashbrook 47, Central Cabarrus 21
• Kings Mountain (4) Bye
• Watauga 16, Olympic 8
• Asheboro (3) Bye
• Eastern Guilford 20, Kernersville Glenn 7
• Alexander Central (6) Bye
• Northern Guilford 63, South Caldwell 0
• Morganton Freedom (7) Bye
• Charlotte Catholic 48, Piedmont High School 6
• Jamestown Ragsdale 37, Berry Academy 6
• TC Roberson (2) Bye

Second Round
This Week

• AC Reynolds (16) at Asheville (1)
• Sun Valley (9) at Greensboro Dudley (8)
• Gastonia Ashbrook (12) at Mount Tabor (5)
• Watauga (13) at Kings Mountain (4)
• Eastern Guilford (19) at Asheboro (3)
• Northern Guilford (11) at Alexander Central (6)
• Charlotte Catholic (10) at Morganton Freedom (7)
• Jamestown Ragsdale (15) at TC Roberson (2)

KNIGHTS

continued from page 1B

Lumberton, Terry Sanford, South View, Douglas Byrd, St. Pauls and E.E. Smith, the Wolverines toppled No. 19 West Johnston in their playoff opener this week in a 44-0 blowout.

As has been the case throughout the majority of its wins this season, Westover's defense was the star of the show in the first round.

The Wolverines issued their fourth shutout of 2026 against the Wildcats, highlighted by a combined 26 tackles courtesy of junior linebackers Kazim Johnson and Brandyn Sims.

Westover forced one turnover while allowing just 94 yards of total offense, tackling West Johnston behind the line of scrimmage nine times — six of which were sacks of Wildcat quarterback Branden Hicks.

Offensively, senior two-way star Nazir Blackmon rushed for two touchdowns and a game-high 75 yards while both Eliijah Carswell and Aron Fields each found the endzone once as well on the ground.

Quarterback Eric Kline connected with freshman phenom Zion Williams for a touchdown through the air as well, with the Wolverines' offense starting to click at the right time.

The 44 points was the second-highest point total for Westover this team — the top spot sitting at 66 against 0-10 Douglas Byrd, which was one of the four contests its defense pitched a shutout.

The Wolverines will be no easy task for the Northern Nash Knights, who received a first-round bye in recognition of their regular-season efforts.

Like Westover, Northern's defense has been the most impressive part of this year's campaign — with the Knights having rattled off five-straight shutouts to wrap up league play, outscoring Big East Conference opponents 299-20 — the only points allowed coming in a 34-20 victory over Fike back on Sept. 25.

Northern's physical, hard-hitting defense is led by seniors Jessie Wade, Jaquaye Arrington and Holton Westbrook as some of the team's leading tackles — while juniors Derek Morris and Tollie West IV have made a mark of their own as the season has progressed.

The Knights have gotten noticeably better as the season has moved forward week-after-week, and that isn't limited to its defense.

Senior quarterback Jaice Johnson — who started the season as Northern's second-string signal caller — has strung together four-straight performances of 100+ yards through the air while having found the endzone rushing in six-consecutive games on top of that.

He's aided by a Knights rushing attack that's headlined by star senior Myles Eatmon, who despite missing one game in the regular season compiled 700 rushing yards and 13 touchdowns.

Eatmon joined in the backfield by Jamarcus Robinson, Cam Lyons and Preston McDaniel — all of whom have eclipsed 200 yards on the ground and have each crossed the goal line at least twice.

Aiding Johnson in the passing game are big-play threats Kam Freeman and Hassan Davis-McKinney, who have combined for eight touchdowns on the year despite Freeman being absent during the team's first four outings due to injury.

As always for the squad led by head coach Andrew Farriss, the Fighting Knights are a serious threat to make a run in the playoffs — but can't overlook a pesky and hot Wolverine group that made a big statement in their first post-season bout.

Kickoff for Friday's second-round game is slated for 7 p.m. and will be held on the campus of Northern Nash High School.

DOGS

continued from page 1B

campaign was on the campus of Nash Central High School.

Year one of the Carter Varnell Era looked all but over six games into the season. The Bulldogs, who dealt with countless injuries and sources of adversity a season ago, dropped its first six outings of the season — and only one contest was remotely close.

Central was beaten comprehensively by SouthWest Edgecombe, rivals Northern Nash and Rocky Mount before being awarded a golden opportunity at Southern Nash — a game they led by two scores with under 1- minutes remaining in regulation.

Alas, the Firebirds rallied and handed the Bulldogs a one-point, 28-27 heartbreaker of a loss — with Central then a bump in the road of still-unbeaten Warren County to round out non-conference play.

A 0-5 mark became 0-6 after Quad County Conference foe Louisburg registered a pair of defensive touchdowns in a 27-19 victory over the Bulldogs, making matters worse for a squad looking for its first winning season since 2023.

But that's precisely when the tides started to turn.

Win No. 1 of Varnell's tenure at Nash Central took place on Oct. 9 against Roanoke Rapids, with the Bulldogs keeping the Yellow Jackets out of the endzone in a 19-3 victory over the team who knocked them out of the 2025 playoffs.

The next week, Central upset Bunn on the road — followed that up with a win over Wake Prep Academy — and all of a sudden found itself in contention for a league title heading into the last week of the regular season.

Thanks to a little bit of help from the same Bunn and Wake Prep squads they knocked off in the waning weeks of the season, the Bulldogs' 49-0 shellacking of American Leadership Academy - Johnston resulted in Central claiming just its second outright conference championship on the gridiron in school history.

What could've turned into a nightmare of a season ended as one of the most important to have occurred at Nash Central High School, and trusting — not abandoning — the process is part of what got the team there.

While a first-round loss in the Class 4-A playoffs may not have been the end that Varnell or his roster wanted, the season was more than salvaged regardless of last Thursday's 28-21 defeat at the hands of Central Davidson.

A trophy and a Gatorade bath aren't a bad way to build your foundation as a program, and when you look ahead to 2027 and notice that the Bulldogs are set to return quarterback Emory Williams in addition to running backs Tristian and Braylon Whitley on top of two-way phenom Avery Flowers, perhaps it won't just be part of the foundation as much as it will be the beginning of a trend.

BIRDS

continued from page 1B

Big East Conference opponents.

But due to the odd number of teams in the Big East, one school has to have a bye week during the league portion of the schedule -- and Southern Nash's just happened to fall on the closing week.

That gave the Firebirds the opportunity to recuperate both mentally and physically, along with giving the SNHS coaching staff a chance to develop the players over a span without having to worry about an immediate future foe.

That valuable practice time paid off last Thursday as Southern Nash, now 5-6 for the season, had no problem with Rockingham County out of Wentworth.

The Firebirds' offense came out running on all cylinders from the outset as Coach Brian Batchelor's underclassman-dominated squad piled up a whopping 385 total yards of offense.

Sophomore quarterback Lovelle White was sharp as he completed four passes for 56 yards while also tacking on a pair of rushing touchdowns.

Freshman Kee'brion Smith continued his exceptional year for the Firebirds by rushing for 192 yards and one touchdowns on just 15 attempts.

For the year, the potential-rich Smith now has 875 ground yards. He also delivered an 85-yard kickoff return for a touchdown during the initial-round playoff stanza.

Southern trailed 7-6 in the second frame before Smith raced away for an electrifying 94-yard touchdown gallop that gave the Firebirds the lead for good less than three minutes into the second quarter of action.

DJ Baker, who contributed 115 yards and three scores to SN's prolific offensive attack, followed with a 19-yard TD burst on the opening march of the second half, and the Firebirds were rolling at 21-7.

SN's cushion was 28-20 in the fourth quarter before Trey Smith gave the Firebirds some insurance with an 85-yard kickoff return for a clutch touchdown.

Southern will hope to continue to make progress this Friday in the second round, but it won't be easy as the Firebirds will travel to Onslow to tangle with the undefeated Northside-Jacksonville Monarchs.

Northside, coming off a bye week, has won all but two of its 10 contests this fall by more than single digits, and the Monarchs have scored 35 points of more five times in 2026.

Northside-Jacksonville closed its regular season with a 42-25 win over perennial titan Havelock before enjoying a bye through the first round.