

2025 NORTHERN NASH HS BOYS SOCCER SOCCER SUCCESS



NORTHERN NASH'S GEHOVANY ALVAREZ-PACHECO CONTROLS THE BALL
(Photos Submitted by Carl Copeland)

Knights enjoyed a special campaign

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

RED OAK -- The 2025 campaign served as one of the most successful seasons in the recent history of the Northern Nash boys soccer program, with third-year head coach Baltazar Rodriguez's Fighting Knights closing out the season on Monday evening at 14-5-2, good for a second-place finish in the first season of the Class-5A/6A Big East Conference.

You have to go all the way back to Joe McCarthy's first stint as Northern Nash's head coach, a legendary tenure that lasted 25 years and resulted in a combined 600 wins between the boys and girls programs, to find a season that successful.

The 14 wins is the program's most since McCarthy 1.0, and the team's November 6



NN'S ISMAEL MARTINEZ MAKES A PUSH



SOUTHERN NASH'S LEO DIAZ DRIBBLES THROUGH THE HPC DEFENSE
(Photos Submitted by Carl Copeland)

SN Showing The Way

Firebirds reached second round of state playoffs

From Staff Reports

STANHOPE -- Even in what was slated to be a rebuilding season, the Southern Nash Firebirds still had a few tricks up their collective sleeve during the 2025 boys soccer campaign.

With only six seniors on the roster and several freshmen and sophomores receiv-



ing abundant playing time, the Firebirds were unable to continue their recent string of crowns in the Big East Conference. Instead, Southern Nash went 10-11-2 overall while finishing in fifth place in the revamped Big East.

But the Firebirds still had some

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NASH COUNTY LEGENDARY COACHES JASON BATTLE AND ANDREW FARRISS

PLAYOFF TIME!

County clubs ready for games

From Staff Reports

NASH COUNTY -- It's become almost a tradition to see a Nash County showdown at some point in the state football playoffs -- but the most recent realignment by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association has diminished that possibility.

At least somewhat, as Southern Nash and Rocky Mount -- former Class 3-A rivals -- are now still together on the Class 5-A level.

But Southern's string of postseason meetings with rival Northern Nash won't occur at least for the next four years because the Fighting Knights are competing in the Class 6-A category.

Southern and Northern have played a few memorable playoff outings against each other, but they will go their separate ways this time around after both clubs received a first-round bye in their respective classifications.

Northern Nash, which repeated as the Big East Conference champion, will resume its slate this Friday in the second round against Jacksonville White Oak at Death Valley on the NNHS campus.

While White Oak's 5-6 ledger might not look impressive from the outside, it must be remembered that the Vikings played



SOUTHERN NASH'S COOPER WHEATON



SOUTHERN NASH'S ISAIAH BATTLE

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NASH CENTRAL SOPHOMORE ROBERT PITT

Nash Central wraps up its gridiron worksheet

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

ROCKY MOUNT - An injury-riddled Nash Central High School football team saw its season come to a close last Friday night at the hands of conference foe Roa-



noke Rapids, falling 14-12 in the opening round of the Class-4A State Playoffs.

It was the second meeting this season between the Bulldogs and Yellow Jackets, with

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NORTHERN NASH STANDOUT GEHOVANY ALVAREZ-PACHECO

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playoff win over South View was the school’s first since 2014, the final winning season of McCarthy’s first residency.

The Knights’ 2025 campaign came to a close on Monday night at Jacksonville, dropping a 5-0 result to the second-seeded Cardinals in the third round of the Class-6A Playoffs.

Both Northern and Jacksonville received a first-round bye due to each team’s regular season success, with the Cardinals now set to face No. 3 East Chapel Hill this Thursday with a trip to the Eastern Regional Final on the line.

This season’s taste of postseason success was obviously something to build on for the Knights, and will likely serve as the first step to an even stronger season next year.

Northern will be bringing back a herd of production from its 2025 squad in 2026, including six of its top seven goal scorers from this season.

That list includes juniors Jayden Roberson and Ismael Martinez - with Roberson leading the way with 14 goals while Martinez passed out a team-best 12 assists on the year.

Additionally, the Knights are expected to bring back goalkeeper Ayden Batts-Wood, a sophomore who entered Monday’s outing at Jacksonville just shy of 1,500 minutes in net while having accrued 151 saves on the year.

“We have a very talented goalkeeper,” said Rodriguez earlier this season of Batts-Wood, who was backed up in net by fellow sophomore Fermin Lopez. That dynamic duo combined for an impressive six total clean sheets over the course of the season, three of which came within league play.

Northern’s conference slate saw the team fire off eight wins en route to an 8-3-1 mark, a record that included two-match sweeps over Fike, who is still alive in the Class-5A Elite Eight, as well

as Rocky Mount and Southern Nash.

The Knights picked up additional league wins over Hunt and Southern Wayne, splitting their series with the Warriors while drawing the Saints 4-4 in double overtime at home. The lone Big East opponent that Northern failed to clip in the regular season was C.B. Aycock, who improved to 22-0 overall on Monday night in a victory that moved the top-seeded Golden Falcons to the 5A Elite Eight as well -- a potential conference dual with Fike, a possibility for a trip to the state championship if both teams win on Thursday.

Outside of the Big East, Northern routed Nash Central in both of their early season bouts, with a win over Triton sandwiched between those two outings.

Northern kicked off the year by winning five of its first six matches, with two victories over Central in addition to wins over Triton, Roanoke Rapids and Cleveland. The lone non-victory to start the year was a 3-3 draw against North Pitt, who now sits at 20-2-2 having advanced to the Class-4A Elite Eight after a triple-overtime win over Roanoke Rapids on Monday.

Seven Knight seniors will be graduating in the spring from this roster, that list consisting of Jayden Tucker, Giovanni Torres, Alvin Luque, Kennedy Diaz-Matiaz, Santiago Melchor, Tambe Mboumien, and Terry Lemus-Tucker being the top goal scorer of that group with seven in 2025.

“One of the things we are blessed with this year is talent across all positions and grade levels,” remarked Rodriguez earlier this season, a statement that proceeded to turn out even truer than what he likely first thought.

Obviously a successful season, 2025 will likely be a building block to what could be even higher heights for a historic Knights program in 2026.

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in one of the state’s toughest leagues -- the Big Carolina 6/7-A Conference, which features the likes of New Bern, Greenville Rose and Jacksonville, among others.

And White Oak is coming into Death Valley on the upswing after topping Eastern Guilford by a 32-22 score in last Friday’s opening round.

As for Northern Nash, the Knights are on the upswing as usual, having gone 9-1 in the regular season, with the lone loss coming on September 5 against a powerhouse Cleveland club.

Since then, the Knights have reeled off seven consecutive conquests, including decisions over strong foes Rocky Mount, Southern Nash and Wilson Hunt to wrap up the conference championship.

During that stretch, Northern Nash’s high-powered offense has scored at least 31 points in every game.

While Northern Nash enters the postseason on a high note, the same can’t be said for Southern Nash, which will host Southeast Alamance this Friday night at Firebird Stadium.

Southern is 6-4 overall, but the Firebirds have dropped three consecutive outings to close out the regular season.

But the Firebirds enjoyed a bye week to finish the campaign, and had another one last



NORTHERN NASH OFFENSIVE STARS (L TO R) PRESTON MCDANIEL AND GEHRIG MILLER

week for the playoffs.

That gave Southern some time to heal both mentally and physically following the disappointing end to the regular season.

Southern Alamance enters the showdown at 8-3 following a victory over Hillsborough Orange in the opening round.

Like White Oak, Southern Alamance also plays in an extremely competitive league.

While the victories would have to pile up for it to happen, there is still a theoretical chance that Southern Nash and Rocky Mount could meet down the road, but it would be all the way in the regional finals as the

Gryphons and Firebirds are on opposite sides of the East bracket.

After their opening-round bye, the Gryphons will kick off their playoff quest this Friday with a home meeting against the South Granville Vikings out of Creedmoor.

Rocky Mount currently stands at 7-3 with a young roster. But like Southern Nash, the Gryphons are on a losing streak as they closed the regular season with back-to-back losses to Wilson Hunt and Northern Nash.

South Granville is 5-6, but the Vikings are on a two-game winning stretch, including an opening-round decision over Orange.



SOUTHERN’S SANTONIO VARGAS SENDS A SHOT TOWARD THE NET AGAINST HIGH POINT CENTRAL IN THE PLAYOFFS

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quality moments, most notably a thrilling 6-2 overtime decision over High Point Central in the opening round of the Class 5-A State Playoffs at historic Firebird Stadium on the SNHS campus.

Southern Nash trailed 2-0 at the break before rallying to tie the score and force the extra session with a pair of unanswered goals in the second half of action.

SN would then see its campaign close in the second round by a 6-2 margin against a CB Aycock club that dominated the Big East this fall with an unblemished worksheet.

It might not have been the season that SN boys soccer fans have grown accustomed to over the past decade, but there is certainly hope for the future as the Firebirds boasted just a sextet of upperclassmen -- Leo Diaz, Joshua Dominguez, Victor Vargas, Mario Arredondo, Elias Pastana and Miguel Gomes.

Vargas closed out his exceptional career in style with a hat trick



SOUTHERN NASH’S VICTOR VARGAS

versus High Point Central, while Arredondo, Diaz and Daniel Landa also found the back of the net as part of the emotional playoff triumph for the Firebirds.

“The season could have been worse, but it could have been a lot

better,” said SN skipper Carlos Barron.

“We had a first-year keeper in goal, plus we had to deal with players being injured.

“I am proud of this team for never giving up and fighting to the very end.”

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Central the victor in the regular-season bout between the two Quad County Conference opponents on October 10.

“We were outplayed most of the night,” said 11th-year Nash Central head coach Chris Lee, who pointed to a lost turnover battle as a catalyst towards the drastic change from his team’s win over the Roanoke Rapids earlier in the year.

The Bulldogs forced four turnovers and gave away just one in their 47-21 road win over the Yellow Jackets during the regular season, a dramatic shift from what happened on Friday night.

Central was the squad coughing the ball up this time, handing three turnovers to Roanoke Rapids while failing to force the Yellow Jackets into a single one.

Additionally, Roanoke Rapids found the end zone through its special teams, seeing Bobby Hawkins Jr. return a punt for a touchdown.

The result brought what has been a frustrating year for Nash Central to a close, with the Bulldogs having now wrapped up their 2025 campaign at 3-8. Central knocked off Roanoke Rapids and American Leadership Academy - Johnston in the regular season during its conference slate, and was handed a season-opening win over SouthWest Edgecombe via forfeit after the Cougars illegal use of an ineligible player.

Though the team got healthier throughout the year, injuries were a huge issue for the Bulldogs early in the season.

The season’s injury report was of course highlighted by Winston Lee, senior quarterback who was expected to run the offense for a third season, but was sidelined early in the year with a season-ending surgery.

Lee had started 24 games at quarterback for Nash Central over the course of his career before his injury, a level of continuity at quarterback that was much different than the Bulldogs saw this season.

“His leadership was missed probably more than anything else,” said Coach Lee of his senior quarterback. “He could tell me things from the field that we might not have seen from the sideline.”

Due to Lee’s injury, Nash Central was forced into playing a whopping five players at quarterback over the course of the season, solidifying sophomore Emory Bynum as the leader of the offense as the year progressed.

Bynum is a serious threat to maintain the starting job for the Bulldogs going into 2026, with Central expected to return eight of its offensive starters and seven of its defensive starters next season. With the Bulldogs one of just three 4A schools in the Quad County Conference, a turnaround season and a sixth-straight playoff appearance could be on the horizon.

“They have to make the commitment to get bigger and faster in the offseason,” said Lee of his returners, who was optimistic about the program’s future in its current conference.

“We played everyone close this year with a very young team,” Lee remarked, as despite Nash Central finishing at 2-4 in six outings against its league opponents, the Bulldogs finished with a point differential of +32, the team’s wins coming by 26 and 23 points while its four losses came by margins of one, six, eight and two points.

Lee did mention that recent district realignment within Nash County Public Schools has seemingly hurt Nash Central more than its other Nash County counterparts, with the school’s enrollment sitting at less than 700 students while their three county rivals each have more than 1,000 students on campus.

“Until the district does something to balance the numbers we will be at a disadvantage,” said Lee, whose Bulldogs suffered early-season losses to Nash Central (40-7), Rocky Mount (42-6) and Southern Nash (35-15) in consecutive weeks before kicking off conference play.

While it may not have been the season that Nash Central had hoped for, the Bulldogs still qualified for the postseason for a school-record fifth season in a row, dating back to the fall of 2021. Excluding the spring 2021 season that was shortened and moved to the COVID-19 pandemic, Central’s streak of playoff made stretches all the way back to 2019.