FANTAS-TECH!

Tech outscores NC State in final period to end No. 8 Wolfpack’s bid for an undefeated season

By Charles Frey/STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

True freshman Ajenavi “Ace” Eziemefe dives just short of the goal line against the North Carolina State Wolfpack. The Jackets next take on the FSU Seminoles at 3:30 p.m. at Bobby Dodd Stadium.

By Scott Kretschmann
Contributing Writer

It was a cold, dreary homecoming in Raleigh, NC as the Yellow Jackets (6-3,3-3) handed NC State (9-1,4-1) their first defeat of the season. Georgia Tech came into a sold out Carter-Finley Stadium ready to play and needing a strong win to salvage their season, while NC State was riding high on their best season in history.

It looked to be a battle of mighty offenses, and this was reinforced by the first play of the game, in which Wolfpack quarterback and Heisman candidate Philip Rivers opened with a trick flea-flicker pass that gained 48 yards. However, Tech’s defense managed to hold NC State on their next few plays and force a Wolfpack field goal—the only score of the quarter.

The beginning of the second quarter brought more of the same. Tech’s offense kept moving downfield and maintained control of the ball, allowing the defense to stay fresh and able to stop NC State’s powerful offense at each possession. However, things began to look up for Tech as halftime approached. Georgia Tech quarterback A.J. Suggs was successfully moving the ball downfield through a combination of accurate passes and his third rush of the game. An unnecessary roughness call against NC State then brought the ball inside the 20-yard line. On a critical third down conversion, Tech pulled off a trick play of its own, when running back Ajenavi “Ace” Eziemefe completed a halfback option pass to Suggs, who came inches away from earning a touchdown. However, NC State held Tech’s running game at the goal line, and after a questionable “no touchdown” call on a run by Eziemefe, Tech was forced to settle for a field goal, tying the game at 3-3 going into halftime.

The Yellow Jackets came out after halftime with a renewed vigor, as they
now saw it within their grasp to defeat the unbeaten Wolfpack. A fumble on a punt return by NC State early in the third quarter allowed Tech to move back downfield, but just like the previous time, NC State held Scott Kretschmann just short of the endzone.

A second field goal made it 6-3 Yellow Jackets. This score also made senior placekicker Luke Manget Tech’s all-time leading scorer with 302 points. This was truly a game for records. Later in the game, Philip Rivers broke NC State’s school record of 637 career completions. NC State also scored its 51st and 52nd touchdowns of the season—both school records.

Rivers faced immense pressure from Tech’s defense in the third quarter, forcing punts and allowing Tech to move back downfield once more and set Manget up for a 41-yard field goal, making it 9-3 Georgia Tech. Pressure continued to come from Tech’s defense on the next drive. Rivers was sacked twice before he managed to complete a few passes downfield, culminating in a touchdown pass to Jerricho Cotchery, catching back up to Georgia Tech and making the score 10-9 NC State going into the fourth quarter.

Tech’s defense did not let up in the fourth quarter, consistently hurrying and hitting Rivers, allowing few opportunities. However, the talented quarterback managed to get the ball downfield on a few key opportunities, and when combined with a Tech penalty, set up a touchdown run by freshman T.A. McLendon to take a 17-9 lead.

Georgia Tech now needed a score badly and got it by a very fortunate penalty. On third and 14, Suggs was sacked, but a delay of game penalty on Tech nullified the play and gave Suggs a second chance, which he converted into a 28-yard pass to Jonathan Smith.

Fortune smiled on the Jackets again when NC State’s Greg Golden dropped a likely interception in the endzone, which allowed Tech to finish off the drive with a touchdown pass from Suggs to J.P. Foschi. Suggs then completed to Smith for a two-point conversion, tying the score at 17.

Following this turn of events, Tech’s defense came out energized and they brought even more pressure on Rivers, enough so that he never truly had a chance to make a play, while Darryl Smith and Tech’s linebackers essentially stopped State’s running game.

The next punt by NC State was short, and when combined with an amazing 26-yard punt return by Kelley Rhino, put Tech on NC State’s 22-yard line. Two plays and 16 seconds later, Gordon Clinkscale ran in Tech’s second touchdown. The away sideline suddenly erupted into celebration, with many players and coaches running slightly onto the field. The mood in the stadium, with the exception of the one small row of gold, was decidedly somber.

The last plays of the game were rather tense, as the game could have gone either way. On NC State’s next drive, Georgia Tech safety Cory Collins caused a fumble that Tech recovered, but NC State’s Dantonio Burnette intercepted Suggs’ pass a few plays later, turning the ball over again.

However, despite having a few excellent chances, NC State failed to capitalize and the score remained 24-17 Georgia Tech after the last NC State pass was intercepted by Jeremy Muyres. There was mass celebration by the team after the clock finally ran out, as they realized they had defeated the highly ranked Wolfpack, and although the sea of red in the stadium quickly disappeared, Tech’s faithful fans stayed and celebrated while the Tech band played.
Philip Rivers commented that Tech was “the best team we’ve played so far” and credited the Tech defense for sticking to its plan, executing it well and never stopping. A.J. Suggs, meanwhile, had what was probably his most solid game of the year, completing 21 of 36 for 211 yards and rushing for 23 yards.

With the Jackets winning their sixth of the season, they are now bowl eligible and may be looking at many different bowls depending on the outcome of the rest of the season. Chuck Edwards, the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl scout, said that Tech might be a good prospect because of the strong team and the large crowd that the hometown Jackets would likely bring. Much remains to be seen about the outcome of the season for Tech, but the future certainly looks brighter now.
Leadership key for CWS return

By Scott Meuleners / STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

Tech’s pitching squad, which carried the team in last year’s College World Series run, returns most of its guns and brings several newcomers.

By Al Przygocki
Senior Staff Writer

Last season saw the Joltin’ Jackets slam their way to Omaha and the College World Series. Coming off of one of the best seasons in school history, how will the 2003 Jackets stack up? After fall practices, a few questions were answered, but even more are still lingering. Let’s tackle them one by one.

Freshmen

This year’s recruiting class was ranked number one by both Baseball America and Collegiate Baseball. So, who’s going to play this year and who will have the biggest impact on 2003?

While the freshmen all look to be as good as advertised, look for Tyler Greene and Micah Owings to make the biggest impact right away. Tyler Greene stepped it up over the course of the fall and will be the starting shortstop to open the season. He should provide very good defense and his hitting should continue to develop.

Micah Owings had probably the best fall of the freshmen and looks to be able to step in right away as both a starting pitcher and a designated hitter. At this point, Jason Neighborgall is still a project. He has amazing stuff, as evidenced by the 98-mph fastball and devastating curveball witnessed by this observer. Unfortunately, the command isn’t there, which is one of the reasons he dropped in last year’s MLB draft.

Asked how Owings will be used this season, Head Coach Danny Hall said, “I can see him ending up being a weekend guy. I think he’s very talented. I
think he really competes. Mentally, he’s very strong. Of the freshmen, he is the closest to being ready to contribute right away.”

On the progress made by Tyler Greene in practices, Hall commented, “As the fall went on, he made a lot of great plays. He’s going to be a great player. He’s usually the first guy at practice and a lot of times the last guy to leave practice.”

“He’s very committed to being a great player, and he has a tremendous passion to be one of the best players in the country, and he wants to learn. There’ll be days where he plays like a freshman, and there’ll be a lot of days where everyone will see that he’s got a lot of talent.”

Also, look for several freshmen to fill key backup roles. Roswell’s Steven Blackwood projects as the team’s fourth outfielder and should see some time as a DH. Ryan Stanley will be the backup at first base, and Andy Hawranick is an excellent catch-and-throw guy who will be the reserve catcher. For now, Jon Crosby and Ryan Self will add depth to an already solid bullpen.

It was the pitching that really carried Tech down the stretch last year, and the staff returns all of its major contributors and adds some young guns. How will the new guys fit in and who will take which roles?

Kyle Bakker will continue to be the Ace of the staff, and Jeff Watchko will continue to be the closer. The other starters are projected to be Brian Burks, Chris Goodman, Kyle Schmidt, and Micah Owings. Keep an eye on Aaron Walker and Andrew Kown to possibly crack the starting rotation as both had outstanding falls. Jason Neighborgall is an incredible talent but has yet to put it all together. If he does get things turned around next season, he could propel Tech deep into the postseason.

The bullpen is loaded with talented pitchers. Jeff Watchko will once again be the closer, and he should once again receive solid setup work from Aaron Walker, Jeff Kindel, Nick Wagner, and Jordan Crews. Philip Perry will be redshirting this season as he recovers from Tommy John surgery. The pen will also include Andrew Kown, Chandler Miller, and the newcomers: Neighborgall, Jon Crosby, Ryan Self, Jared Hyatt, and John Berthelsen.

Asked about his depth of quality arms, Coach Hall answered, “I think this team has the pitching to go as far as possible. Our pitching is good enough to win a national championship.”

On Jason Neighborgall and his struggle to succeed, Coach Hall said, “He’s got tremendous ability. He’s got a lot to learn about everything. Guy’s like that, they can make a big jump. He’s got so much ability that he’s always going to stack up stuff-wise better than anybody we have. We’ve got to continue to develop him. We’ve got three months before we have to play. He’s got to use those three months well, to try to keep learning and improving. He’ll be a factor, whether it’s as a starter or a reliever or midweek guy. Some how, some way, he’s going to be a factor on this club. Potentially he’s a superstar.”

Defensive problems plagued the Jackets at inopportune times all last season and helped the Jackets take an earlier than expected exit from the College World Series. So, what have the Jackets done to shore up their defense for 2003?

Having Tyler Greene at shortstop should help plug some of the holes on the left side of the infield. Victor Menocal was an average shortstop defensively
who was really in the lineup more for his bat. Greene is the opposite at this stage of his career, as his defense is his primary strength.

Eric Patterson at second base started off slowly last year in the field, probably due to pressing at the plate, but ended the season as one of the team’s top defenders. Brandon Boggs in centerfield has a year of experience under his belt and should continue to show improvement on defense.

Catcher Mike Nickeas has also worked to become an even better catch-and-throw guy. This improved defense up the middle should help the Jackets close the gap on the top defensive teams next season.

On things to work on for the new season, Head Coach Danny Hall decided that, “The area we have got to get better in is defense. We are not a national championship-caliber defensive team right now. That’s one area we’ve got to get better at.”

Coach Hall continued, “I would also say that we are not a national championship-caliber offensive team right now either. We can be, but right now, no. We’ve got to get better on defense and see if offensively we can make some strides.”

Position Battles

Five position starters from the College World Series will not be returning this season. Who will step up and take their places in the starting lineup?

Third Base – This spot has been one of uncertainty for the past two seasons, and that’s certainly the case for 2003. The frontrunner for the job right now is Davis Myers, who is considered to be the strongest defensive candidate as well as being a good baserunner. Jake Hall is considered to be a better contact hitter, but his defense is not quite as good as Myers. Look for this battle to continue for most of the season with Cameron Lane and Garrett Groce also receiving consideration.

Shortstop – Tyler Greene turned down the pros for a chance to come to Tech and develop into the next Nomar. Just like Menocal, Greene will wear Nomar’s number five and looks to be able to grow into the next great Georgia Tech shortstop.

First Base – This spot should fall to Jason Perry’s regular backup last season, Clifton Remole. Remo should continue to provide pop from the left side of the plate and play solid defense. Don’t be surprised to see Micah Owings play first from time to time, and projected backup Ryan Stanley can also handle first base.

Catcher – This spot will also fall to last year’s backup. Mike Nickeas will succeed Tyler Parker behind the dish and is looking to show an improved offensive game to go with his already solid defense.

Centerfield – Brandon Boggs opened last season as the starting centerfielder. He lost that job to Wes Rynders due to miscues in the field and a lack of offensive pop. Brandon has all the tools to be a superstar in this game and should break out this year, both in the field and at the plate where he looks to erase the memories of a homer-less season.

Leadership

Tech has had all the talent in the world before but has only rarely translated that talent into postseason success. Last year’s team may have been one of the least talented Tech teams in a decade, but the went to the College World
Series on the strength of their senior leadership. Who will step into that leadership void and help mold this collection of great talent into a great team?

Initially, the leader of the team and the player most respected by his teammates is Jeff Watchko. Watchko has been in the program for four years, seen good times and bad times, and has a commanding presence. It can be hard for a pitcher to be a leader on a baseball team, simply due to the natural separation of pitchers and position players.

As such, watch for Eric Patterson and Matt Murton to step forward as leaders amongst the position players. Patterson can draw on his experiences with USA baseball, and Matt Murton leads by example with his work ethic and quiet strength.

“I think everyone respects Jeff Watchko,” Hall said. “He’s a senior, he’s been in the system for four years, and he’s the one guy I think everyone has total respect for. I look for him to be one of our big leaders. I think it has to come from a lot of different places.

“Of the position players,” Hall added. “As a sophomore Eric Patterson is one of the best leadership guys we have.”

“Murton does it in a little bit of a different way. He really works hard, and so he’s more of a leader by example. I think that’s something where we’ll have to see how it evolves. That’s one of the things where we want to see what they think as far as who the leaders are.”

CWS Hangover

How will last year’s trip to Omaha affect this year’s squad? Will they fight to get back? Will they rest on their laurels? Will they be able to avoid the trap of media hype that comes with a CWS trip and a number one ranked recruiting class?

“I think that they want to go back. Anyone who was there understood that we were very close to competing for the national championship,” Hall said.

“You eliminate a couple of innings, and we outplayed our opponents, but every inning counts. I’m hoping we learned from the experience of being out there. I’m hoping that experience motivates us to do better, but every year is different.”

“How this team gels, what type of chemistry they have, how hard they’re willing to work, what kind of sacrifices they are willing to make, those are all things that pertain to this year’s team, not last year’s team.”
WEEKEND PREVIEW

Georgia Tech vs. Florida State

By David Rottmann

Coaching:

This is a match-up of experienced coaches. Chan Gailey has coached for 28 years, including going to four Super Bowls and has this year’s Yellow Jacket team at 6-3 (3-3, ACC), a fine effort considering the circumstances Gailey has had to deal with. Bobby Bowden, who ranks second all-time to Joe Paterno with 329 wins, has his Florida State squad also at 6-3, but they are currently in first place in the ACC at 5-0.

The three FSU losses have come in a tough upset loss to Louisville in overtime, to then top-ranked Miami on a missed last-second field goal, and to a resurgent Notre Dame team. FSU is 10-7-1 against Tech throughout history, with all ten wins coming since the Seminoles joined the ACC in 1992. The Jackets have dropped five straight to the Noles at Bobby Dodd Stadium, which does not bode well for Tech.

Advantage: Florida State

Quarterback:

Both teams have gotten lackluster quarterback play throughout the season. Florida State will likely send out sophomore Adrian McPherson who was impressive in his first career start against Wake Forest last week. On the year McPherson is completing over 60% of his passes with six touchdowns and only one interception. McPherson replaced Chris Rix at starter due to Rix’s inconsistency.

A.J. Suggs has been playing solidly over the past few weeks. For the year he is completing 59% of his passes with nine touchdowns and seven interceptions to go along with his 181.4 yards-per-game average.

Advantage: Even

Running Back:

The Seminoles took a big blow in their win against Wake Forest. Bruising tailback Greg Jones went down with a torn ACL and other ligament damage. This puts the ACC’s leading rusher out for the season. Filling in for Jones will be senior Nick Maddox who rushed for a career-high 122 yards against Wake. Maddox is also a dangerous receiving threat.

Tech will continue to use a platoon of backs. Senior Gordon Clinkscale will get the start for the Jackets. Clinkscale ran for a career-high 94 yards with his lone touchdown on the year in the Jackets’ upset victory over eight-ranked N. C. State. Joining Clinkscale will be freshman walk-on P.J. Daniels and freshman “Ace” Eziemefe.

Advantage: Florida State
Wide Receivers:
Florida State’s senior receiver duo of Anquan Boldin and Talman Gardner is one of the best in the ACC. Both have a great combination of size and speed that make them dangerous threats in the passing game. Boldin is fourth in the ACC with 699 yards receiving. Both are averaging over sixteen yards-per-catch and have combined for thirteen touchdowns.

Georgia Tech’s Kerry Watkins leads the ACC in receptions and is third in receiving yards. Senior Will Glover and junior Jonathan Smith have failed to provide big play ability opposite Watkins. Glover is gaining just 8.6 yards-per-catch while Smith has not been much better with 10.7 yards-per-catch.

Advantage: Florida State

Offensive Line:
Florida State has one of the most talented offensive lines in the ACC. This group has four senior starters in tackle Brett Williams, guards Todd Williams and Montrae Holland, and center Antoine Mirambeau. Rounding out this group is talented sophomore tackle Ray Willis. However, they have allowed nineteen sacks on the year.

The Yellow Jacket O-line has been solid, allowing only three sacks in the last five games, and only thirteen total on the season. Led by sophomore tackle Nat Dorsey and junior center Hugh Reilly, both All-America candidates.

Advantage: Even

Defensive Line:
Probably the strength of Florida State’s defense is its defensive line. This group has nineteen sacks and 62 tackles for loss. Senior end Alonzo Jackson has a team-high seven sacks, and junior end Kevin Emanuel has a team-high fourteen tackles for loss. Talented defensive tackle Darnell Dockett leads all defensive linemen on the team in tackles with 40, placing him fourth on the team.

Tech has two young ends in sophomore Tony Hargrove and red-shirt freshman Eric Henderson. Henderson leads the team in tackles for loss with eleven. They each have three sacks as well, tying them for second on the squad. Tackles Travis Parker and Alfred Malone have been solid, but not very productive.

Advantage: Florida State

Linebackers:
The Seminoles have possibly the fastest set of linebackers in the nation. Led by outside linebackers Kendyll Pope and Michael Boulware, the Florida State linebackers are effective against both the run and the pass. Pope has emerged as one of the league’s top linebackers with 77 tackles and seven tackles for loss.

Georgia Tech has a great set of linebackers. Junior middle linebacker Daryl Smith leads the team with 63 tackles and four sacks and ranks second with ten tackles for loss. Senior outside linebacker Recardo Wimbush is second on the team with 61 tackles. Junior outside linebacker Keyaron Fox is third on the team in tackles and tackles for loss.

Advantage: Georgia Tech
Secondary:
The Florida State secondary is the weakest part of this defense. They have good depth at corner, with four players that have starting experience, led by junior Rufus Brown. The safeties are young, but quite talented. Sophomore Jerome Carter headlines this group along with fellow sophomores B.J. Ward and Kyler Hall.

Tech has an experienced group in the secondary. They are led by senior safeties Jeremy Muyers and Cory Collins, who rank fourth and fifth on the team in tackles respectively. Muyers also has a team-high four interceptions. Corners Marvious Hester and Jonathan Cox, both 5'10,” may have some trouble guarding Florida State’s big receivers.

Advantage: Georgia Tech

Special Teams:
Despite a solid season for place kicker Xavier Beitia, wide left will continue to haunt him. The sophomore has gone 16-22 on field goals. Senior punter Chance Gwaltney is a solid punter averaging 41.1 yards-per-punt. Return specialist Leon Washington is averaging over twelve yards on each punt return and over 32 yards on kickoff returns, including a 97-yard kickoff return for a touchdown.

Georgia Tech special teams have been solid all season. Kicker Luke Manget is 9-13 on field goals and with his ten points against N.C. State passed Scott Sisson to become Tech’s all-time leading scorer. Manget’s consecutive PAT streak is now at 153. The punter duo of Dan Dyke and Chris Morehouse has combined for an average of 40.2 yards-per-punt. Tech return specialists have been consistent but have not broken many big plays.

Advantage: Even
Evaluating the BCS: For once the ‘C’ isn’t silent

By John Parsons
Senior Staff Writer

Last weekend provided the first major shakeup in the BCS. Four of the last eight undefeated teams in Division 1-A fell, leaving Oklahoma, Ohio State, Miami and Bowling Green. Miami even slipped behind Ohio State in the BCS after playing Rutgers close before a 34-point fourth quarter explosion won the game by a 48-17 margin. They trailed the Scarlet Knights 17-14 heading into the fourth quarter!

How’s that for a challenge to one’s manhood: trailing the Scarlet “Anythings” in football heading into the fourth quarter. Ohio State, meanwhile, demolished the far more fearsome Golden Gophers of Minnesota by a 34-3 margin.

Oklahoma has to be considered the best the nation right now after mowing down Texas, Iowa State and Colorado in the last four weeks. It’s even more impressive if you consider that all three of those teams were riding high heading into their respective matchups with the Sooners. In fact, they all had winning streaks of at least five games snapped by the Sooners.

Miami can still make up ground with their remaining schedule, which consisted of visits to Knoxville and Syracuse and hosting Pittsburgh and Virginia Tech. My guess is that it would be Ohio State left out of the party if all three major undefeated teams finished that way.

It is pretty obvious from glancing at the rest of the standings that strength of schedule plays a much stronger role this year.

Why else would thrice beaten Florida and FSU each be in the top fifteen. This emphasis on schedule strength seems to already be having a positive affect on the game.

Already this year we’ve seen FSU/Notre Dame and Miami/Florida matchups that used to be reserved for bowl games. This weekend Tennessee will host Miami. No doubt ADs will start looking for more of these types of non-conference opponents, especially for teams in conferences like the Big East where there just aren’t enough quality opponents within the conference make a case for inclusion in the title game, especially when carrying a loss.

I guess the only thing that puzzles me about the polls this week is how far Colorado fell after a loss to Oklahoma. Meanwhile, Georgia and Notre Dame barely moved after losses to opponents perceived as inferior. You’d think that Florida and Boston College would at least make significant gains in the polls, but that didn’t happen either. To close out this college football themed column, I think the Michigan State coaching situation needs addressing. Bobby Williams was fired this week after the program’s worst loss in 55
years left the team with a 3-6 record.

That doesn’t get you fired, however. The most telling moment in the whole issues was his response when he was asked if he had lost the team.

He said, “I don’t know.” That is as close to “yes” as you’re going to get in response to that question. I can only say that it’s about time.

The team had already lost two of its captains. Quarterback Jeff Smoker was suspended for “violating team rules,” which can be as little as missing curfew or as big as a nice way of saying he has a drug and/or alcohol problem. It turns out it was the latter.

Then tailback Dawan Moss went Randy Moss on a cop after a traffic stop (Memo to NYPD: Beware of pulling over Santana). So what Williams meant to say was: “Lost the team? What team? I don’t see a team.”
SPORTS BRIEFS

Tech basketball season opens Friday

Tech basketball fans can get their first look at the 2002-2003 men and women’s teams at HoopsFest on Friday, Nov. 8, at 7 p.m., at Alexander Memorial Coliseum at McDonald’s Center. Admission is free, and both teams will scrimmage and be available for autographs and photos. There will be contests and games for fans of all ages and 150 T-shirts will be given away.

Paintball team takes home SEC Championships

The Georgia Tech Tournament Paintball Team took home the first place trophy in their first NCPA (National Collegiate Paintball Association) event. The team competed in the championships against the UGA, Clemson, Virginia Tech, the Citadel, and Oklahoma State. Tech is currently ranked No. 9 in the nation after competing in only a single event.

No. 24 Volleyball tames Tigers

The Georgia Tech volleyball team defeated Clemson in four games, 30-23, 30-27, 25-30, 30-26 on Tuesday night. With the win, the Yellow Jackets improve to 24-5, 10-3 Atlantic Coast Conference while the Tigers fall to 15-13, 6-7 ACC.

Memorial toy drive at FSU-Tech football game

The Michael Isenhour Memorial Toy Drive to Benefit Kids with Cancer will be held this Saturday at Bobby Dodd Stadium. Collection of toys will begin 1 hour prior to kick-off. All toys collected will be donated to Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and the Ronald McDonald House. Students are encouraged to bring unwrapped, unused toys to any gate surrounding the stadium.