

By John Chuhran  
CaMMVets Media

West Point, N.Y. – After winning its sixth game of the year, Army (6-0, 5-0 in the American Athletic Conference) has finally started to draw some attention on a national level. Last Saturday's 44-10 win over the University of Alabama at Birmingham was Army's third consecutive win in which the Black Knights scored over 40 points and the team leads the nation in most rushing yards per game and, defensively, ranks fourth in fewest rushing yards allowed and is number one in Red Zone defense.

The strong start to the season has earned Army the No. 23 ranking in the Associated Press poll and No. 24 in the US LBM Coaches poll. This is the first time the Black Knights have been nationally ranked since 2020. Steve Spurrier – the former Heisman Trophy winner, 1996 NCAA football championship-winning coach, and member of the College Football Hall of Fame – currently ranks Army as the fourth-best college team in the land.

For everybody in the country that's ranked, it's a source of pride," Said Army Head Coach Jeff Monken. "But it only really matters where a team is ranked at the very end (of the year), so we're just striving to be the best team that we can be week in and week out. But certainly, it's a source of pride for our Academy, for the United States Army, for our fans, for our players and their families. We should strive to represent all those that we represent as well as we can."

Army has no time to dwell on its rankings. This Saturday at noon, the Black Knights host the Pirates of East Carolina (3-3, 1-1) with broadcast coverage on ESPN2 TV and the Army Sports Network (Radio). The game is already a sellout.

Traditionally one of the better teams in the AAC, East Carolina has had two weeks to prepare for its matchup with the Black Knights. Monken expects the visitors to be a difficult opponent largely because of the familiarity the Pirates coaching staff has with the triple-option offense used by Army; Head Coach Mike Houston used the option earlier in his career and others on his staff have experience defending against it.

"Mike Houston has done such a great job," Monken said. "They (the Pirates) are talented, well coached, fast, physical. It's unique, really, to be facing a head coach with so much experience against the option, and a defensive coordinator (Blake Harrell) with so much experience against the option. They've played an option team in the league (Navy) for several years, but Mike was the head coach at a school (The Citadel) where they ran the option and their defensive coordinator has been the defensive coordinator at two different schools where they ran the option, so they've got a lot of experience and it's going to take a tremendous effort on our part to prepare both offensively and defensively."

"I think we have a huge challenge this week," added Army Offensive Coordinator Cody Worley. "I know how they're coached and I know their head coach. I know the culture that they try to instill. I know their defensive staff really well. I think that they're going to be motivated beyond belief – they're going to come in here motivated to get a win in conference play, to upset a ranked team, to play on the road. There's a lot of motivating factors and I think anytime you get two weeks to prepare for an opponent, it certainly helps."

That said, Army has played exceptionally well so far this year. The Black Knights are the top rushing team in college football (avg. 369.8 yards per game), and Quarterback Bryson Daily was named winner of the Walter Camp Football Foundation Offensive player of the week after scoring four rushing touchdowns and passing for a fifth in the win over UAB. The coaches know that Daily's success is shared by the rest of the offensive unit, especially the offensive line – Center Brady Small, Guards Bill Katsigiannis and Paolo Gennarelli, and Tackles Connor Finucane – which ranks second in fewest tackles for loss allowed and in sacks allowed all while opening the holes and clearing the lanes for Army rushers, and has consistently held the pocket open to allow Army to lead the country in Passing Efficiency.

“What sets this one apart from others (he has coached in past years) is health,” Monken said. “They've remained healthy. We started the same offensive line five, six games in a row. They've been durable and just played really well together. There's been times where we've had some second-team guys come in and take some reps and they've really been able to continue to play as a unit, which is encouraging. That first unit of guys I just think is playing particularly well together. They're physical and they're strong.

“They're veteran players and with success comes more confidence. We've been able to run the football and do a good job at the line of scrimmage creating some seams for our backs. We don't throw it a whole lot, but they've done a good job with protection when we have. So I think they're just playing well, playing confident. I really like that group of guys. I think the offensive line is an important unit on every team and ours really sets the tone for the temperament and personality of our team.”

The Army running attack may be even stronger against ECU. Fifth-year running back Tyrell Robinson (who has gained 1,541 ground yards while at West Point) has been working hard to come back from the second serious knee injury of his college career. He may be ready to make his season debut on Saturday. Despite seeing no game action this year, he continues to be an important part of the Black Knights as a team.

“There are a lot of players that come back from this injury that are as good or better than they've ever been,” Monken said. “And there's some that come back from injuries like that that aren't the same and don't ever look like what they were before. I hope that he's able to play at a level that he feels competitive. You know, nothing's more frustrating for an athlete than to not have a body that works like you want it to. That's the remarkable thing about T-Rob – his attitude, his energy, his leadership. Nobody had to boost him up, he's continued to boost up people around him.

“It's really hard as a player that's injured to remain in a leadership position, to provide positive leadership for the guys on the team, when you're not out there in the huddle and you're not taking reps. But he's got a personality, and certainly earned the respect of everybody in this program. He's just a special young, dynamic leader. All I care about is him going out there and trying his hardest and giving it his all. I think our trainers and our medical staff are going to make sure that he's healthy enough to be able to play and that he's ready. If he's not ready, they won't let him play. And that's the right decision. I know that regardless of what he looks like physically, he's going to help our football team just because of who he is and his leadership and his effort.”

Other areas where Army focuses and excels are in time of possession (34:27 – third nationally), fewest turnovers (first in the nation), and fewest penalties committed (third in the country).

Key players to watch on the Pirates include running backs Rahjai Harris (200 carries for 416 yards and three touchdowns), London Montgomery (19 carries for 125 yards and a TD), and Javious Bond (14 carries for 94 yards and a TD). Quarterback Jake Garcia has completed 109 of 181 passes with 8 TD and 12 interceptions. Top receivers are Winston Wright Jr. (25 catches for 280 yards and 2 TD), Chase Sowell (19 for 298), and Anthony Smith (18 for 284 and 2 TD).

Defensively, ECU is led by Omar Rogers (42 tackles, 1.5 tackles for loss, 1 int), Zaky Barker (40, 7 tfl, 1 int, 1 forced fumble), and Michael Edwards III (37, 8 tfl, 0.5 sack).

Monken cited two keys to a potential victory.

“I think we need to work really hard at not turning the ball over,” Monken said. “We did that once earlier this year. That's one too many, so we've got to hang on to the ball. It's hard to control a game on offense if you don't have the football, so we work really hard at that. We'll continue to do that this week. We place a great emphasis on it. We drill it and, hopefully, our guys will do a good job with ball security. Number two, we've got to do a good job of blocking them at the line of scrimmage and creating some seams for our running backs and that's going to be a challenge. Securing the ball and getting them blocked up front will likely be two of the biggest factors in our ability to move the chains and gain yards in the run game.”

(- CaMMVets Media -)