

Remember the names



Seniors depart as winningest class in program history after three FCS National Championship appearances

By CATIE HARPER
The Breeze

Not long after losing the FCS National Championship game, redshirt seniors Ron'Dell Carter, Ben DiNucci and Riley Stapleton each walked off the stage following the postgame press conference.

Before each left the platform, head coach Curt Cignetti stopped them, one by one, for a simple handshake. The exchanges were quick between the fifth-year seniors and the first-year head coach, but they signified the end of a run.

The trio of players sat to address the media only a few minutes prior. Their faces were blank — occasionally forming into flashes of disappointment and sadness — as they fielded questions on topics from the loss to their time with the program.

"There's got to be a winner every game,

there's got to be a loser every game, and we just happened to come up on the short end of the stick today," DiNucci said as he looked toward the ground.

Coming into the national title game, the JMU senior class had already cemented itself as one of the best to wear the purple and gold. It's the winningest class in program history with 51 victories and six players named to 2019 All-American lists, and some were FCS National Champions in 2016.

For Stapleton, his entire college career has been based in Harrisonburg. The Indiana, Pennsylvania, native redshirted his first season at JMU but later became a constant threat at the wide receiver position, finishing second in program history for receptions (169), fifth in receiving yards (2,113) and second in receiving touchdowns (22).

"It's tough to put in, like, one or two sentences," Stapleton said with a slight shake of his head. "It's been an amazing experience. I wouldn't change it for the world. JMU holds a special place in my heart, and, uh, it's tough to look back right now just because this hurts so much."

Even though Carter and DiNucci started their careers elsewhere — both playing in the FBS first at Rutgers and Pitt, respectively — their importance to JMU football can't be denied. DiNucci, a two-year starter at quarterback, climbed into the record books after only playing in 28 games.

The Wexford, Pennsylvania, native finished his career as a Duke tied for third in program history for completions (479), fourth in passing touchdowns (45) and seventh for total offense (6,718). DiNucci also fought his way to a major comeback after a difficult end to last season.



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"I haven't been here for four years, but I've had the pleasure being here for the last two," DiNucci said. "It sure feels like I've been here for four or five [years]. These guys have been nothing but brothers to me."

Carter joined the JMU football program in 2017 fresh off its first FCS National Championship win since 2004. His brother, Robert, was on the team from 2015 to 2018, and sitting in Frisco, Texas, that Saturday, Carter told the media he wished he never went anywhere other than JMU.

The defensive lineman played one season at Rutgers before reuniting with his brother in Harrisonburg. During his time playing for the Dukes, Carter became one of the top defensive players in the country.

During the 2019 season alone, Carter epitomized a senior leader on and off the field. He recorded 66 tackles, 12 sacks and

27 tackles for loss. Carter's disruption in the backfield this season earned him eight First Team All-American selections, and he was also selected as a STATS FCS Buck Buchanan Award Top-3 Finalist.

"I transferred in here three years ago, and it was for this reason — to compete for a national championship," Carter said. "Those guys in that locker room, I wouldn't trade them for the world. Win, lose or draw, I want those guys to the end."

While the trio won't take the field again for JMU, the players who wait behind them for their own chance have had at least a season to learn from teammates like Carter, DiNucci and Stapleton.

During Saturday's contest, there were glimpses of the future when athletes like redshirt sophomore quarterback Gage Moloney and freshman running back Latrele Palmer took the field.

"This place was good when I came in," Carter said. "I've been fortunate to

see great leaders before I got here — the Bryan Schors, Andrew Ankrabs, Simeyon Robinsons ... All of us were able to learn from them, and we were able to basically preach all that stuff to the young guys, and hopefully, they'll just carry on the legacy."

When the three Dukes walked out of the press conference, they headed down the hallway of Toyota Stadium and into the locker room. Carter took off the No. 5, DiNucci the No. 6 and Stapleton the No. 10 for the last time as JMU football players.

They won't be back for spring camp in a few months, but that doesn't mean football is over for the three or any of the other seniors. There's always a chance to play on Sundays.

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PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE BREEZE



Riley Stapleton (left) had 100 receiving yards and two touchdowns against North Dakota State, while Agyei-Obese ran for 76 yards.

Change of guard

Opinion | JMU football's recruits and underclassmen are vital for continued success for the Dukes

By NOAH ZIEGLER
The Breeze

JMU football is about to undergo a transitional period.

No, the Dukes won't have a down year because of the number of seniors leaving following their 2019 FCS Championship loss. It's clear JMU has enough talent returning to the fray next season.

In the 2020 season, there will be a complete change in the faces of the team.

Fifth-year players like wide receiver Riley Stapleton and cornerback Rashad Robinson became fan favorites with clutch plays in high-profile games, etching their names in the JMU history books. Quarterback Ben DiNucci and wide receiver Brandon Polk didn't begin their collegiate careers in Harrisonburg, but they eventually found a home at Bridgeforth Stadium and took major strides in 2019. Defensive ends Ron'Dell Carter and John Daka — leaving as true seniors — have terrorized opposing quarterbacks but now will move on and attempt to play professionally.

The next-man-up mentality is going to be tested. Head coach Curt Cignetti has preached that mantra all season long, but this is a big

offseason for him after completing his first year at the helm.

Cignetti and his coaching staff need a new quarterback and will be replacing the top two wide receivers, key members on the defensive line, a primary linebacker and a couple of defensive backs. On both sides of the ball, Cignetti will have plenty of time to find players that fit his system.

The late signing period is less than a month away, meaning more recruits will sign their letters of intent to play for the Dukes. The transfer portal will give more FBS players the opportunity at a fresh start, an important tool for FCS teams to use to bolster their squads.

JMU has proven it can take FBS players and develop them into the top players in the country. Carter and DiNucci, who came from Rutgers and Pitt, respectively, were named First Team All-CAA and found themselves on numerous award watchlists. Polk, the Dukes' top receiver this season, came from Penn State for his final season of eligibility.

It's the standard JMU has set in past years that makes it an attractive program for players to join, whether they're coming from a Power-5 school or deciding as a senior in high school.

But, finding replacements for players whose achievements are difficult to replicate is the next task Cignetti must complete in order for the Dukes to remain in the top portion of the FCS rankings.

With a dramatic change of guard, Cignetti has the opportunity to show that he can bring in his own players and remain competitive. He did it by bringing in Polk in the summer, but he had the luxury of having returning players with experience. Finding similar players is crucial, but the underclassmen on JMU's roster have proven their talent will prevent any hiccups in the 2020 season.

The entire running back group is returning, including junior Percy Agyei-Obese, who's coming off a 1,216-yard season. Freshman Latrele Palmer got valuable minutes in the national championship against North Dakota State and carried the ball 60 times over the course of the 2019 campaign, averaging 4.7 yards per attempt.

The offense Cignetti and offensive coordinator Shane Montgomery brought to JMU is one that relies heavily on the run game to give it an opportunity to pass or utilize run-pass option plays. Returning every running back on the

roster is good for a team searching for its next quarterback, but what plays a crucial role in the success of running backs is the offensive line.

The Dukes lose two key linemen — Mac Patrick and Jahee Jackson — but return three starting O-Linemen. Incoming freshman Tyler Stephens and Stanley Hubbard, a UConn transfer, will also provide reinforcements for Jackson and Patrick's absence.

Other transfers like safety Joseph Norwood from UMass and defensive end Abi N-Okonji will also get the chance to establish a big presence in the team with the departures of Carter, Daka and senior safety Adam Smith.

The transfer portal is vital for competitive FCS teams, and Cignetti's staff recognizes that. There's talent on the Dukes' roster ahead of the 2020 season, but additional players are expected to come. The next few months are important for the outlook of the team, but the coaching staff is already working to reload and get back to Frisco, Texas, in a year's time.

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SAMANTHA LINCZYC / THE BREEZE



'It doesn't even feel real'

JMU football players react to the Dukes' FCS National Championship loss to North Dakota State

By NOAH ZIEGLER
The Breeze

JMU football's players are still digesting what happened.

From a near upset of FBS power West Virginia in late August to rampaging through the regular season and playoffs, the Dukes' season came to a close at the biggest stage of FCS football.

JMU had the chance to play spoiler in NDSU's dynasty yet again and prove that the program belongs in the same echelon as the Bison. It was a chance for No. 2 to prove itself as the true No. 1 team, but its magic ran short.

The Dukes defeated five ranked teams in the regular season before adding two wins over seeded opponents in the playoffs. The team built a resume that few teams could match, even after falling short in the 2020 FCS National Championship.

"Right now, to be honest, it doesn't even feel real," redshirt senior cornerback Rashad Robinson said. "It's still kind of a shock to think that's my last game. For five years, for what I've been through and the other guys in the locker room have been through, it hasn't really hit me yet."

Robinson was a member of the 2016 JMU

team that won the program's second national championship, interrupting NDSU's run of five straight FCS titles. A season later, he was named the 2018 CAA Preseason Defensive Player of the Year, but a season-ending injury before the campaign began allowed him to be back in 2019.

Back as the team's top cornerback, Robinson's ball-hawk ability helped shut down opposing wide receivers. Redshirt junior safety D'Angelo Amos and senior safety Adam Smith also played a significant role in the team's secondary, but Robinson's experience and leadership played a major role in the development of the younger defensive backs.

Robinson ended the title game with five total tackles. He said he plans to take a week off and recuperate before training for the team's Pro Day.

"It's been an honor," Robinson said. "In 2015, I made the best decision of my life to come here

and play for JMU. These five years, I wouldn't have it any other way."

What makes the current JMU roster unique is the number of starters who transferred from other schools. Senior tight end Dylan Stapleton, who came from Division II's Slippery Rock, joined the team following his sophomore season.

Against NDSU, Stapleton had six catches for 66 yards and converted multiple first downs. His play kept a few JMU drives alive during the second-half comeback, but he said the slow start put the Dukes in a position that they ultimately couldn't climb out of.

"Pretty rough start in the first half. [They] hit us on a couple of trick plays, and the fake field goal hurt," Stapleton said. "I think our offense stalled a little bit in the first half, but I thought we played better in the second half. We got it down to the wire, just couldn't finish."

When the offense stalled, NDSU redshirt freshman quarterback Trey Lance thrived. He finished the game with 166 rushing yards — the

first time any player has rushed for over 100 yards against JMU this season — and one touchdown. His 44-yard touchdown in the second quarter was a critical point in the contest and showcased how quickly he can turn the momentum around.

Redshirt senior linebacker Dimitri Holloway said Lance's ability to run the ball gave the Bison a major advantage. On plays where the running back takes the ball, the quarterback is effectively nonexistent, meaning there's one less blocker for the defense to worry about. But when the QB runs it, the running back can block for him, allowing more gaps to be busted open.

With the 2019-20 season now finished, the team will now undergo a transition period. The seniors who have either graduated or will graduate in May will say their goodbyes, and the next wave of recruits will arrive in Harrisonburg with the same goals as the veterans did years ago. To senior defensive end John Daka, the blueprint has been made, and the talent will continue to flourish.

"This isn't the last time you'll see the Dukes in Frisco," Daka said.

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Relive the FCS National Championship

The top photos from the Dukes' and Bison's showdown in Frisco, Texas

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