

Delta State too much for Eagles

Dropped balls, missed opportunities spell doom for Eagles in playoffs

HBCSports Press Association

DURHAM, NC, Nov. 25 – For the second-straight season, North Carolina Central was hosting a second round playoff game after receiving a first round bye. And for the second straight year the opponent was from the Gulf South Conference; this year's opponent was Delta State.

Delta State scored 21 unanswered points in route to a 24-17 victory over North Carolina Central at O'Kelly-Riddick Stadium. The Eagles lose for the first time this season and finish the season 11-1.

North Carolina Central got on the board first when Tyrone Williams's interception-return setup a Stafford Brown (22-40-1-255-2) to Wayne Blackwell 9-yard touchdown early in the first quarter giving the Eagles a 7-0 lead. NCCU held the Statesmen high-powered passing offense to another punt and the Eagles had outstanding field position poised to score again. On 1st and 10 Brown found a wide open Charles Futrell (9 receptions 131 yards), but Futrell, trying to place his feet and make the catch, dropped the ball, one of six on the day for the Eagles. The Eagles drive stalled and on 4th and 2 from the Delta State 25, the Eagles opted to go for it instead of bringing in kicker Brandon Gilbert, the hero in NCCU's win two weeks ago. Brown was sacked and the Statesmen took over on downs.

The momentum had clearly shifted as the Statesmen (10-2) put together a 10-play, 75-yard drive capped off by Scott Eyster's 7-yard touchdown pass to Jeremy Ricks tying the score at 7-7. Delta State would score on its next two possessions – an Eyster to Robert Davis 67-yard touchdown and a Steven Davis 10-yard run – putting them up 21-7. As the Eagles offense stalled during its four possessions, the Eagles thought they had caught a break. Down 14-7 Gilbert's punt appeared to hit Monterio James as he called for the fair catch and the ball went through his hands. NCCU recovered and scored what was an apparent touchdown as signaled by one official. But after a conference the officials determined the ball had not touched James which led to the third score.

"I thought the ball hit the guy and we recovered it," said NCCU head coach Rod Broadway. "It was just that clear."

"I did not touch the ball," said James.

Late in the half the Eagles put together and 11-play, 51-yard drive that took 1:11 off the clock and led to a 40-yard field goal by Gilbert, but the Statesmen led 21-10 at halftime. Delta State gained 289 yards of total offense in the half, the most given up by NCCU in a half all season.

In the second half the Eagles defense stepped up. After the Eagles held the Statesmen to a three-and-out early in the 4th, receiving outstanding field position, Brown engineered a 4-play, 57-yard touchdown drive, one in which he had a 17-yard carry. Two plays later Brown found Daunte' Fields in the end zone for a 12-yard touchdown pass to cut the NCCU deficit to 24-17.

The Eagles had one more opportunity to tie the game. Late in the game on 4th and 5, Brown found tight end Kenneth Broadway who made an outstanding leap and grab for 12 yards to the Delta State 7 extending the drive. On the very next play, Brown rolled to his right looking for Futrell in the end zone and was intercepted by James who cut in front of the route. Eyster, who

completed 21-of-34 passes for 264 yards, engineered a drive to run out the clock that included completing two crucial third downs.

Said Eagles senior safety Andre George: "He [Eyster] kept me off all day. Things I expected to key on during the game I couldn't key on. He's the best quarterback I've faced."