

2008 & 2009 NAIA NATIONAL FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

Hosted by Rome/Floyd County and Shorter College

315 Shorter Avenue • Rome, Georgia 30165 • (706) 233-7347 • Fax (706) 233-7575

CHAMPIONSHIP UPDATE: THE ROAD TO ROME Hawks Hope for Play-off Opportunity

Note: The 53rd Annual Russell Athletic-NAIA Football National Championship will be held in Rome, Georgia on Saturday, December 20th. In conjunction with the game, Rome's Host Committee will provide periodic updates on the city and its preparations for this event as well as any local items of interest. This article is the first in that series.

Rome, GA - When Rome, Georgia was selected as the site of the 53rd annual NAIA National Football Championship in January of this year, Shorter College football coach Phil Jones was asked about the chances of the local school playing in the game. Jones, trying to be positive, publicly stated that, "Obviously, there's a slim chance (that we could play for a title) and as long as it's an open chance, we want to work toward having the opportunity to do that." In reality, the coach was thinking there wasn't much of a chance for his program, just in its 4th year, to even make the playoffs, much less appear in the championship game. Now, ten months later, the Hawks' coach may be having second thoughts.

With an 8-2 record and coming off a strong 35-0 win over conference foe, Belhaven College, the Hawks have surprisingly put themselves right in the middle of the play-off picture.

"You know, we always tell our kids that we need to take it one game at a time. At this point, I guess it's kind of simple. If we can beat a very talented and dangerous Bethel College (Tenn.) team at their place next week and finish 9-2, I think we are certainly playoff worthy. With a loss, we are done. I really don't think any team with three losses has much of a chance." Just as the selection of Rome as the host city for the Championship game surprised many, so has the Hawks ascension to the top levels of the NAIA football world.

Currently ranked 21st in the nation in the NAIA's most recent poll, Shorter hopes that it can somehow claw its way into the playoffs and at least give themselves a chance to make it to what is becoming the premier sports event in their home town. Playing what some consider one of the toughest schedules in the country - the Hawks compete in the very competitive Mid-South Conference - Shorter is hoping the pollsters will start to take notice of the season they are having.

In addition to Shorter, the Mid-South has four other top 25 teams including 18th ranked Union College, who Shorter defeated earlier in the season. In addition to a tough conference schedule, the Hawks also put together a daunting out of conference schedule, facing FCS Division I opponent Western Carolina and Division II North Greenville Christian University. If that wasn't enough, the Hawks intra-state rival, LaGrange College, is currently 8-1 and will play for its conference championship next week.

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"One of the reasons that we play so many higher level teams is because we have no other NAIA football schools in Georgia," said Shorter Athletic Director, Bill Peterson. "In addition, Coach Jones likes to test our team early to help us get ready for conference play. We think these kinds of games are also good for the NAIA, especially when you are successful."

In that department, the Hawks have done well. With a solid two touchdown win over North Greenville and as the only team to beat LaGrange, Shorter has held its own against its NCAA counterparts. Nonetheless, the Hawks did lose to Western Carolina, whose conference champion, Appalachian State, beat Michigan last year in a game that was a major triumph for all of small college football. Without that loss, the Hawks would stand 8-1 and most certainly be rated as one of the top 15 NAIA teams in the country.

"We really don't think the pollsters will penalize us for losing to a Division I program," added Peterson. "In a lot of the computer rankings, we are a Top 10 team because of strength of schedule. We know that fact will eventually be recognized by the NAIA pollsters."

The Hawks only other loss came in the last 39 seconds of a 42-38 shoot-out with Lambuth University. Lambuth, currently ranked 12th in the nation, also stands 8-2 and is on an eight game winning streak. In addition to a strong schedule, the Hawks' rise to the top can also be traced to a bruising offense and a hardnosed defense. Shorter leads the country in rushing offense, with an average of over 320 yards per game on the ground. In addition to their offensive prowess, the Hawks lead the Mid-South in scoring defense.

Individually, Shorter running back A.J. Cooley remains as one of the top NAIA players in the nation as the junior is ranked in the top 10 in four categories - No. 2 in all purpose yards (169 yards a game), No. 3 in rushing (135.6 ypg), No. 5 in scoring/TDs (11 ppg) and No. 7 in kickoff returns (27.0). In senior Lukas Gonzalez, the Hawks also have one of the country's best kickers and punters. Seemingly, the Hawks have put together the total package that might indeed earn them a shot at the play-offs.

On Saturday, Shorter celebrated their final regular season home game against Belhaven College with 'NAIA Jam the Joint Day' as an opportunity for the citizens of Rome and Floyd County to experience an NAIA football game. Shorter offered a special ticket price of \$1.00 per person for this special celebration and members of the NAIA Host Committee were on hand for early ticket sales to the NAIA Championship Game. One of those present was Host Committee co-chairman, Bob Berry, who marveled at Shorter's 35-0 win over Belhaven.

"It is hard to imagine that there are 16 teams in the country that are better than Shorter," Berry said. "They have the complete package of offense, defense and special teams and I hope they at least get their chance."