

Conquest getting blocking again

By Mike MacAdam

By any standards, getting outscored, 36-7, in the second half of a game is an unqualified disaster.

The dam didn't just leak, it shattered.

The Albany Conquest gave up four sacks in the season opener against Mahoning Valley, including two in the second half, one of which resulted in a safety that helped keep the momentum swinging in the Thunder's favor.

Since then, the Conquest (2-1) have shored up their offensive line, and quarterback Dan Cole, the former Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute star who is tied for the league lead in net passing yards per game, has flourished.

That means Mahoning Valley (1-3) will see a profoundly different team at 7 tonight at the Times Union Center, particularly in the offensive line, from the one the Thunder beat, 59-33. Since then, Mahoning Valley has lost three straight, and the Conquest have won two straight, with a chance for their first three-game winning streak in almost four years.

"The blocking is better, especially for the center and the fullback, because they have to work together the most, and after a couple of games, they're getting better and better

every week," Cole said.

"Overall, the line has stepped it up," said Conquest lineman Woody Telfort, a 6-foot-7, 325-pounder from Northwestern State. "We've been having good practices, and that's followed up in the games.

"With the line blocking the way they are right now, I think he's more comfortable back there."

Part of the line's turnaround has been the addition of 300-pound fullback Norm Bauer, who did not play in the season opener, but has been in the lineup for the two victories.

He has proven to be a strong complement to center Marcus Ferguson.

"They're in sync with each other," Conquest head coach Jeff Hoffman said.

"Marcus Ferguson has really done a great job, compared from the first game to this game," Cole said. "He's been a leader right through training camp, and is a big part of our success, so far."

Telfort was a late arrival to camp, and didn't join the lineup until the second game of the season.

Jacobs Hobbs has not dressed for the last two games, but Hoffman said he wants to get him back in there at some point.

"Woody Telfort has gotten an opportunity, and has been doing an awesome job," Hoffman said. "I tried to go with the chemistry of the first group because they were together the whole camp. We had a couple glaring things that needed to be addressed and we took care of it. Even some of the guys that were on there initially, like Jacob Hobbs, will get another opportunity at some point. It's just when that's the question."

The improved line play has allowed the Conquest to absorb the loss of receiver Jared Jones, who will be on the injured list for three more weeks, but should be healed and ready to go in two.

Antwun Williams has caught 10 passes in each of the victories over Peoria and Manchester.

“Antwun’s been here a couple years, and we had a good rapport last year in the couple of games I played,” Cole said. “He has all the tools. I don’t think he has a weakness to his game. He has good hands, he has good speed, he’s not a burner, but he runs really good routes, and the thing that separates him from other people in the league is he will go after any ball, no matter where it is. He’ll sell out his body to make a catch.”

“That’s expected from Antwun,” Hoffman said. “To say he’s stepped up, I wouldn’t use that term, because that’s what I expected of him. Chris Bocage stepped in, and Vernard Abrams did a good job as well. Our receiving corps is pretty solid across the board. You’d think you would take a big drop losing somebody like Jared, but the guys stepped up.”

Cole leads arenafootball2 with 295.3 offensive yards per game, and is tied in average passing yards at 271.0.

After playing in just two games last season, he has been putting up big numbers, no matter who his primary target is.

“He’s playing lights out,” Hoffman said. “Going into the season, I expected this from him. He sat a lot last year, and got some playing time at the end of the season. He learned the game, and this is his team. They’re following his lead, and he’s doing a great job leading the guys, and they believe in him and if we need a big play, he’ll get it done. In the same breath, Dan believe in his players.”

Albany is 0-3 in the all-time

series against Mahoning Valley.

Although the Thunder have lost three in a row since beating the Conquest, Mahong Valley has continued to hold its opponents to a relatively low score. No one has scored more than 45 points on the Thunder.

“I know they’ve dropped three in a row, but two of them have been on the last play of the game and had some blown calls by the official, so they could very easily and should be 3-1,” Hoffman said. “And the difference for us from the first game is the offensive unit has been blocking for the quarterback.”