

Conquest need to protect quarterback, get passing game going

By Bob Weiner

Some problems are hard to solve.

Although the Albany Conquest thought they had fixed their pass protection deficiencies early in the season, that weakness resurfaced during the team's recent three-game losing streak.

If the Conquest hope to get back on the winning track, they must find a way to keep quarterback Dan Cole out of harm's way. That will be the focus tonight at 7, when

Albany (3-4) takes on the Manchester Wolves (1-6) in an arenafootball2 game at the Times Union Center.

The Conquest, still in second place in the American Conference East Division, are coming off their worst offensive performance of the season in a 69-27 loss to the

Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Pioneers last Friday night at Wachovia Arena. In that game, Albany was held to 153 total yards.

"They [the Pioneers] did everything right against us last week," said Albany head coach Jeff Hoffman. "They shut down our offense and our defense. About the only thing we did right was special teams. Often, special teams is the difference between winning and losing, but that's not the case when you are so bad in the other two categories.

"The Pioneers are a great team. They have a lot of talent, and I knew we had to play a special game to have a chance against them. But the biggest thing for us was that we didn't block. I didn't count how many times Dan got hit in that game, but he got hit way too often."

The Conquest have played well when they protect Coles, but lately he has been under pressure, especially in the second half against the Pioneers.

"We couldn't complete many passes last week, and it was a combination of Dan being under constant pressure, where he probably had to throw the ball sooner than his receivers broke toward the ball, and the fact that our receivers dropped some passes against some excellent Pioneers' defenders," Hoffman said.

"But it all comes down to protection for us. We need to improve our pass protection at all costs. We've been very efficient offensively, in terms of points and yardage, this season when Dan has time to pass, but when we don't protect him, it leads to a lot of dropped passes."

In order to strengthen his offensive line, which lost one member when Schenectady High School and UAlbany graduate Jacob Hobbs signed with the New York Giants, Hoffman said he is trying to make a few player moves.

"I'm trying to bring in a lineman or two to challenge the guys. I've got another guy coming in

[today], but he can't play yet. There are some other talented people I'm trying to bring in to step up, and one of them is a former player for us named Agean Robinson. He's played in this league before, and he knows the system. There is a good chance he may play against the Wolves."

Offensive specialist Jared Jones, who has missed several games because of a knee injury, is finally ready to return to the lineup, **even though USC graduate Chris Bocage has filled in admirably.**

“If I can get Jared into the game, I’ll play him,” Hoffman said. “Chris will play also. I’m pleased with Chris’ progress. Hopefully, the other guys can make the same kind of progress that Chris has.”

Bocage, who recorded a game-high 224 all-purpose yards against Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, leads the Conquest in that category with 1,051 (632 kickoff return, 382 receiving, 37 rushing). He’s sixth in the league with an average of 175.2 all-purpose yards per game.

Antwun Williams, who was one of the Conquest’s few bright spots against the Pioneers with six catches, 58 yards and three touchdowns, leads Albany in reception (42), receiving yards (576) and touchdowns (14).

Cole, the former Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute standout, has completed 145 of 264 passes for 1,735 yards and 34 scores.

Manchester will be trying to snap a six-game losing streak. The Wolves have used four different quarterbacks this season. Since Albany’s week No. 4 defeat of the Wolves, Manchester has revamped its lineup. There are nine new players on the roster.

“I would say that Manchester is a whole different team than the one we faced,” said Hoffman. “They’ve got four new guys on offense, and maybe five or six new guys on defense. Plus, they went toe to toe with the No. 1 team in the league recently. They’ve lost their last three games by six points or less. If our guys think they can just walk in and beat these guys, they are mistaken.”

James Pinkney is expected to start at quarterback for the Wolves. He has completed 53 of 89 passes for 675 yards and 12 touchdowns in his three starts. Bradley Chavez is the team’s top receiver with 47 receptions for 586 yards and 14 scores, while Emery Sammons is next with 44 catches for 615 yards and 13 TDs.