

THE ROAD TO FRISCO

A look back at Jacksonville State University's 2015 Championship Season



Produced by the Marketing Department of The Anniston Star
Content & photos provided by Star staff writers and photographers

JSU VS. CHATTANOOGA

Sept. 5, 2015

Win 23-20

JSU starts season strong with win over Chattanooga

Jacksonville State came to Chattanooga looking to start building its FCS playoff resumé against another top 10 team.

The Gamecocks came away with the kind of drive that launches dream seasons.

Miles Jones' 1-yard touchdown leap with 2:41 to play clinched a 10-play, 79-yard drive to answer No. 8 Chattanooga's go-ahead touchdown return of a Troymaine Pope fumble, and No. 9 JSU held on for a 23-20 victory at Finley Stadium.

So much also went right for JSU in this one, starting with Pope's performance. The senior and Anniston High grad looking to succeed JSU great DaMarcus James rushed for a career-high 173 yards on 15 carries.

JSU's defense came up with two big fourth-down stops on their side of midfield, one in the second quarter and one in the fourth.

The Gamecocks also forced a three-and-out after Jones' go-ahead touchdown, and Darius Jackson's emphatic sack of Jacob Huesman after the Mocs got the ball back with eight seconds left ended the game.

Gamecocks' big season-opening opportunity looked in doubt when they took over on their 21-yard line with 8:11 to play.

It would take nine more plays for JSU to cover the final 30 yards, including two fourth-down conversions. Jones' 4-yard run converted fourth-and-two from UTC's 22, and Jenkins' quick pass to a leaping Josh Barge turned fourth-and-three at the 11 into first-and-goal at the Mocs' 3.

Two plays later, Jones went over the right side for the go-ahead score, and Rouleau's kick made it 23-20.

The Gamecocks' defense followed with a three-and-out and — following a five-play possession that saw JSU run the clock from 1:52 to 0:08 — ended the game on Jackson's sack.



JSU VS. AUBURN

Sept. 12, 2015

Loss 20-27

JSU pushes Auburn to brink of upset in 27-20 overtime game

AUBURN — Ranked fifth in Football Championship Subdivision, the Gamecocks led Football Bowl Subdivision's sixth-ranked team by a touchdown until the final 39 seconds of regulation.

Auburn won 27-20 in overtime, but the day and game were most meaningful for JSU.

The Gamecocks got the attention of the college football world once again. Five years after upsetting SEC member Ole Miss, they pushed the preseason SEC favorite to the brink of a landmark upset in a game televised by the SEC Network.

JSU ran a Gus-like 89 plays to the 70 run by Malzahn's team, held a near-11-minute edge in time of possession and outgained Auburn 438 yards to 401.

They say the team that makes the most possessions end in a kick has the best chance to win, and eight of 12 JSU possessions ended in kicks. Time expired on possessions at the ends of both halves. The overtime possession ended on downs.

Another possession ended on Eli Jenkins' one bad decision, a throw into double coverage that resulted in Rudy Ford's interception in Auburn's end zone.

The rest ended in kicks. Problem was, two JSU possessions that ended in kicks ended in missed field goals. A shanked punt set up Auburn's game-tying touchdown with 39 seconds left in regulation.

Then came the three catch/no catch/out-of-bounds calls at the same end zone pylon, plays that apparently stunned Auburn's new, nine-story scoreboard into forgetting its replay function.

JSU's patient, possession passing while moving the pocket and rolling Jenkins away from pressure kept the Gamecock offense on the field a lot longer than Auburn's.

Jenkins' passing was the staple. In stretches, his read-option keepers were JSU's best running play.

His 314 total yards accounted for 72 percent of JSU's total offense on a day when JSU outgained a Malzahn-coached offense.

In the end, JSU grew, even if the game goes down as merely near-miss FCS takedown of a top 10 FBS team.



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Go Gamecocks! Good Luck in Frisco!



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JSU VS. TENNESSEE STATE

Sept. 19, 2015
W 48-13

Top-ranked Gamecocks throttle Tennessee State

JACKSONVILLE — Luckily for the Jacksonville State Gamecocks, their scoreboard was plenty big enough to handle all the points they poured on Ohio Valley Conference for Tennessee State on Saturday.

Coming off what could have been a spirit-breaking overtime loss on the day Auburn unveiled its monster scoreboard, the Gamecocks spanked TSU 48-13 to give the home crowd something to crow about.

The No. 1-ranked Gamecocks battled the usually stingy Tigers to a scoreless tie in the first quarter in front of a JSU Stadium record crowd of 23,413 before pouring on the points. Jax State rolled to a 21-0 lead at the half and 38-13 after three quarters. JSU head coach John Grass said he really wanted more, after his team missed a field goal on its opening drive and quarterback Eli Jenkins was intercepted at the Tigers' 17 on the second.

The JSU offense, led by Jenkins's 95 yards on nine rushes and 162 yards and two touchdowns on 14-for-23 passing, was 7-of-9 in the red zone with five TDs. The Gamecocks averaged 6.9 yards a play and controlled time of possession following the opening period.

Jenkins got his two touchdown passes in the second quarter, the first a 21-yarder lobbed to a wide-open Markis Merrill to cap an 11-play, 80-yard drive and the second to Josh Barge from 9 yards out. Ruben Gonzalez had his second straight game with eight catches, this time for a career-best 109 yards to lead the Gamecocks.

JSU got two touchdowns from Miles Jones, both on 2-yard runs. Another came on Kentucky transfer Josh Clemons' first JSU score. Jarren Johnson ran 17 yards with 53 seconds remaining for the final TD. Connor Rouleau kicked a 34-yard field goal early in the third quarter and Cade Stinnett booted a 22-yarder early in the fourth.



VOTE

Ray

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JSU VS. UT MARTIN

Sept. 26, 2015

W 48-41

JSU football: No. 1 Gamecocks hold off late UT Martin rally

MARTIN, Tenn. — For three quarters on Sept. 26, the No. 1 Jacksonville State Gamecocks were sailing toward an easy win over Ohio Valley Conference for Tennessee Martin. Just when almost everybody thought it was over, the good ship Gamecocks hit some rocky shores.

JSU righted the ship, though, and eased past the Skyhawks 48-41. The Gamecocks carried a 48-20 lead into the final 10 minutes of the game at Hardy Graham Stadium, but touchdown passes of 63, 16 and 39 yards by Jarod Neal put the fear of a stunning upset in the Gamecock faithful.

Jenkins fumbled the snap on the first play of the second half, and Terrious Triplett scooped it up and rambled 22 yards for a touchdown. The Gamecocks' lead was cut to 28-20, but the visitors responded with three straight touchdowns before the final quarter's sudden shift.

After UTM forced the Gamecocks to punt — for the only time of the game — on their next possession, Jenkins made up for his miscue leading his team to three straight scores. He completed five passes, including a 17-yard touchdown to Barge in a 13-play drive to go up 35-20. Then on a fourth-and-eight, he made a miraculous escape from pressure by running first to the right hash then to the left before hitting Troymaine Pope with a short pitch that he turned into an 18-yard gain.

Four plays later, Jenkins bowled over a Skyhawk defensive back for a 1-yard score. Finally, Jenkins directed a 12-play, 63-yard scoring drive capped by Josh Clemons' 4-yard run to put the Gamecocks up 48-20 with 10:39 left in the final period.

The Skyhawks were 1-for-2 on onside kicks, recovering the one following a 16-yard TD with 5:56 left in the game that had narrowed JSU's lead to 48-34, followed by a 39-yard TD on that 54-yard possession and the game was down to a touchdown margin with 4:26 left.





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JSU VS. MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE

Oct. 3, 2015

W 49-7

Top-ranked Jacksonville State mauls Mississippi Valley State

JACKSONVILLE — Top-ranked Jacksonville State crushed Mississippi Valley State 49-7 in front of a rain-soaked 13,889 fans to improve to 4-1 on the year. The JSU defense set a school record with 18 tackles for a loss against the 0-5 Delta Devils out of the Southwestern Athletic Conference. The Gamecocks piled up 494 yards while holding the visitors to 194 — 68 on the ground — against what is still a makeshift front with none of the opening-week defensive line starters playing even one snap. Mississippi Valley converted just 1 of 14 third-down attempts.

All-star cornerback Jermaine Hough got his first interception of the year, returning it 37 yards to set up a 2-yard touchdown run by Troymaine Pope. Hough's theft was one of four on the day for the Gamecocks.

Quarterback Eli Jenkins threw sparingly in the rain, but he completed 7 of 10 passes for 127 yards and a score. He was intercepted once and ran for 48 yards and a pair of touchdowns, from 22 and 20 yards. Dalton Screws led the receiving corps with three catches for 49 yards, Ruben Gonzalez caught two for 47 with a 14-yard TD.

Pope also scored the first time he touched the ball on a 32-yard rush around left end and finished with exactly 100 yards on just seven touches. Josh Clemons punished the Delta Devils for 98 yards on 13 attempts and scored on a 12-yard run. Eight other Gamecocks carried the ball on the day, piling up 328 yards on the turf.

Bo Billups, a little-used senior from Birmingham, got the final TD of the game for JSU, plunging in from a yard out.

The Gamecocks never trailed, but led only 14-7 when Mississippi Valley quarterback Ruban Thurston Jr. broke free for a 29-yard touchdown on a fourth-and-23 with 12:38 left in the half.



JSU VS. TENNESSEE TECH

Oct. 17, 2015

W 42-13

Jenkins overcomes illness to help JSU overpower Tennessee Tech

COOKEVILLE, Tenn. — Eli Jenkins won long-deserved statewide acclaim for his performance against Auburn earlier this season, but it's one of many gems for Jacksonville State's third-year starting quarterback.

Add his performance in just two-and-a-half quarters of play at Tennessee Tech to the list.

Coming off a week where he lost 10 pounds from a stomach virus, Jenkins threw for 184 yards, rushed for 86 and accounted for three touchdowns to lead top-ranked JSU to a 42-13 rout of its latest Ohio Valley Conference opponent.

JSU also got 134 yards total offense (89 rushing) from senior Troymaine Pope. His day included a 30-yard catch-and-run touchdown off a Jenkins scramble. Miles Jones added 63 yards on eight rushes, including a 45-yard touchdown run in the third quarter. JoJo Wynn added a 65-yard touchdown run with 54 seconds left, and Josh Clemons scored from 3 yards out in the second quarter.

JSU finished with 619 total yards, 341 on the ground. The Gamecocks passed 400 yards total offense for the 17th straight game.

Meanwhile, JSU's defense got in on the scoring fun when true freshman Monty Young, a Saks High graduate, sacked Tech's Colby Brown for a safety in the third quarter.

With the return of tackle Devaunte Sigler, end Darius Jackson and bandit Chris Landrum from injuries, the Gamecocks held Tech to Dorian Carter's 1-yard run with 1:04 to play and John Arnold field goals of 43 and 29 yards in the first half.

Scrambling, throwing and keeping on read-option runs, Jenkins led the Gamecocks to a 33-6 lead by 8:27 of the third quarter, coming out of the game for good at that point. Backup Christian LeMay mopped up.



JSU VS. AUSTIN PEAY

October 24, 2015

W 27-7

Jacksonville State's fast start steamrolls Austin Peay

CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. — Perfection. Well, at least in the record book.

The Jacksonville State Gamecocks rolled to a huge lead and coasted past Austin Peay 27-7 on the road to stay perfect in the Ohio Valley Conference. For the Gamecocks, it looked something — perhaps a lot — less than perfect in the second half.

Winless Austin Peay outscored the No. 1-ranked Gamecocks 7-0 in the second half as a mixture of JSU backups and front-liners managed only 97 yards after intermission. All five of Jacksonville State's punts came in the second half.

Quarterback Eli Jenkins threw for 189 yards, completing 18 of 26

throws. He ran for 25 more and scored on a 1-yard sneak near the end of the first half, his next-to-last play of the game, that pushed the visitors' lead to 27-0.

Miles Jones led seven Jax State ball-carriers with 56 yards on 16 rushes, including a 1-yard TD. Josh Clemons had nine carries for 46 yards, while Troymaine Pope ran six times for 27 yards and a 10-yard TD to start the scoring on JSU's first possession. Connor Rouleau kicked a pair of field goals, from 30 and 28 yards, and added three extra points.

Finally, on the offensive plus side, Josh Barge and Anthony Johnson had six catches apiece — for 62 and 54 yards, respectively. JSU quarterbacks Jenkins, Christian LeMay (5 for 13 with an interception) and Dalton Etheridge (1 for 2) connected with nine different receivers.

Defensively, the Gamecocks were school-record spectacular against the Governors. Jacksonville State held Austin Peay to 82 yards of total offense. APSU gained 17 yards on the ground — 0.6 yards per attempt.

APSU's lone score came with 1:43 left in the third quarter on the first drive into JSU territory all day. Quarterback Trey Taylor found Jared Beard in the front corner of the end zone for the TD from 5 yards out.

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JSU VS. EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY (HOMECOMING)

Oct. 31, 2015

W 34-0

Gamecocks smash Eastern Kentucky

JACKSONVILLE — His players say that Jacksonville State head coach John Grass really likes Halloween. After the Gamecocks vandalized Eastern Kentucky's reputation as a top-15 FCS team with a 34-0 shellacking, Grass had reason to be excited.

The Gamecocks put the heat on No. 13-ranked EKU in a hurry. Linebacker Dawson Wells de-cleated the Colonels' kickoff returner at his 13-yard line to set the JSU tone. After one first down, EKU punted for the first of 11 times. In the opening half, the Colonels managed 51 yards rushing and 50 through the air and surrendered 299 total yards to the Gamecocks.

Up 7-0 after one quarter thanks to a season-best 96-yard, 11-play drive, the Gamecocks crushed EKU's hopes in the second period. One play after quarterback Eli Jenkins lost a fumble at the EKU 46-yard-line, linebacker Wells picked off Bennie Coney and rambled 48 yards for his first collegiate touchdown.

JSU pushed it to 21-0 on its next possession with Pope's 1-yard run after a 70-yard drive. Connor Rouleau then hit his first of two field goals with 13 seconds left in the half, a 41-yarder capping a 62-yard march. Rouleau hit the crossbar in the third quarter, just missing from 47 yards, and made a 37-yard field goal to close out the scoring with just over five minutes left in the game.

After intermission, Barge ended a trademark JSU quick-strike touchdown drive with his 26-yard score to cap a four-play, 53-yard possession that lasted 1 minute, 53 seconds. Barge caught a 30-yard pass to set up his TD and suffered a hand injury on that drive that sent him to the locker room.

The shutout was the first against the Colonels by an OVC team since the Gamecocks blanked them 28-0 in 2006. JSU has held EKU without a touchdown for nine straight quarters and has outscored the Colonels 122-16 over the past three seasons, all wins for the Gamecocks.

JSU VS. EASTERN ILLINOIS

Nov. 7, 2015

W 24-3

JSU football: Gamecocks inch closer to OVC championship

CHARLESTON, Ill. — Quarterback Eli Jenkins rolled left on a bootleg, looking for something to shake his Jacksonville State Gamecocks out of their offensive doldrums. He found it, 43 yards away in the back — the way, way back — of the south end zone at O'Brien Field in Dalton Screws.

Screws secured the long, high spiraling pass near the end line for a touchdown to snap a deadlock with Eastern Illinois, and the No. 1-ranked Gamecocks pulled away for a 24-3 win in a key Ohio Valley Conference road game.

In the opening half, the Panthers broke up a scoreless first-quarter tie thanks to a goal-line stand that forced JSU to give up the ball at EIU's 3-yard-line after two Miles Jones' dives failed to gain. Eastern Illinois then gashed the Gamecocks for 16 plays to move 91 yards before being forced to settle for a 23-yard Nick Bruno field goal.

Jacksonville State's Connor Rouleau tied the game with a 23-yard field goal of his own, this one with 15 seconds left in the first half.

That tie finally snapped with 15 seconds left in the third period, when Screws broke free as an Eastern Illinois defender closed in on Jenkins. The quarterback found him and let loose just as he was pounded to the turf by the hard-charging rusher. Screws, a junior out of Wellborn High, adjusted on the ball and cradled it as he tumbled out of the end zone.

The JSU defense smashed EIU's offense for one of 11 three-and-outs in 14 tries, then the Gamecocks put together their best sustained offensive drive of the chilly afternoon with Troymaine Pope racing in for a 10-yard touchdown. On the first play after the kickoff with JSU up 17-3, linebacker Dawson Wells picked off Jalen Whitlow's pass and sprinted 35 yards for his second TD interception in two weeks. Jacksonville State had scored three touchdowns in 4 minutes, 12 seconds of game time. Game totally over.



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JSU VS. SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE

Nov. 14, 2015
W 56-28

Jacksonville State streaks past SEMO to clinch OVC title

JACKSONVILLE — It is a tribute to the domination that the Jacksonville State Gamecocks have shown over the Ohio Valley Conference for the past two years that one of the least impressive numbers to come out of Saturday's win over Southeast Missouri State was the score.

The 56-28 romp gave JSU the outright OVC title for the second straight year. The No. 1 Gamecocks improved to 9-1 overall and 7-0 in the league.

A win over 3-7 Murray State to wrap up the regular season next week would seal a second straight perfect league run. Jacksonville State hasn't lost an OVC game since Nov. 16, 2013, for a string of 16 straight — the nation's longest active conference win streak now that Harvard lost on Saturday.

Five different Gamecocks got in the end zone in the rout. Markis Merrill got it started, hauling in a 28-yard pass from Jenkins for the only score in the first period.

After SEMO quarterback Dante Vandeven tied it with a 3-yard run with 10:36 left in the half, the Gamecocks reeled off four straight scores to put the game away. Barge caught his two scoring passes (4 and 24 yards, from Jenkins) to push the home team up 21-7 at the half.

Miles Jones ran 22 yards for a touchdown, sandwiched between Pope's 2- and 30-yard scoring blasts. The Gamecocks were up 42-14 after three quarters. LeMay got his 42-yard TD with 10:24 left in the game and his 51-yarder with 8:50 to play, following a 99-yard kickoff return by Cameron Sanders for the Redhawks.

Jacksonville State now has won eight straight vs. Southeast Missouri and is 16-4 all-time.



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JSU VS. MURRAY STATE

Nov. 21, 2015

W 42-20

JSU Gamecocks blast Murray State, await playoff seeding fate

JACKSONVILLE — The Jacksonville State Gamecocks did almost all they could do on the field to prove they have earned the top seed in the upcoming FCS playoffs. Saturday's 42-20 whipping of Murray State provided an exclamation point to a second straight perfect 8-0 record in the Ohio Valley Conference.

JSU quarterback Eli Jenkins led the Gamecocks to another 500-yard performance with 504, passing for 212 yards, completing 15 of 30 with an interception. JSU had 16 tackles behind the line of scrimmage with senior Chris Landrum notching 4.5, a school record that boosted him into first in Jax State history with 33.5 for his career.

The Gamecocks sputtered in the second and third quarters. After junior phenom Josh Barge caught a 13-yard TD pass from Jenkins on the first snap of the second period to go up 21-3, JSU punted on five of its next seven possessions and lost an interception and a fumble — for a TD — on the other two.

The Gamecocks scored on two of their next three tries, though, to seal the deal.

Murray State got 398 yards, with 310 coming through the air, and Humphries completed 22 of 45 passes with one TD and one interception. The Racers got a pair of field goals from Connor Mitchell and a 1-yard scoop-and-score touchdown from nose tackle Demetrius Mason. Humphries did connect with Dominique Rhymes for a 35-yard score midway through the final quarter.

Senior Troymaine Pope ran for 78 yards on 17 carries, including a 22-yard touchdown to open the scoring. The redshirt junior had 130 yards, bolstered by his 65-yard touchdown run to close out the scoring. He also scored on a 7-yard first-quarter run and a 24-yard third-period scamper.

Barge's second touchdown came on a 27-yard throw late in the third quarter. Another redshirt junior, Barge had seven catches for 92 yards. Markis Merrill had 98 yards receiving for the winners on just four catches with a long play of 43 yards while Miles Jones ran for 76 yards on 12 attempts.



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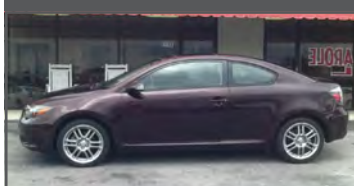


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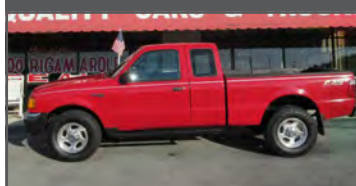


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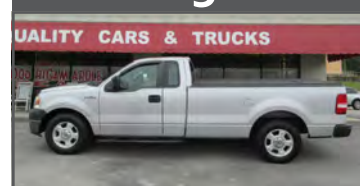


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JSU VS. UTC

Dec. 5, 2015

W 41-35

JSU football: Gamecocks survive with 41-35 win over Chattanooga in overtime thriller

JACKSONVILLE – Tournament football is all about “survive and advance.” Jacksonville State-Chattanooga II turned out to be all about survival.

The No. 1-ranked Gamecocks rallied again and again after twice losing a two-touchdown lead to beat UTC 41-35 in overtime in the second round of the FCS playoffs. In front of 21,452 at Burgess-Snow Field, Jenkins ended the game with a 14-yard run on JSU’s second OT snap.

The visitors scored first with 35 seconds left in the opening period, when Huesman bull-rushed his way into the end zone to cap a 91-yard, eight-play drive. One snap before the TD, JSU fans thought Folo Johnson had forced C.J. Board to fumble out of the end zone, but it was marked out at the 1.

JSU answered immediately, scoring on Jenkins’ 5-yarder to cap a 51-yard, three-play march.

Pope then got his first score, from five yards out, after a 90-yard drive on nine snaps. Jenkins confounded the Mocs’ defense to push JSU’s lead to 21-7 with his 10-yard run that started right, stopped in the center of the field for a stutter-step or two, and finished when he crashed through two defenders at the left hash.

Huesman shocked the Gamecocks with a two-play drive after the ensuing kickoff, first with a 20-yard pass to James Stovall and then a 45-yard TD run with 53 seconds left in the half.

Pope put the Gamecocks on the board again just four plays into the second half with his 49-yard TD run. When JSU missed a 39-yard field goal, Chattanooga trimmed the margin to 28-21 as Stovall caught a wide-open drag route from 7 yards out.

Two plays into the fourth quarter, Alphonso Stewart caught a 15-yard pass from Huesman to tie the game at 28. When a Jenkins-to-Josh Barge throw into the end zone bounced off the leaping wideout’s hands, C.J. Fritz intercepted to set up a go-ahead score on a 39-yard Huesman-to-Alejandro Bennifield pass with 8:35 left.

Pope exploded through a big gap in the UTC line for his 75-yard touchdown with 4:40 to play in regulation for the third tie in the game.

JSU linebacker Brandon Bender set up Jenkins’ heroics by intercepting a 14-yard Jacob Huesman pass in the end zone on the Mocs’ third play to open the extra period. The senior could have bookended the game with thefts as Chattanooga’s first play of the game was a pass that went through his hands.





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JSU VS. CHARLESTON SOUTHERN

Dec. 11, 2015
W 58-38

Pope, Jenkins lead second-half explosion as JSU advances to FCS semifinals

JACKSONVILLE – Troymaine Pope and Eli Jenkins ran wild in the second half of Friday night's FCS playoff game as the Jacksonville State Gamecocks stayed up late to spank No. 8 seed Charleston Southern 58-38 to roll into next week's semifinals.

The top-seeded and No. 1-ranked Gamecocks turned a 13-10 halftime lead into a 34-17 third-quarter advantage on the strength of long-distance touchdowns by Pope and Jenkins and a more pedestrian 11-yard scamper by Miles Jones. Pope had a 76-yard score on the second snap of the second half, while Jenkins scored on an 83-yard thing of beauty, diving the final three yards for the pylon. It was the longest TD of his JSU career.

Pope finished with a JSU-playoff-best 250 yards on 16 carries with fourth-quarter TD runs of 44 and 54 yards on his way to the Gamecocks' single-season rushing record of 1,576 yards. Jenkins ran 21 times for 195 yards and threw for 91 more. The junior quarterback also scored on a 1-yard keeper with 11:05 left in the game, after his 49-yard run for an apparent score was overturned on a replay review.

Connor Rouleau kicked a JSU-postseason-best three field goals, with a 35-yarder to put the home team up 10-0 and two 38-yarders, with 2:48 left in the first half (13-10) and 3:48 left in the game that made it 51-38. He also added seven extra points.

Both of the long kickoff returns came in the final period and set up a one-play scoring drive, thanks to a 21-yard pass from Kyle Copeland to Nathan Perera and a two-play drive from the 6-yard line that had Copeland running it in from the 3.

Copeland's run cut JSU's lead to 48-38.

After what proved to be Charleston Southern's final score, Rouleau kicked his final 38-yard field goal, then Pope popped his 54-yard TD run with 2:16 remaining in the game.



Good Luck Gamecocks!

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JSU VS. SAM HOUSTON STATE

Dec. 19, 2015

W 62-10

Next up for Jax State: A trip to Texas to play for a national title

JACKSONVILLE — Revenge was sweet — and stunning and brutal.

The Jacksonville State Gamecocks paid back Sam Houston State for knocking them out of the playoffs a year ago by crushing the Bearkats 62-10 on Saturday and cruising into the FCS national title game for the first time.

The No. 1-ranked Gamecocks blistered Sam Houston for 41 points and 314 yards in the first half. The first of three lost fumbles for the visitors came on the game's opening kickoff. The opening kick went to the Bearkats' 31, where Hayden Cagle was separated from the ball by Lawon DeBardelaben's big hit, and Santavius Oden pounced on it.

Four plays later, JSU quarterback Eli Jenkins was in the end zone on a 1-yard run, and the rout was on. JSU's stifling defense forced Briscoe to fumble on its first possession after the one-time UAB backup had driven the Bearkats to the Gamecocks' 15. Desmond Owino separated the QB from the ball, and E.J. Moss recovered.

Anniston's Troymaine Pope made short work of Sam Houston's defense, scampering 62 yards for a score on the fifth play of the drive to put the Gamecocks up 14-0. Darius Jackson knocked the ball loose from Briscoe on Sam Houston's next possession. Chris Landrum recovered to set up the first of two Rouleau field goals, this one from 36 yards out. Rouleau also made a 22-yarder late in the half.

JSU outscored Sam Houston 24-10 in the second quarter, thanks to touchdowns on a 3-yard run by Miles Jones, a 12-yard pass from Jenkins to Ruben Gonzalez and a 7-yarder by Pope.

After Rouleau's second field goal, the Gamecocks took advantage of Rashod Byers' 30-yard interception return to the Sam Houston 7-yard-line when Pope carried it in on first down.

In the third period, the Gamecocks got another Jenkins-to-Gonzalez score on an 8-yard pass and another 3-yard TD run by Jones. Backup QB Christian LeMay closed out the scoring with a 13-yard run with 9:29 to play in the game.

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