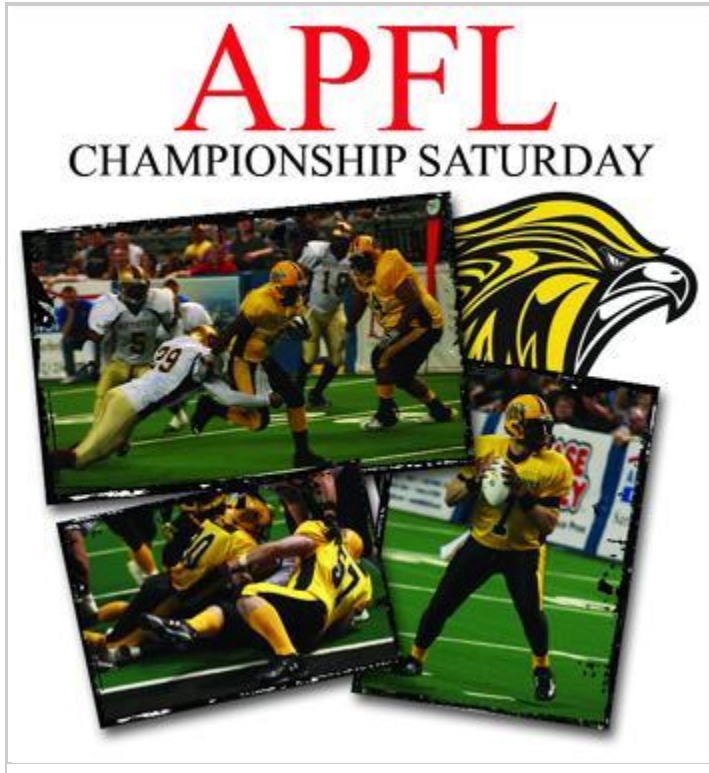


Blackhawks carry long history with Kansas into final



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The brief history of the American Professional Football League has been dominated by the Kansas Koyotes. In its seven years of existence, the indoor team from Topeka, Kan., has won 62 of its 69 games and has captured all six of the league championships to date.

Iowa is one of the few teams in the APFL that has had any sort of success against Kansas. But the Blackhawks have struggled mightily against the six-time champions in the playoffs.

In each of the past four seasons, Iowa's title hopes have ended against the Koyotes at Landon Arena in Topeka. When the two teams meet again Saturday for the 2009 APFL championship, there will be one big difference ... we're not in Kansas anymore.

By winning two of the three regular-season games between the two 8-2 teams this season, the Blackhawks earned the right to host the title game for the first time. And when the ball goes in the air at the Mid-America Center at 6:05 p.m. Saturday, there will be no love lost between the indoor rivals.

"I have none," Iowa offensive lineman Tyrice Ellebb said. "The rivalry's intense. There's a lot of bad blood there. There's been a lot of close games against the Koyotes in the last four or five years. It is very intense."

This will be the third time Iowa has faced Kansas in the championship game. The last meeting in 2007 was a forgettable affair that was dominated by the Koyotes. The first, which occurred in 2005, was the exact opposite. And it still lingers in the minds of some of the Blackhawks.

Iowa trailed late that night, but quarterback Chuck Wright engineered a length-of-the-field drive in the final minute to put the Blackhawks up by one with a touchdown and two-point conversion. The lead didn't last long, though. Kansas

kicker Jerry Lakin crushed Iowa's hopes by knocking home a game-winning field goal as time expired.

Ironically, Lakin now kicks for the Blackhawks. And those remaining from the 2005 team haven't let him forget about how he broke their hearts.

"That was the worst feeling I've ever in my life," Ellebb said. "Losing that close just tore me apart. That's why I've stuck it out this long."

At age 31, Ellebb is the oldest player on the Iowa roster. Wright, 29, is the most experienced. The quarterback is in his sixth season with the team and said he's the only player remaining from the Blackhawks' first APFL squad in 2004, which finished the season at 1-5 before going all the way to the title game the following year.

Like Ellebb, Wright said the 2005 championship loss still stings. But the former Dana College star said it was a great experience for the entire Iowa organization to build on.

"It got us in the position that we're in now ... to have the championship game in our home place," he said. "That's something that's never happened. To have an opportunity to bring the first championship to Council Bluffs, I'm just excited about it."

In the first game with Kansas at the MAC this season, Wright led Iowa back from a 15-point deficit in the fourth quarter to win 34-31 on a Lakin field goal in the final minute. The Blackhawks followed that up with a convincing 55-35 victory at Landon, which virtually locked up the top seed for the postseason. Kansas won the third game in Topeka 42-41 in overtime.

After that last game, Wright said he spoke to some of the vets on the Koyote roster.

"I told them, 'We'll see you on the 25th in our place,'" he said. "You bring whatever you want to bring, and we'll bring the kitchen sink. Then we'll just go to war."

Both teams should be fresh coming into the game. Kansas had to win a playoff game already while the Blackhawks have been out of action for three weeks.

Wright said Iowa is as ready as it can be for Saturday. And he hinted the game could be his final one after six seasons if the Blackhawks can finish better than they did in 2005.

"We want to have the same storybook ending that we did the first time we made it to the title game," he said, "except with the opposite outcome."