

Sports



PHOTOS BY LINDSAY FENDT

ABOVE: The Elon University defense held the Duke University rushing game to 4.3 yards and 192 total yards in the Sept. 4 game.
LEFT TOP: Freshman wide receiver Kierre Brown caught a 30-yard touchdown pass against Duke with 40 seconds left in the game.
LEFT BOTTOM: Junior tight end Andre Labinowicz had one reception for eight yards in the 27-41 loss against the Blue Devils.



Youth shines through on 2010 football team

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Sports Editor

True freshman wide receiver Kierre Brown ran a route down the right side of the field that led him to the end zone. With a 30-yard pass from senior quarterback Scott Riddle, Brown recorded a touchdown in his first-ever collegiate game.

"Kierre Brown came in, and it was good to see that," Riddle said. "If somebody goes down, you know we got another guy out there that can play. We got some weapons, we just have to find a way to utilize them a little more."

Brown wasn't the only freshman who took the field against Duke. In the 27-41 loss against the Blue Devils Sept. 4, nine freshmen saw playing time. Three of those were starters.

"As freshmen, the guys that keep up with that pace are the ones that find themselves on the field," head coach Pete Lembo said.

Freshmen and sophomores combined to make up just less than half of the athletes in the season-opening matchup. On defense, the Phoenix started as many underclassmen as it did seniors.

For these young players,

Saturday's game provided valuable understanding that no practice can give, Lembo said.

"Saturday was a great learning experience," he said. "It's so fast-moving. It's definitely a learning curve."

Not only were there many young players who participated, but there were also experienced players who got starting positions for the first time.

Lembo referenced players like junior defensive lineman Khirey Walker and sophomore wide receiver Aaron Mellete, who played in games last season but didn't have a starting role.

"Better programs are going to have new starters, but a lot of them have been in the system," Lembo said. "So when it comes their turn to be a starter, it's not totally new to them."

Sometimes experienced players aren't the ones who are able to line up before the snap. Sometimes younger players have to step up and fill a role on the team.

It can turn out well, like in Brown's case.

But it can also turn out poorly, like when it came to penalties against Duke.

The Phoenix drew eight penalties Saturday, seven of

which came in the first half.

"There were too many. There's no question about that," Lembo said. "In all cases, they were all guys playing their first game."

Two of those penalties were because the center was starting his first game and got thrown off, Lembo said.

"It was a lot of first-game jitters," sophomore defensive back Dale Riley said. "Players got over-hyped and made poor decisions."

Riley stressed the idea of decisions and each player doing his job.

Despite a loss to Duke, Elon still remains a top-10 team, landing at No. 8 nationally, and the Phoenix still has two more games before it enters conference play.

The first nonconference game in Durham Saturday was just the first, and the team will draw upon the learning experience when it continues throughout the season, Lembo said.

The first chance to do so will come at 7 p.m. Saturday at home against Shaw University.

"What you hope they take away, despite the opponent and despite the crowd, it's just football," Lembo said. "You have to go out and do what you've prepared to do."

BREAKING DOWN THE DUKE GAME

BY THE NUMBERS

20:36 minutes of possession for Duke in the second half

7 first half penalties on the Phoenix

9-14 conversion rate for Duke on third down

21:42 ratio between the times Elon ran the ball and the times passes were thrown

542 total yards of offense allowed by the Phoenix

42 carries on the ground for Duke's rushing attack

6.0 average yards gained per rush for the Phoenix

111 yards receiving for senior wide receiver Sean Jeffcoat

19 tackles by senior linebacker Brandon Wiggins — a career high

5 things to look for vs. Shaw

- 1. How will the young Phoenix secondary hold up against the pass?** Against Duke University last week, the Phoenix allowed redshirt sophomore quarterback Sean Renfree to throw for 350 yards. The Phoenix defensive backfield will aim to improve this weekend.
- 2. Will the Phoenix offense be balanced?** Against Duke, the team ran the ball 21 times and attempted 42 passes. Last season, the Phoenix relied on its running game to keep opponents off balance.
- 3. Which receiver will step up?** Last week it was senior wide out Sean Jeffcoat, with six catches for 111 yards. Will he be quarterback Scott Riddle's go-to receiver again, or will someone else ascend to being the top target?
- 4. Can the Phoenix find discipline?** Playing a lower-level team like Shaw offers the Phoenix a chance to work on the smaller aspects of the game, like avoiding false start and holding penalties. Last week, the Phoenix committed eight penalties for 69 yards.
- 5. Can the defense get off the field on third down?** Last week, the defense surrendered first-down conversions nine out of 14 times on third down. It was a key factor to the defensive unit being on the field for 28 minutes of the game.