

Soul power way to Virgin Mobile ArenaBowl XXII Championship

Wednesday, 30 July 2008

NEW ORLEANS – The Philadelphia Soul captured Virgin Mobile ArenaBowl XXII this afternoon, knocking off the San Jose SaberCats, 59-56, in front of a sold-out crowd of 17,244 at New Orleans Arena. The victory gave Philadelphia its first title in franchise history and denied San Jose its second straight ArenaBowl championship.

Soul quarterback Matt D'Orazio completed 26 of 43 pass attempts for 302 yards and seven touchdowns and rushing for one score to be named Mitsubishi Motors ArenaBowl XXII MVP. Meanwhile, Philadelphia receiver Chris Jackson was named the Offensive Player of the Game after totaling 11 catches for a game-high 146 yards and three touchdowns.

The SaberCats, who were looking to earn their fourth championship in seven seasons, had several opportunities catch up to the Soul, who posted an AFL-best 13-3 regular-season record. But early mistakes and turnovers allowed Philadelphia to jump out to a 19-point third-quarter advantage it would not relinquish.

San Jose took the opening kickoff and methodically moved down the field, scoring the game's first points on a Rodney Wright eight-yard touchdown catch. But the explosive Philadelphia offense responded when Brent Holmes broke free behind the SaberCats defense for a 34-yard score.

The SaberCats put together their second straight 45-yard drive to retake the lead on a five-yard screen pass from quarterback Mark Grieb to wide receiver/linebacker Jason Geathers. Not to be outdone, Philadelphia mimicked its opening scoring possession as well, cashing in on a 34-yard heave from D'Orazio to Jackson to knot the score, 14-14, at the end of the first quarter.

After another pair of touchdown catches by Geathers and Jackson, Philadelphia logged the game's first defensive stop, forcing a San Jose turnover on downs. The Soul took advantage on the very next play, as Larry Brackins' 20-yard touchdown catch put Philadelphia ahead, 27-20. The Soul extended their lead to 14 points thanks to an interception by Eddie Moten and a D'Orazio eight-yard touchdown scramble.

Down by seven following Geathers' third touchdown of the afternoon, San Jose head coach Darren Arbet made the first challenge of a official's call in ArenaBowl history, arguing that his team had recovered a fumble by Philadelphia tight end Phil Bogle. Referee Bill LeMonnier upheld the call on the field, however, ruling that Bogle had recovered the ball on his own. A 20-yard field goal by Connor Hughes gave the Soul a 37-27 halftime lead.

Overall, three calls were challenged during the game, with only one being overturned following video review. Coaches challenges were approved for use during the playoffs for the first time in AFL history earlier this season.

The SaberCats finally slowed the Soul offense on Philadelphia's opening drive of the second half when defensive back Clevan Thomas broke up a fourth-down pass attempt by D'Orazio. But Philadelphia took control of the ball once again after defensive lineman Gabe Nyenhuis sacked Grieb and forced a fumble. The Soul pushed their lead to 17 points with Jackson's third touchdown catch of the night.

Philadelphia's defense continued to flex its muscle, as Raheem Orr sacked Grieb in the end zone for a safety. San Jose responded with a defensive stop of its own, however, as a D'Orazio fumble caused by George Williams led to a 12-yard touchdown catch by Geathers. Despite the score, the SaberCats found themselves down, 46-34, with one quarter remaining.

San Jose's defense stepped up once again on Philadelphia's next drive, forcing a field goal attempt that was botched by holder and backup quarterback Tony Graziani. In an unusual turn of events, however, the Soul recovered the ball on the same play after Graziani's desperation pass attempt was intercepted and then fumbled by Rodney Wright. Philadelphia's Bogle jumped on the loose ball, setting up a touchdown pass to Brackins that put the game virtually out of reach.

A Brian Johnson three-yard touchdown catch pulled San Jose back to within 10 points, 52-42. The SaberCats could not

recover an onside kick attempt, however, allowing the Soul to open up a 17-point lead with a two-yard touchdown pass to Bogle with 39 seconds remaining in the game.

The SaberCats refused to go out quietly. Wright narrowed the lead to 11 points with his 13th catch of the night, an ArenaBowl record. San Jose's Trestin George then recovered an onside kick, setting up Geathers' fifth touchdown grab of the night and bringing the SaberCats within a field goal. The miracle comeback came up short, however, as Philadelphia's Rod Davis recovered the final onside kick of the night.

Virgin Mobile ArenaBowl XXII by the numbers

- Philadelphia quarterback Matt D'Orazio and San Jose quarterback Mark Grieb each tied the ArenaBowl single game record for touchdown responsibility with eight (7 passing, 1 rushing). D'Orazio threw for six TDs and ran for two in ArenaBowl XX. Grieb threw for eight TDs in ArenaBowl XVIII.

- San Jose SaberCats receiver Rodney Wright set a new ArenaBowl record for catches with 13 receptions. He broke the previous mark of 12 set by three players, most recently by Derek Lee (Georgia Force) against the Colorado Crush in ArenaBowl XIX (June 12, 2005).

- The safety scored by Philadelphia was the first in an ArenaBowl since ArenaBowl XIV when Nashville's William Gaines recorded a safety in the second quarter. Orlando opened ArenaBowl XIV with a safety. The safety in today's game when Raheem Orr tackled Mark Grieb in the end zone was the fifth overall in ArenaBowl history.

- Mark Grieb entered today's game with 12 career ArenaBowl touchdown passes. With eight in AB XXII he now has 20 career, passing Sherdrick Bonner (14) and Jay Gruden (17).

- Grieb has thrown for 845 career ArenaBowl passing yards, moving him into third place on the all-time list behind Jay Gruden (965) and Sherdrick Bonner (970).

- With 299 passing yards in today's game, Grieb has thrown for 5,037 career postseason yards to move into second on the Arena Football League all-time list. He moved past Jay Gruden (4,778) and trails only Sherdrick Bonner (6,761).

- Grieb's 44 passing attempts were the second-most in an ArenaBowl game. Kurt Warner (Iowa) threw 51 times in ArenaBowl XI.

- With 27 completions in today's game, Grieb moved to second all-time in passes completed in ArenaBowl history with 78. He trails Sherdrick Bonner with 81.

- San Jose's Jason Geathers tied the ArenaBowl record for touchdowns scored with five, equaling the mark of James Roe of San Jose (vs. Arizona in ArenaBowl XVIII) and Terrill Shaw of Grand Rapids (vs. Nashville in ArenaBowl XV).

- San Jose tied for the second-most completions in an ArenaBowl with 27. Orlando (AB XX), Arizona (AB XVIII), San Jose (AB XVIII), Albany (AB XIII), and Iowa (AB X) all finished with 27 completions as a team in the championship game.

- San Jose's 22 passing first downs set a new ArenaBowl record, eclipsing the mark of 21 set by Arizona against the SaberCats in ArenaBowl XVIII. San Jose and Philadelphia combined for 36 passing first downs today, the second-highest total in ArenaBowl history (37; San Jose and Arizona in AB XVIII).

- San Jose's Ronald Jones recorded two sacks for 16 yards, tying with five other players for the second-highest total in an ArenaBowl. Scott Dmitrenko (Pittsburgh) set the record with 2-1/2 against Denver in ArenaBowl I.