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Sports

Mavericks senior coming off record-setting performance

Speed rusher Smith totaled 4.5 sacks in last week's victory against Duluth

By Chad Courrier
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — After watching plenty of film, Grant Smith noticed that both of the Minnesota Duluth tackles were vulnerable. The left tackle backpedaled too fast, and the right tackle was too square to the line, leaving an inside gap in the pass protection.

Despite specializing as a speed rusher, the Minnesota State senior defensive end

made the adjustment, and the result was a school-record 4.5 sacks in the Mavericks' 35-14 victory last week.

"I'm more of a speed guy, but whatever feels comfortable, I just go for it," Smith said.

The Mavericks host St. Cloud State at 1 p.m. today in a North Central Conference football game at Blakeslee Stadium, and Smith might not even be in the starting lineup. He has been rotating the end positions with Randy

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Previews for today's games:

- MSU vs. St. Cloud State
- Gustavus vs. Macalester

Earl and Telema Bobmanuel, meaning the Mavericks have two fresh pass rushers in the game at all times.

"I think we all help each other," Smith said.

Uncomfortable in the spotlight, Smith was honored this week by the NCC and D2football.com's player of the week after making nine tackles,



Pat Christman

Minnesota State senior defensive end Grant Smith (99) is tied for the North Central Conference lead with five sacks.

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including a school-record 4.5 sacks. The defense tied a school single-game record with seven sacks.

"That's last week," Smith said. "It's this week now."

Smith, a senior from Farmington, played two seasons at Rochester Technical & Community College, where he made 20 sacks as a sophomore. Last season, Smith played in nine games and

made 21 tackles, with three sacks. This season, Smith ranks eighth on the team with 27 tackles, including 7.5 tackles for loss and five sacks, which is tied for the NCC lead.

"He plays extremely hard, he has great hands, all the attributes you look for in a pass rusher," Minnesota State coach Jeff Jamrog said. "He's undersized (at 245 pounds), but he has great technique and a great motor."

With four games remaining in the regular season, the Mavericks are ranked eighth in the region, and six teams advance to the playoffs. Jamrog said he thinks if his team can win the last four games, they would qualify for the postseason.

"We're focused on St. Cloud State, but that's extra motivation," he said. "This is then first time since I've been here that we could talk about (the playoffs) this late in the

season."

For Smith, he sees the rewards from the spring and summer workouts paying off. He said the Mavericks realized after they beat Central Missouri in the season opener that they could be a competitive team, and nothing that's happened since has changed his mind.

"We're all pretty excited," he said. "These next four games, they're all like playoff games for us."

College football gameday

St. Cloud State at Minnesota State

1 p.m., Blakeslee Stadium, KTOE 1420-AM

The matchup

Minnesota State (4-3, 2-2 in North Central Conference) is coming off a 35-14 victory at Minnesota Duluth, which ended a two-game losing streak. The Huskies (3-4, 0-4) committed seven turnovers in a 44-18 loss at home to Augustana last Saturday and have lost four straight. Minnesota State is 30-37-4 in the series with the Huskies, who have won the last four meetings, including a 16-3 victory last season at St. Cloud. The winner of today's game claims the Traveling Training Kit.

What a rush

Minnesota State has made just 16 sacks this season, which ranks sixth in the NCC, but the Mavericks have made 11 sacks in the last two games. Against North Dakota, the Mavericks had four sacks, led by tackle Chris Brunkhorst's 2.5. Last week against Minnesota Duluth, the Mavericks tied a school record with seven sacks, including 4.5 from end Grant Smith, who received the conference's and D2football.com's defensive player of the week award. Smith has the team lead with 5.0 sacks, followed by Brunkhorst at 4.5 and end Randy Earl at 4.0. Linebacker Blake Freese has a team-high 8.5 tackles for loss.



Chris Brunkhorst

Mavericks' league leaders

Minnesota State has the top passing offense in the NCC, averaging 365.7 yards per game. Quarterback Ben King leads the conference in passing with 359.4 yards per game and total offense at 368.9 yards per game. Kelvin Rodgers is the top return man, averaging 14.1 yards on punts and 27.1 yards on kickoffs. Defensive end Grant Smith is tied for the NCC lead with 5.0 sacks.

Gridiron tidbits

King passed for 341 yards last weekend to push his career total to 9,455 yards, breaking the school's career record of 9,433 held by John Hebgren (1993-96). King now holds school records for passing yards, attempts (1,409) and completions (802). He's still seven touchdown passes short of Hebgren's record of 71. ... Through four games at Blakeslee Stadium, the average attendance is 4,412, with a high of 6,102 two weeks ago against North Dakota. ... The Mavericks need two wins in the last four games for its first winning season since 2004. ... MSU quarterbacks have combined to throw 22 touchdown passes, which is 14 short of the program's single-season record, set in 1993. ... Minnesota State outgained Minnesota Duluth 109-18 in rushing, the second time this season that the Mavericks have had more rushing yards than their opponent. The other was Peru State. Last season, the Mavericks outrushed only one team, Minnesota Duluth.



Kelvin Rodgers

Key stat

St. Cloud State leads the NCC in pass defense, allowing 204.0 yards per game, while the Mavericks are the top passing team in the league.

Scouting the Huskies

St. Cloud State lead the NCC in total defense, allowing 335.0 yards per game, with 25 sacks, best in the league by five. Quarterback Jon Quesnel has completed 47 of 95 passes for 564 yards with four touchdowns and five interceptions, though Mike Hammerseng also saw action at quarterback last week. Michael Graham is the leading rusher with 259 yards and a touchdown. Derek Sedin is the top receiver with 34 receptions, but Fred Williams made five catches for 142 yards and two scores against Augustana. Defensive back Bryce Kieffer is the leading tackler with 48 stops, four more than defensive back Tyler Krueger. Defensive lineman Ryan Kees has 10.5 tackles for loss, and defensive back Matt Jensen has made three interceptions.



Ryan Kees



Fred Williams