

OPEN SEASON

CMU overcomes early jitters to win first opener since 2002

By **Brian Manzullo** | Assistant Sports Editor

Fan group Sneed's Creed may have something to cheer about during senior tailback Ontario Sneed's last season.

So will the rest of CMU's fans if Thursday's season-opener at Kelly/Shorts Stadium is any indication.

Sneed sparked CMU's offense with 88 yards and a touchdown on 13 carries as the Chippewas beat Eastern Illinois 31-12 to win their first season-opener since 2002.

A broken arm kept Sneed out of spring practice and healing throughout the summer. He hid it well Thursday.

"I felt I gave the team a little spark," Sneed said. "Even coming back from an injury, I was confident in my arm and my teammates helped me out. I felt good."

Sneed totaled 43 yards on his first two runs, including a 23-yard touchdown to jumpstart the Chippewas to a 10-3 lead, which it never relinquished.

Sneed also played a role in the passing game, catching four passes for 43 yards and making key blocks for junior quarterback Dan LeFevour.

"He played physical," said coach Butch Jones. "Everyone's talking about his running, but he picked up a couple blitzes that were critical to some of our completions down the field, too."

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The team got plenty of help from the 19,732 in attendance at Kelly/Shorts Stadium.

Down 17-3, Eastern Illinois marched easily into CMU's red zone on its first drive of the second half. But then the student section came alive, forcing EIU to call a timeout and have communication issues on the field.

The Panthers settled on a 29-yard field goal after a 1-yard rush.

"We turned around, and it was like we had a volume button and we kept making it louder and louder," said junior defensive end Frank Zombo, who totaled 2.5 sacks and a forced fumble. "You can't replace that. It's awesome."

CMU opened the game with a 78-yard drive, capped by junior Andrew Aguila's 20-yard field goal. Eastern Illinois responded, converting several third downs on its second drive and evening the score on Tyler Wilke's 29-yard field goal.

Sophomore linebacker Nick Bellore, who tied a career-high with 16 tackles, admitted the team was a little jittery at first, but remained focused.

"I was nervous and I've already played a season," Bellore said. "Everyone's going to come in a little nervous at first."

However, CMU's offense — and defense — improved in the second quarter, using good field position to widen its lead.

Sophomore Antonio Brown

returned a punt 29 yards to EIU's 34-yard line to set up Sneed's 23-yard touchdown run.

Zombo set up CMU's next touchdown drive, sacking EIU quarterback Bodie Reeder at the Panthers' 13-yard line. Senior tackle Casey Droscha recovered the ball at the 18-yard line.

Junior wide receiver Jean Pitts then made a spectacular 18-yard diving catch in the end zone one play later to give CMU a 17-3 lead heading into halftime.

LeFevour's 5-yard touchdown pass to junior receiver Bryan Anderson and 11-yard touchdown pass to sophomore receiver Sean Skergan rounded out CMU's scoring in the second half.

EIU scored its lone touchdown

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on a 15-yard pass from Reeder to tight end Sean McGrath in the fourth quarter.

LeFevour finished 21-for-31 with 217 yards and three touchdown passes. He also ran 11 times for 52 yards.

Anderson caught 9 passes for 66 yards, placing himself third in school history in receptions and fourth in receiving yards. Brown returned three punts for 64 yards. Next up is No. 1-ranked Georgia at 3:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 6, in Athens, Ga.

"I want to enjoy tonight," Jones said, laughing. "We've got a 24-hour rule, to enjoy the victory. ... We'll worry about Georgia after that."

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