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Niumatalolo will keep delivering wins to Navy

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Navy had a close call in December, but not on the field, where coach Ken Niumatalolo led his team to two big wins in the Midshipmen's best season ever. The only Asian head coach in college football, Samoan Niumatalolo has excelled at Navy. The team has become dominant, not only against the military academies, but also against other formidable college teams. Navy nearly lost Niumatalolo to one of those daunting opponents, even as the team's wins against Army and Pitt also set several individual and team records.

Army has not been much of an opponent against Navy lately, enduring a 13-game losing streak to their bitter rivals. Eight of those wins have come since Niumatalolo became head coach, part of his own success story with the Midshipmen.

In December of 2007, Niumatalolo replaced Paul Johnson when the latter departed for Georgia Tech just before Navy faced the Utah Utes in the Poinsettia Bowl. The Midshipmen lost a squeaker in that game, 32-35, a deceptively weak beginning to Niumatalolo's strong coaching career.

Since that first defeat, Niumatalolo has become the winningest head coach in Navy history, piling up a 66-37 record heading into the latest Army-Navy game. Among other milestones, he is the first Navy coach to go to a bowl game in his first three seasons, the first to win the Commander-in-Chief's trophy (signifying wins against both the other academy teams) in his first two seasons, and the first to win his first seven Army-Navy games.

In the latest battle against the Black Knights of Army, Niumatalolo ran that string of wins to eight. The 2-9 Black Knights took an early lead on a field goal, and the teams alternated touchdowns until halftime, when Army continued to cling to its three-point lead. Navy took the lead in the third quarter with a quick-strike touchdown from Keenan Reynolds to Jamir Tillman.

Though he has a good arm, Navy quarterback Reynolds is better known for his footwork. He scored two rushing touchdowns in the first half, setting a new Division I record for career rushing touchdowns. Army had chances to narrow the gap, but they missed a field goal from the Navy 12 yard line early in the fourth quarter, and then they fumbled on their next possession on the Navy 38 yard line. Two more interceptions sealed the game's outcome, 21-17.

Still hanging over Navy's head, how-



COACHING EXCELLENCE. Navy head coach Ken Niumatalolo directs his players during a National Collegiate Athletic Association football game in Annapolis, Maryland, in this file photo. The only Asian head coach in college football, Samoan Niumatalolo has excelled at Navy, and has also become the winningest head coach in Navy history. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, File)

quarter.

Then the Panthers came roaring back. Pitt's offense scored its first touchdown of the day on an 85-yard drive. Later the defense added a score of its own when Navy coughed up the ball and Jordan Whitehead scooped it up and galloped into the end zone. With their lead now down to just 10 points, Navy scored another touchdown, converting two fourth downs on the way, but Pitt replied with a score of its own.

Niumatalolo and Reynolds came together to clinch the game for Navy. A 75-yard drive culminated with Reynolds' third rushing touchdown of the day and the 88th in his career. This latter mark was the most for any player in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) history. Reynolds' 530 career points are also a FBS record, and his 4,559 rushing yards are a record for a FBS quarterback.

His score also put the game out of Pitt's reach, delivering the victory to Navy, sealing its first 11-win season in its 136-year history. Niumatalolo also became the first Navy coach to win three straight bowl games. Next year will be a different story, since Reynolds will have graduated, and Niumatalolo will have to find a new field general. Whoever that quarterback might be, Asian sports fans will root for their Samoan hero to continue his run of excellence.

ever, was Niumatalolo's future. Earlier in the month, Brigham Young University (BYU) head coach Bronco Mendenhall announced he would resign to accept the head coaching position at Virginia. Though several schools had courted Niumatalolo, BYU was "different" to him. That's because he's a devout Mormon, and BYU is a Mormon university.

Niumatalolo visited the BYU campus and met with the school's officials while Navy anxiously awaited his response. After "agonizing" contemplation, Niumatalolo chose to remain with the Midshipmen. "I've been here 18 years and given everything I have for Navy football," he said. "... What we decided as a family is that we're happy where we are right now."

Reassured in their mutual relationship, Navy faced the Pittsburgh Panthers two weeks later in the Military Bowl. Ranked 21st in the nation, Navy entered the game with a 10-2 record, while the unranked Panthers had an 8-4 record. The first half reflected this mismatch, though not without an early scare for the Midshipmen.

Pittsburgh's Quadree Henderson took the opening kickoff from goal line to goal line to give the Panthers the initial lead. But the advantage didn't last long, as the Middies marched 75 yards down the field, scoring on a Reynolds one-yard run. On Navy's next possession, Reynolds took his

squad 86 yards and ran for another touchdown.

Pitt threatened twice more in the half, missing a field goal from the Navy 12 and then throwing an interception at the Navy 16. After the pick, Reynolds again led Navy to the end zone, this time passing to Tyler Carmona to widen the lead to 14. A fourth touchdown and a field goal gave Navy a 31-7 lead midway through the third

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