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Johnnies deny Falcon upset bid

St. John's University took its first lead of the game with 4:01 remaining, then made the touchdown stand up to spoil UW-River Falls' upset bid in the college football opener for both teams Saturday at David Smith Stadium at Ramer Field.

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St. John's University took its first lead of the game with 4:01 remaining, then made the touchdown stand up to spoil UW-River Falls' upset bid in the college football opener for both teams Saturday at David Smith Stadium at Ramer Field.

The Falcons jumped out to a 17-0 lead over the 13th-ranked Johnnies and led 24-14 after an Ahmad Palmer 5-yard touchdown run early in the fourth quarter. But the Johnnies closed the gap to 24-21 with just over eight minutes remaining, then took the lead for good four minutes later after forcing a UW-RF turnover.

The Falcons had four minutes to go 75 yards for the win, and on 4th-and-11 from their own 46, quarterback Ryan Luessenheide hit tight end Ryan Hansen for a 12-yard gain but the play was negated by a penalty. The Falcons retried the down but were unsuccessful, and the Johnnies ran the victory formation onto the field and secured the win.

The Falcons struck on their first possession of the game after St. John's missed a 31-yard field goal attempt. UW-RF marched 80 yards in 16 plays and scored when Luessenheide rolled right and found freshman wide receiver Wade Schlichting of Baldwin wide open in the right corner of the end zone. The extra point was converted by Chad Blair and the Falcons led 7-0.

On their next possession, Luessenheide found senior receiver Mike Woodward down the seam for a big 38-yard gain to the St. John's 11. Facing fourth-and-one from the two, Luessenheide sprinted out right and with pressure in his face completed a touchdown pass to a leaping Connor Graves. The Falcons would add a Blair 37-yard field goal on their next possession and lead 17-0.

Back-to-back touchdown drives by the Johnnies cut the Falcon lead to 17-14 at the half. Both Johnnie touchdowns were scored by Ben Vanderheyden on pass plays of 24 and 46 yards. The first was a tip-toe catch on the left side of the end zone.

Both defensives had a great third quarter, turning a potential shoot out into a defensive battle. The Falcons were able to get onto the board three minutes into the fourth quarter when Palmer went off the left edge and powered across from six-yards out to widen the Falcons' lead to 24-14 with 12:06 remaining.

The Johnnies answered right back to score on a 6-yard run by Kellen Blaser to cut the gap to 24-21 with 8:38 remaining.

The Falcons took over at their own 29 but Palmer fumbled on first down and the Johnnies recovered at the Falcon 30. Back-to-back penalties on St. John's pushed the ball back to the 45, but they eventually scored on a three-yard touchdown pass from Joe Boyle to Josh Overman to give St. John's their first lead of the day.

Luessenheide finished the game 15-for-25 passing for 205 yards and two scores. He also ran for 47 yards. Woodward was the team's leading receiver with 103 yards, 97 of those in the first half.

Running back Taylor Edwards led the team with 14 carries for 83 yards, including a 43-yard run in the second quarter that was a shoe string tackle away from being a touchdown. He was injured on the tackle and never returned.

The leading tacklers for the Falcons were Cole Lowell and Matt Guertin with nine and seven, respectively. Derek Nette had 1.5 sacks for the Falcons.

UW-RF has Saturday off before traveling to Northwestern College to take on the Eagles Sept. 19. Kick-off is set for 1 p.m.

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