Owls’ defense looking to clamp down on UH

Healthy secondary helped hold Arkansas to 128 yards passing

By Richard Dean
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Naeem Smith made a highlight play last season that he and his Rice teammates would like to duplicate more often. The veteran strong safety returned an interception 36 yards for a touchdown against Marshall, one of five interceptions for the team in a 20-0 road upset against the nation’s 15th-ranked team.

“Game-altering plays that’s the one big thing that as a defense if we can do that this year and set our offense up in better position to score or score ourselves, then we’re going to be really happy with the season we could have,” Smith said, one of many seasoned players in the Owls’ secondary.

Defense was a strength for Rice last season. And the back end has improved in 2021 with several key components returning from injury, including free safety George Nyakwol. He’s a difference maker who Rice coach Mike Bloomgren calls, “The big bad wolf in the middle of the field.”

Nyakwol missed the 2020 season with an injury suffered early in fall camp. The 6-0, 181-pound senior from Eisenhower started all 12 games in 2019.

It’s not only Nyakwol who is back to full health in the defensive backfield. Backup right corner Andrew Bird made eight starts in 2019 before missing the first two games of 2020. In Rice’s 2-3 season a year ago, Smith only played two games, starting with Marshall.

“I just want to be a player that can make plays for this defense, create turnovers, and when we’re all out there together, just having fun, flying around,” Smith said.

The Owls certainly had fun for the first 30 minutes at Arkansas last week, leading 10-7 at halftime and 17-7 in the third quarter. But the Owls, who host Houston on Saturday at 5:30 p.m. at Rice Stadium, were outscored 21-0 in the fourth quarter, losing 38-17. The Owls just need to carry over that first-half energy into the second half.

Rice held Arkansas to 373 yards, only 128 yards passing. Right cornerback Sean Fresch came up with an interception. Against the Razorbacks Treshawn Chamberlain had a team-high 11 tackles from his linebacker/visor position.

Rice played with a banged up secondary for most of last season. With players returning healthy and added depth, it has become a position of strength in 2021.

“This time last year we had a bunch of guys out on the back end,” defensive coordinator Brian Smith said. “For the most part we got those guys healthy. When you have those guys working every day and competing, those young guys stepping up makes my job easier when one guy goes down and you can bring another guy back.

“Having those guys healthy now has been awesome and the young guys are learning from them. We have to continue to improve.”

At left corner is Miles McCord, who has kept his starting role since taking over due to injuries at that position in 2020. The secondary backups are free safety Kirk Lockhart, strong safety Gabe Taylor, left cor-

nerback Jordan Dunbar and Bird.

Nyakwol led the team with 67 tackles in 2018. He collected four in the Arkansas game. Smith, 5-11, 197, has started since the second game of the 2019 season. Smith totaled six tackles against the Razorbacks.

On the defense as a whole, Brian Smith is encouraged with the unit’s work ethic.

“I’m excited about the group that we have and the depth that we’re building,” Smith said. “I’ve been happy with the level of effort they’re approaching every day with an attitude to get better. Collectively as a group I feel confident in the way we’ve gone.”

Rice’s defense forced Arkansas into one turnover. Naeem Smith feels the defense is capable of more.

“Looking to force fumbles from the second player in,” Naeem Smith said. “As DBs we got to have good eyes, but at the same time we got to know when the ball is coming, high point, or make plays that can change the game.”

For one half at Arkansas Rice was the better team. The Owls will be tested again on Saturday against crossover rival Houston, which also blew a halftime lead last week. The Cougars led Texas Tech 21-7 at inter-

mission before the Red Raiders outscored the Cougars 31-0 over the last two quarters of Tech’s 38-21 victory at NRG Stadium.

“UH isn’t going to hand it to us, we have to go out there and take it,” Nyakwol said.

Like Rice, Houston struggled at times moving the ball in its opener. Both teams have playmakers and are motivated to get a win after each finished their game on a flat note.

“They got a lot of athletes, but so do we,” Nyakwol said. “I look forward to the game because we got guys who can run. Our secondary can cover pretty much anybody so I look forward to seeing how we match up against their skill guys.

“I think it will be really important to stop the run because teams like this, they want to run the ball. They have good athletes on the outside and the slot, but they want to run the ball. We feel like if we make them run the ball and become one dimensional it will be a better game for us.”