

Mariners rally past Wyoming for first AIFA championship

Nemeth guides Baltimore to 57-42 win for city's eighth pro football title

Playing in their first American Indoor Football Association title game, the Baltimore Mariners made every attempt Sunday to link their newfound success to the city's storied football past, even bringing in Colts Hall of Famer Lenny Moore to serve as honorary captain.

By the end of AIFA Bowl IV, it was clear to the announced 6,075 in attendance at 1st Mariner Arena that the indoor upstart had found its niche.

Quarterback E.J. Nemeth fired three second-half touchdown passes, including a pair to Aaron Yarbough, as the Mariners rallied from an early 16-point deficit for a 57-42 win over the Wyoming Cavalry to complete the first perfect season in the brief history of the AIFA, the third largest of the nation's arena football leagues in terms of size.

"We knew how important it would be to bring a championship here. Even as small as it may seem, it's important because we understand the legacy and the heritage and the history here," Mariners coach Chris Simpson said. "It's a tremendous accomplishment for this organization."

With the win, the city added its first indoor title to a pro football resume that also includes seven titles between the National Football League, Canadian Football League and United States Football League (though the latter played its home games in College Park).

To get there, the Mariners (16-0) first had to overcome five touchdown passes from Wyoming quarterback Matt Strand (16-for-31, 257 yards), as well as a particularly ominous start, in which they fell behind 16-0 in the first 6:09.

"We haven't been in too many positions where we've been down by 16 this year," said Nemeth, who completed 21 of 30 passes for 228 yards, with four touchdown passes and one touchdown run. "We fought back, got up to speed, nobody panicked and we just stayed with our game plan."

Said Yarbough, "We had to eliminate penalties, eliminate turnovers, calm down and just play football."

The third-year team did just that, scoring 32 of the game's next 40 points. Kicker J.R. Cipra played a starring role, scoring 15 points and giving the Mariners a sizable advantage against a team without a true kicker.

"I think when it's all said and done, [the kicking game] was probably their Achilles heel," Simpson said of the Cavalry, who didn't attempt a single extra point.

Wyoming (14-2) suffered its fourth straight title game loss, including the past three in the AIFA.

In a game that turned into an offensive slugfest, it was the Mariners defense that eventually made the difference, intercepting Strand four times.

Up 43-42 late in the fourth quarter, the Mariners first retained the lead when defensive back Armar Watson knocked away the potential go-ahead two-point conversion from receiver Jasonus Tillery (seven catches, 170 yards).

They then extended their lead to eight when Isaiah Grier scored on a 2-yard run with 3:55 to play, and teammate Richard Johnson sealed the win moments later by intercepting Strand's Hail Mary at the 5.