

## Blackhawks look to cage Outlaws

*Iowa needs to find a way to defeat Mid-Missouri*

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A year ago, three-time Central Plains Football League champion Mid-Missouri was unsure if it was ready to make the jump to the American Professional Football League. Now the Outlaws are not only in the APFL, they're a legitimate threat to win it in their first indoor campaign.

With two weeks remaining in the regular season, Mid-Missouri sits in a first-place tie with the reigning champion Iowa Blackhawks. The two 6-1 teams meet at 7:05 Friday night at the Mid-America Center in a game that will decide the top seed for the upcoming APFL playoffs and the home-field advantage that goes along with it.

The Outlaws won the first meeting between the teams 41-38 in Sedalia, Mo., two weeks ago and will lock up the top seed with a win. Iowa either needs a victory by more than three points Friday or it needs to win its last two regular-season games.

"Our guys are well aware of the ramifications of this game in terms of being the No. 1 seed," Blackhawks coach Mike Wolff said. "With 6-1 identical records, it comes down to head-to-head. Mid-Missouri beat us by three, so we need to beat them by four or more. Then it doesn't matter the rest of the way."

Iowa has yet to beat the Outlaws in what has quickly become one of the most exciting series in the APFL. Mid-Missouri has won both previous encounters in come-from-behind fashion.

The Outlaws rallied from a 35-0 deficit to beat the Blackhawks 54-59 last June in a nonleague affair that ended with Iowa on the Mid-Missouri 1-yard line. It was that victory that prompted the three-time CPFL champs to enter the APFL.

"Had they not pulled their starters, they would've routed us pretty darn easy," Outlaws coach Travis Jobe said. "They just couldn't get the momentum back. That game is what made us jump up. We knew we belonged in the league right then."

If there was any remaining doubt, Mid-Missouri erased it two weeks ago when it wiped out a double-digit deficit to win on a 16-yard touchdown run on fourth down by quarterback Kyle Middleton with 33 seconds remaining. An Iowa TD in the closing seconds was nullified.

"I'm sure they're still bitter," Jobe said. "If they can beat us 100-0, they're going to do it."

The Blackhawks seemingly had that game in hand until kicker Jerry Lakin went down with an injury to the knee on his plant leg. The 41-year-old APFL veteran was unable to play the rest of the game. Iowa attempted no field goals or PATs in the second half.

"The injury to Jerry Lakin impacted us immensely," Wolff said. "We had to go for it on fourth down instead of putting points on the board, and that hampered our effort."

Lakin is scheduled to return Friday. Iowa also will get do-it-all rookie Derek Townsend, who is the team's second kicker, back from a finger injury that has kept him out of action.

Mid-Missouri is the only team to beat the Blackhawks at the MAC in the past two seasons. The Outlaws are 39-5 in the past four years and have lost only once in the APFL, dropping a road game to third-place Springfield in early May.

"If you look at their past three years in the CPFL, they've had a tremendous amount of success," Wolff said. "They're an awfully confident team. And they do have very talented athletes on both sides of the ball."

Jobe doesn't question that, but he still doesn't see his team as Iowa's equal. However, Mid-Missouri will concede anything to the Blackhawks, he said.

"Iowa is, by far, the most talented team in the league," he said. "We just attack them differently and we don't give up. We just don't know how to quit. That's what makes us a good team.

"We didn't come in here to finish second, I can tell you that. Our guys hate losing more than they like winning."