

## Blackhawks claim regular-season APFL title



Staff photo/Cindy Christensen - Iowa Blackhawks wide receiver Steve Rush escapes a tackle from Mid-Missouri Outlaws defensive back Chad Jackson during Friday night's game at the Mid-America Center. Iowa won 41-37.

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Eric Johnson? Nick Freet? Zach Kohlhoff?

They're not names familiar to fans that have followed the Iowa Blackhawks for the past couple of years. But thanks to them, the path to the American Professional Football League championship will once again come through Council Bluffs.

Johnson scored the game-winning touchdown from a yard out with 2:35 remaining Friday at the Mid-America Center. Then Freet recovered a fumble snap by Mid-Missouri at the Iowa 5 with nine seconds left to preserve the Blackhawks' 41-37 win over the Outlaws in a matchup of the top teams in the APFL.

Kohlhoff, meanwhile, filled in for injured kicker Jerry Lakin and booted a pair of field goals and three extra points as Iowa clinched the league's regular-season title and the home-field advantage in the postseason that comes along with it.

The victory was the first for Iowa (7-1) in three meetings against Mid-Missouri (6-2) over the past two seasons. And it took some of the sting out of a 41-38 loss to the Outlaws two weeks ago in Sedalia, Mo.

"One of the things we always work for is to make sure we have the home-field advantage throughout the playoffs," Blackhawk coach Mike Wolff said. "It's what you strive for during the season. You don't want to travel to someone else's turf for the playoffs or the championship game."

The defending APFL champions will play at the MAC the rest of the way thanks to a hard-fought win in a game that

saw neither team lead by more than a touchdown at any time. Iowa was down 37-33 before driving 18 yards for the winning score following a bad snap by Mid-Missouri on a field-goal try.

Johnson, who returned to the Blackhawks this season after some time away, took a toss from quarterback Chuck Wright and raced for the goal line on third down. At 5-foot-6, 160 pounds, he had to muscle his way in, barely getting into the end zone to put Iowa up late.

"It was hard running all night," Johnson said. "If it wasn't for that offensive line coming through, the game would not have happened. They came through big time."

Kohlhoff kicked a 24-yard field goal as time expired to give the Blackhawks a 27-24 lead at the end of a back-and-forth first half.

Iowa outgained the Outlaws 188 total yards to 57 during the first two periods. But it lost running back Mell Holliday to a knee injury while fighting to reach the goal line in the closing seconds of the second quarter. He had 50 first-half yards on the ground but didn't return.

That left Johnson to be the guy for the Blackhawks, and he came through with a game-high 53 rushing yards and the winning score.

Mid-Missouri went from its own 4 to the Iowa 2 in the final 1:55. But on second-and-goal, a high snap got away from quarterback Kyle Middleton. It bounced around until Freet, who signed with the team along with Kohlhoff this week, pounced on it.

"I just went down and rushed on the outside," said Freet, who played with Iowa during the 2005 and 2006 seasons. "The ball was on the ground, and I just dropped on it."

"It's good to be back with the Blackhawks. It's great to come back and actually make a difference."

The two teams traded scores throughout the second half. Thanks to a botched snap on an Iowa PAT, the Outlaws carried a 34-33 lead into the fourth quarter.

They extended the lead to four when kick Adrian Trevino kicked a 46-yard field goal with 11:37 remaining. It was his third long attempt of the game. He also connected from 60 and 56 yards out.

Wright was intercepted for the second time in the game on the ensuing series, and Trevino lined up for another field goal that would've extended the lead to seven. Middleton had to run with the bad snap, however, and was stopped well short of the first down.

Johnson put Iowa on top to stay four plays later.

Mid-Missouri 10 14 10 3 - 37

Iowa 10 17 6 8 - 41

I: Robert Kirvin 4 pass from Chuck Wright (Zach Kohlhoff kick)

M: Adrian Trevino 60 FG

I: Kohlhoff 26 FG

M: Curtis Walk 2 pass from Kyle Middleton (Trevino kick)

M: Eric Brown 6 run (Trevino kick)

I: James Johnikin 32 pass from Wright (Kohlhoff kick)

I: Rush 2 pass from Wright (Kohlhoff kick)

M: Brown 28 pass from Middleton (Trevino kick)

I: Kohlhoff 24 FG

M: Trevino 56 FG

M: Marcus James 4 run (Trevino kick)

I: Kirvin 10 pass from Wright (run failed)

M: Trevino 46 FG

I: Eric Johnson 1 run (Rush pass from Wright)