SPORTS

A Rugged Start

An Ivy win and a terrible injury mark Harvard football’s early season.

On Saturday, September 16, at Meade Stadium in Kingston, Rhode Island, players from the Rhode Island football team leaped in ecstasy at the final gun, having pulled off the season’s first shocker: a 17-10 win over perennial Football Championship Subdivision power Harvard. But there were at least seven other schools whose players, coaches, and fans were jumping for joy—those of the rest of the Ivy League. The defeat at Rhode Island was the Crimson’s third in a row, stretching across two seasons and encompassing the 21-14 humbling in the 2016 Game at the hands of underdog Yale. That triumph, which was the first victory for the Elis in the series in 10 years, had made the long offseason awfully blue. In the 2017 preseason media poll, the Crimson had been tabbed co-favorite with co-defending champion Princeton, but the Rhode Island game seemed to expose flaws on both sides of the ball. Was this the season in which high-and-mighty Harvard—winner of at least seven games for 16 consecutive years—would get its comeuppance?

As football announcers sometimes say when indicating that a long gain is about to be called back by a penalty: Hold the phone. Thanks to some legerdemain by coaching maestro Tim Murphy, the Crimson bounced back the following Saturday with a convincing 45-28 win over Brown, a victory that had added import because it was an Ivy contest. The next week, playing at Washington, D.C.’s RFK Stadium, Harvard manhandled overmatched Patriot League foe Georgetown 41-2.

At least for the record, Murphy had not shared the preseason optimism expressed by the media poll. “We are absolutely not deserving of that accolade or prediction,” he told The Boston Globe before the opener. Entering his twenty-fourth season on the Crimson sideline, the coach was cognizant of the All-Ivies he had to try to replace: man-mountain offensive linemen Max Rich and Larry Allen Jr. (the latter, a member of the class of 2018, is taking a year off from school); sure-handed tight end Anthony Firkser; and defensive-line sackmeister James Duberg.

No foe was shedding any tears for Murphy. Harvard had a battle-tested quarterback in fifth-year senior Joe Viviano and other splendid offensive weapons, the most dangerous being a pair of slippery junior wide receivers, Justice Shelton-Mosley (who is also one of the league’s most dangerous kick returners) and Adam Scott. The defense was anchored by three seniors: linebacker (and 144th Crimson captain) Luke Hutton, quarterback-harassing defensive end DJ Bailey, and hard-hitting cornerback Raishaun McGhee. If the team seemed not as imposing or complete as recent predecessors, including the 2016 group that finished 7-3 overall and 5-2 (good for third place) in the Ivy League, then Murphy surely had men in the pipeline. He always does.

The opener at Rhode Island was marred by a frightening injury that will resonate the rest of the season. The Crimson had scored first. Harvard’s 5-foot-9, 200-pound junior running back Charlie Booker III rumbled 50 yards to the Rhode Island four; when the at

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tack failed to get the ball into the end zone, junior Jake McIntyre booted a 38-yard field goal. Now the Rams had the ball. On third-and-15 from the Rhode Island 31, Rams quarterback Tyler Harris dropped back, looked left and aimed a pass for receiver Marven Beauvais, who was covered by Crimson defensive back Ben Abercrombie, a freshman from Hoover, Alabama. Beauvais made the grab for an 18-yard gain and was knocked down by Abercrombie. Both men initially stayed on the ground. Beauvais got up, Abercrombie did not. After a somber six-minute delay, he was taken away on a stretcher and transported to Rhode Island Hospital, where he would undergo spinal surgery.

On the first play following the stoppage, Harris found receiver Aaron Parker all alone behind the Harvard defense for a 51-yard touchdown. C.J. Carrick booted the extra point. Rhode Island 7, Harvard 3. Moments later Carrick drilled a 21-yard field goal. Rhode Island 10, Harvard 3.

Then it was again Booker time. On first and 10 from the Harvard 35, the burly back barreled 57 yards to the Rams’ eight. He would finish with a game- and career-high 139 yards. Booker, a Houston product, emerged in the Crimson backfield last year after recovering from early-season hamstring woes; he scored the first touchdown to Rhode Island on downs. Then it was again Booker time. On first and 10 from the Harvard 35, the burly back barreled 57 yards to the Rams’ eight. He would finish with a game- and career-high 139 yards. Booker, a Houston product, emerged in the Crimson backfield last year after recovering from early-season hamstring woes; he scored the first touchdown against Brown to Rhode Island on downs. In all, the Crimson incurred three offensive-holding calls and 10 penalties for a loss of 80 yards.

Viviano was sacked five times and otherwise spent much of his day trying to evade aggressive Rams’ defenders. He finished a respectable-sounding 17-for-32 passing for 192 yards.

Capping a 98-yard drive, sophomore back Lavance Northington (2) dove into the end zone for the Crimson’s third touchdown against Brown. That was not good enough to keep his starting job. The following Saturday at the Stadium, against Brown, Murphy pulled a stunner, naming as the opening quarterback a freshman to start at the position since 2001, when Ryan Fitzpatrick ’05 got the call. As Murphy explained afterward, “The bottom line is that Jake had performed the best as a quarterback in practice over the last two weeks.” Pointing to his team’s sluggish offense in the latter part of last season and against Rhode Island, Murphy added, “We needed a jolt.” The coach’s choice was vindicated on Harvard’s second offensive series when Smith nimbly led the Crimson 62 yards in five plays, the last two a 31-yard toss to Scott and a 16-yard Booker touchdown blast. A few minutes later, though, Smith was trapped behind Harvard’s goal line and tackled for a safety.

Usually teams tally a touchdown or at least a field goal after registering a safety, but here the Crimson defense flipped the script and made the play of the game. On third and five at the Brown 34, Bruins quarterback Nick Duncan dropped back and threw to his left. Tracking it like a laser, Harvard senior defensive back Tanner Lee snagged the pigskin and cantered 39 yards the other
The following week in the nation’s capital, Harvard was barely challenged in whipping Georgetown for the fourth straight year. The highlight came early in the first period, when Shelton-Mosley fielded a punt at his nine-yard line, identified a seam and, set up by a wall of blockers, streaked to a touchdown. The 91-yard return was the longest in Crimson history, surpassing the 89-yard effort of Hal Moffie ’50 against Holy Cross in 1948. Smith again started at quarterback and went 16-for-30 passing, Booker powered to two touchdowns, the Crimson defense forced four turnovers and McGhee had Harvard’s second interception return for a touchdown in as many weeks, a 23-yarder. All in all, a good warmup for the cauldron of the Ivy campaign.

Tidbits: Harvard has not lost a home opener since 2000, and it has not dropped an Ivy League opener since 2010. Murphy is 19-5 in Ivy openers.... Of the home states of players on the Crimson’s opening-day roster, California was most represented, with 17, followed by Texas (14), Georgia and Massachusetts (eight each) and Alabama (seven).... At season's start, nine former Harvard players were on NFL active rosters or practice squads.

―DICK FRIEDMAN

**“Too Normal” for a Goalie?**

Merrick Madsen was the brick wall in net for last season’s Frozen Four team.

**Last March**, Harvard goaltender Merrick Madsen ’18 played one of the best games of his life: a 3-0 shutout against Providence, on the road, in the east regional semifinals of the NCAA tournament. The contest was a big deal—Harvard had made seven NCAA tournament appearances in recent years, but the team hadn’t won a game there since 1994. This season was already something different, though. By the time the Crimson reached Providence, it had begun to seem unbeatable. The players were riding a streak of 14 consecutive wins. They’d won the Beanpot Tournament for the first time in 24 years. Two weeks before the Providence game, they had taken the ECAC conference championship, thrashing perennial foe Cornell 4-1 in the final at Lake Placid, New York. That victory had earned them the chance at this one. And so here they were, back at the NCAAs. Before the game, Madsen told himself that he was going to leave everything he had out on the ice, no matter what. “I thought, I want to be stretchered off if I have to. Because I am trying that hard.”

In the next three periods, Madsen stopped 41 pucks, a furious assault from the Friars, who took half again as many shots on goal as the Crimson. In the first three and a half minutes alone, he made seven saves. That was pretty much how the next two hours went. “I think we had something on our side,” Madsen told reporters after the game. His coach, Ted Donato ’91, put it a different way: “I think it starts with the goaltender.”

And yet, when you ask Madsen to think back on the season that took his team all the way to the Frozen Four, the first game to come to mind for him is an earlier, less glorious contest: a late November matchup against Boston University. At that point in the season, Harvard was 5-2-1; they’d had a...