

# Chasing History

## Zuni beats Shiprock, 40-29,

By Santiago Ramos  
Staff Sports Writer

ZUNI — The Zuni T-Birds erased memories of last year's Class 3A state football playoff snub by knocking off Shiprock 40-29 Friday night to claim their first-ever District 1-3A football title.

The win was Zuni's first over Shiprock in 30 years with the last win coming in 1981 (17-13).

A year ago, Shiprock outlasted Zuni 37-36 in the district finale to win the district title. As the district champion, Shiprock earned an automatic trip to the state playoffs while Zuni, despite being 8-2, was left without an at-large bid.

"We talked about coming so close last year," second-year Zuni head coach Joseph Claunch. "We worked hard about toughening up our preseason schedule this year and it prepared ourselves for district. It was a hard season at times. We lost games by large margins so it came as a surprise that this (the district title) hap-

pened. We went through adversity. I'll take a 5-5 record and the district title any day over being 8-2 and no state playoffs. This year has been very rewarding. We had former NFL football player Preston Dennard talk to the players last week. The kids started believing in themselves. The kids were focused. I was glad that we had an opportunity to play for the district title. This was Zuni's first district title ever in football."

Now in its first ever state football playoffs, No. 11 seed Zuni (5-5 overall, 3-1 in district) travels south to T or C to take on No. 6 Hot Springs (6-4) Saturday in the first round of 12.

Kickoff is set for 1 p.m. The winner of Saturday's state matchup will play at No. 3 Lovington next week.

The Zuni football team will have a send-off to T or C Saturday morning at the Zuni High School at 9 a.m.

Claunch says he likes the state matchup with the Tigers.

"They run the Wing T offense and use a 5-2 defense," Claunch said. "We've seen the Wing T

offense with Lordsburg and Shiprock. We're very familiar with that. I'm sure that Hot Springs will have some wrinkle to use on us but we'll stick to what we do well. It will be a great matchup."

This season Hot Springs has beaten Tularosa 34-6, Ruidoso 56-38, Lordsburg 35-6, Mesilla Valley 39-34, Hatch Valley 19-9, and Cobre 48-6. The Tigers lost to Deming 24-14, Hope Christian 45-0, Socorro 45-26 and Silver 51-13.

Claunch said his team is trying to make history by being the first Native American school with the exception of Laguna Acoma in being able to win a state football playoff game.

"We're 0-43 in state playoff games in football," Claunch said. "It's been a huge drought. We're fully focused on making history."

Against Shiprock, the T-Birds had a comfortable 40-13 lead before the Chieftains rallied for a pair of long kickoff return touchdowns by Manuel Lee of 95 and

## T-Birds

Continued from Page 1

85 yards. The Chieftains, who finished at 6-4, 3-1, marched down late in the game to Zuni's 15-yard line before the T-Bird defense put up an impressive defensive stop.

Zuni was led by senior quarterback Jalen Yepa, who was named the District 1-3A Offensive MVP of the Year. Despite missing two and a half games due to an injury, Yepa still threw for over 1,200 yards and 18 touchdowns. Against Shiprock, Yepa completed 11 of 19 passes for 203 yards and two touchdowns. He also rushed for 40 yards.

Zuni senior Kyler Tran

caught a pair of TD receptions of 6 and 35 yards along with a 50-yard fumble recovery for another score. Junior Galen Cheeku had three rushing TDs of 1, 2 and 8 yards. Cheeku also booted a 36-yard field goal.

"It was a nice opportunity to have," Claunch said about playing for the district title despite losing the district opener to the Eagles. "Last year we lost to Shiprock by one point for the district title and this year it was totally switched around. The tables were turned."

After beating Ramah in the season opener 32-0, the T-

Birds lost Yepa during the game against Montezuma-Cortez that resulted in a 46-8 loss. Yepa, who suffered a high ankle sprain, missed the next two games against Hope Christian (52-0 loss) and Lordsburg (56-13 loss) before returning for the following game.

With Yepa back running the pistol offense, the T-Birds beat Navajo Pine 72-42, then lost their district opener to Crownpoint 44-43 and then suffered a 54-7 blowout to Laguna Acoma. But Zuni regrouped and won its next three district games over Wingate 53-0, Thoreau 55-6 and the crucial showdown with Shiprock 40-

29.

Zuni had to beat Shiprock by eight points or more to claim the district title outright. If Zuni had beaten Shiprock by seven points or less, there would have been a three-way tie for first with Zuni, Crownpoint and Shiprock. If Shiprock had beaten Zuni it would have been the district champs once again.

"We're excited about the playoffs, but we're not done yet," Claunch said.

Next year Zuni will drop down to District 1-2A to compete with Laguna Acoma, Ramah, Crownpoint and Tohatchi.