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Mesa Community College football finishes season in national polls at number 5

Dec 7th, 2016 · by Aaron Webster, Special to the Independent · Comments: 0

With an exciting double overtime victory in the Valley of the Sun Bowl over Lackawanna College Saturday night, 48-42, Mesa has solidified itself as the No. 5 team in the NJCAA polls. This will be the last poll this season for football. This is the highest ranking Mesa has finished in the national polls in the Ryan Felker era, finishing with a 9-2 overall record. The last time the T-Birds finished 9-2 was in 2007, which the T-Birds also won the Valley of the Sun Bowl that year as well.

Quarterback **Rathen Ricedorff** led the way for Mesa all season, establishing himself as one of the best players in the country. Ricedorff finished the season as the nations leader in touchdown passes (42), attempts (433), completions (281), total passing yards (3685) and second nationally in yards per game (335.0 YPG). He also threw the longest touchdown pass of the season (95 yards) to **Aaron Molina** at Pima in the final game of the regular season. He completed touchdowns to 10 different receivers throughout the season, connecting with **Darius Aguirre** for 11 of those touchdowns, four of which came in the Valley of the Sun Bowl.

Defensively, this Mesa squad was one of the nations toughest units. From the D-Line, to the linebackers, to the secondary, Mesa's defense lack little weakness. Led all around by linebacker **Amonai Itaaehau**, who finished sixth nationally in total tackles (118, 68 solo). He also recorded seven sacks on the season, and led the team in tackles for loss (14.5) for 57 yards. On the defensive line, **Rashun Parker** led the T-Birds in sacks (9) with Itaaehau, **Kenneth Steele** and **Elijah Jeffcoat** each recording seven sacks while **Jameer Outsey** and **Aaron Blackwell** recorded six and half sacks. In the secondary, safety **Marcus Brantley** finished ninth nationally in tackles (113) while leading the team in interceptions (4). Brantley and cornerback **Shakial Taylor** tied for second nationally in pass breakups (19) while Marquan Claiborne finished 10th nationally in pass breakups (13).

Mesa started the season on a tough note, falling at Phoenix College on the last play of regulation, 43-42. But the T-Birds used the loss as motivation as they rattled off seven straight victories, including wins over then #1 Snow College and in the rematch against then #6 Phoenix College. With their win in the Valley of the Sun Bowl against #7 Lackawanna, Mesa defeated three teams this season ranked in the top ten nationally.

Throughout the season, Mesa earned nine Western States Football League Player of the Week honors, with **Rathen Ricedorff** earning two NJCAA Offensive Player of the Week honors.

To see the complete list of NJCAA rankings, click on the link below. [Final NJCAA Rankings Link](#)

Editor's note: Aaron Webster works at Mesa Community College and can be contacted at <http://contacts.mesacc.edu/aaron.webster>.

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