RUNNING TO A CHAMPIONSHIP
A RECORD BREAKING SEASON FOR WOLVES FOOTBALL
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“Well, we’ve got a lot of talent. We’re a lot bigger and a lot faster than we were. And we’re a lot deeper,” said Hall. “We have a lot of new guys who are learning what to do, but they seem to have a great attitude.” Those were the words from Hall after his first practice. It’s an interesting point of view, because speed, depth and a great attitude would be the pillars of what would eventually become the most successful Division II season in West Georgia football history.

From the beginning of the Will Hall era, which began when he took the reins on November 22, 2013, the young coach talked about championships and the potential that West Georgia had to become a regular attendee in the NCAA Playoffs and beyond. “West Georgia has the facilities and a tremendous administration who wants and deserves a championship-caliber football program,” said Hall at his first press conference. “And we want to do everything we can to play hard-nosed football and put rings on your fingers.”

Hall then hired a top-notch staff and went to work. His first recruiting class had the city of Carrollton and the UWG alumni base buzzing about the prospects of West Georgia football, and he hadn’t even put the team through its first spring practice, let alone its first game. But the spring brought about a large change in the football roster, as Hall returned just 55 players from a roster of nearly 90, making room for a talented recruiting class.

The preseason was one of high anticipation, as more and more changes showed up within the program. Hall introduced his “6 Core Values” to the team, which can be found plastered all over the Athletic Operations Building. He also changed the uniforms, going back to the 1981 look, when the football program restarted and the original coaching staff wanted white helmets.

As Hall’s squad transitioned from the preseason into the regular season, the new coach tried everything in the book to help increase the excitement and engagement on campus. The university introduced the “Go West With the Vest” campaign in addition to a number of other activities. Hall stormed classrooms around campus with the message, “Just give us one chance, and I promise you won’t go away unsatisfied with West Georgia football.”

The season could be broken up into segments, as the Wolves faced a solid pre-conference schedule, then took on “The Gauntlet” as Gulf South Conference play began. West Georgia then finished strong in the regular season, before moving on to the NCAA Playoffs for the first time since the 2000 season. The Wolves then took the remainder of the season one game at a time, finishing the year off as one of the top four teams.

“Running to a Championship

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The Wolves opened the 2014 campaign at home September 6, facing the Mars Hill Lions at University Stadium on a sunny afternoon. The game would be a glimpse of what was to come, as Mars Hill took the ball 81 yards on the first drive of the game, but the UWG defense stiffened at the goal line, forcing the Lions to settle for a field goal. Less than three minutes later, the last lead change of the pre-conference season would take place, as Seth Hinsley scored the first touchdown of the season, pounding in from five yards out to give the Wolves a 7-3 lead. The Wolves would not trail again until the fifth game of the season.

West Georgia scored three touchdowns before halftime, then built a 31-13 lead before Mars Hill made things interesting in the third quarter with an 88-yard fumble return for a touchdown, followed by a 27-yard touchdown pass that cut the UWG advantage to 31-26. But with 10 minutes left in the game, Denarius Appling scampered in for a 39-yard touchdown to seal the 12-point victory at 38-26. The Will Hall era was off and running at 1-0.

But the very next week, West Georgia was set to face an opponent that had given the Wolves fits in each of the previous three seasons. This game would be on the Miles Golden Bears’ turf, a place where UWG had struggled in recent years.

Defensive coordinator Scott Symons and his defensive staff went to work to prepare for a very athletic football team. The work paid off as Damius Caldwell sacked the Miles quarterback on the first play of the game, causing a fumble and giving West Georgia the ball in the red zone. That would be a common theme of the day, as the Wolves pitched a shutout in a 26-0 victory.

West Georgia was strong offensively against the Golden Bears as well, rushing for 296 yards in the game. Another theme for the Wolves was starting to take shape in the running game, as UWG rushed for nearly 400 yards in the first game against Mars Hill followed by another almost 300-yard performance against the Golden Bears.

Rushing and defense would play big the next week as well. Johnson C. Smith would come to Carrollton for one of the earliest Homecoming games in school history, where the Wolves and Bulls would meet on RA-LIN Field. The Pack opened the scoring in the contest with a 30-yard pass from junior quarterback Dallas Dickey to senior all-everything playmaker Denarius Appling. That would turn out to be the only touchdown of the first half, as the Wolves took a 7-0 lead into the break.

The coaching staff noticed a glaring weakness in the Johnson C. Smith kickoff coverage, but due to the defense shutting down the Bulls in the first half, the Wolves had to wait until the third quarter to receive a kick. Fifteen seconds after toe met leather, Appling raced down the sideline for a 96-yard kickoff return and a 14-0 lead. That return sparked a dominating effect in the third quarter, as the Wolves scored four touchdowns in the period en route to a 49-0 victory in front of a thrilled Homecoming crowd. West Georgia was balanced on the afternoon, rushing for 202 yards and throwing for 235 yards on the offensive side. The defense, which had now not allowed a touchdown in nine consecutive quarters, pitched back-to-back shutouts for the first time in school history. The Wolves gave up just 183 offensive yards that afternoon, including a meager 40 yards on the ground.

The start was impressive, but there was one opponent left before Gulf South Conference play was set to begin. Hall’s squad had to travel to Atlanta to take on the Clark Atlanta Panthers for a chance to move to 4-0 for the season.
This one was never close, as the Wolves jumped out to a 21-0 lead in the first 11 minutes of the game with two offensive drives and a short field set up by an interception by freshman Zed Brown. The only negative came with 27 seconds left in the first quarter when an errant pitch from the Wolves found its way into the end zone, forcing West Georgia to take a safety and snapping the scoring streak of nine consecutive quarters.

The Panthers would never sniff the end zone, as the Wolves scored once in each of the final three quarters to take a 42-2 victory and a 4-0 record into Gulf South Conference play.

No less than three major storylines surrounded week five of the season. It was billed as one of the biggest games at UWG in more than a decade, as the West Alabama Tigers came to town. The strong start for UWG had turned into a national ranking, as UWG came in as the 24th-ranked team in the nation by the NFCA, the first such ranking since 2001. That also marked the first game between ranked opponents on RA-LIN Field, as the Tigers were 22nd in the nation. Above all else, West Alabama was Will Hall’s former team and the reigning Gulf South Conference champion.

Thus marked the end of the pre-conference season and the beginning of what would become “The Gauntlet” portion of the schedule. “The Gauntlet” was so named due to a string of four straight games against the powers of the Gulf South Conference in recent years, including three ranked teams and a trip to Valdosta State, one of the more dangerous teams in the nation and West Georgia’s biggest rival.

“Attitude is everything.”
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But Will Hall would not allow his team to do the same. The Wolves went right back to work, forgot about dropping out of the rankings and put all of their efforts into the next opponent: undefeated and 9th-ranked Delta State. Everything would be dependent on how things started out in this game, because the Statesmen remembered West Georgia putting them out of the playoffs in 2013.

Helmets were flying early in this one, as the Wolves’ defense came out with a nasty attitude after getting torched by Valdosta State the week before. West Georgia struck first with a Hunter Heck field goal in the first quarter. The UWG defense allowed some yardage, but turned DSU over inside the 20 multiple times in the game. When the dust settled at the end of the game, West Georgia came out on top with a 24-16 victory.

But above that, the defense redeemed itself after the debacle in Valdosta. The Statesmen entered the game averaging more than 50 points and 500 yards per game, but left with only 423 total yards and only 16 points in the contest.

The Wolves were now 6-1 on the year and back on track. But “The Gauntlet” is just that, as up next was a trip to Florence, AL. West Georgia would have to turn around for a visit to one of the most storied programs in Gulf South Conference history in fourth-ranked North Alabama. To add to the challenges that came with playing the 4th-ranked team in the nation on their own field, Dickey was unable to play, forcing Hall to give the ball to a tested hand, but still a backup in senior Emmanuel Taylor.

Any fears that came with playing a “backup” were solved on the first drive of the game, as Taylor broke free for a 45-yard touchdown run on the opening drive of the game. North Alabama also scored a touchdown in the first half, but the two top defenses in the Gulf South Conference were just that in the first 30 minutes of the game. Dickey was unable to play, forcing Hall to give the ball to a tested hand, but still a backup in senior Emmanuel Taylor.

This year was already different from any before. The Wolves allowed 260 total yards to a team that came in as one of the top offenses in the Gulf South Conference. With a final score of 26-17, the UWG defense also allowed just one offensive touchdown, as the second score was an interception return. Dickey had 22 carries for 135 yards, including a 62-yarder in the third quarter that was a back-breaker in the contest.

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The loss, however painful, showed that the Wolves had quality depth all over the field, as Taylor rushed for 170 yards on 24 carries with three touchdowns. But West Georgia was through “The Gauntlet”. It was time to finish the season strong.

The Gauntlet

After blazing a trail through the first four games of the year, the reigning Gulf South Conference champion Tigers came to University Stadium. Knowing they would be facing their former coach, the Tigers took RA-LIN field waving a black flag and sporting a massive chip on their collective shoulders.

The emotion with which the Tigers were playing bled through in the first quarter, as UWA put together a 90-yard drive to open the game and put UWG behind for the first time since the season opener. The Wolves tied the contest early in the second quarter, but West Alabama went on another big drive, eating up the clock, but this time had to settle for a field goal. West Georgia wasted little time in responding to that score, taking just 1:14 to score the next touchdown. The Wolves would not trail in the contest again.

The defense and Dallas Dickey’s legs were the heroes of the day, as the Wolves allowed 260 total yards to a team that came in as one of the top offenses in the Gulf South Conference. With a final score of 26-17, the UWG defense also allowed just one offensive touchdown, as the second score was an interception return.

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Included in the theme of finishing strong was working for West Georgia’s first bid to the NCAA Playoffs, which began on October 27, just four days before the Wolves would play host to Mississippi College for the first time since the mid-90s. The Choctaws, once a proud team with a proud tradition, struggled for much of the 2014 season in one of the toughest conferences in the nation. The Wolves would provide them with a similar result, as West Georgia never trailed en route to their 55-14 victory.

The win was an important one, as it was the most wins for any UWG football team since the 2005 season, but the Wolves were not done. Finishing strong meant that two more wins were needed to be in a position to make the playoffs. Up next was another challenge in the Florida Tech Panthers.

The Panthers came to Carrollton on Senior Day, and one could have looked at the scenarios in place and judge that an upset was in the making. Florida Tech had several last-second wins over GSC opponents during the 2014 season and had pushed Delta State and North Alabama to the brink, making them a dangerous opponent. That, coupled with a sometimes historically slow start on Senior Day with the emotions of the pregame ceremony, had fans wanting the Wolves to put this one away early.

Those fears were realized very early in the game, as Florida Tech used their fast-break offense to score in the first 45 seconds of the contest. But that seemed to wake up the Wolves, as West Georgia closed out the first quarter with a 21-7 lead after scoring three unanswered touchdowns in the remainder of the quarter.

In the fourth quarter, Florida Tech looked poised to make a run at another late-game win, tying the game at 35-35 with 2:05 left in the contest. But Dallas Dickey and the Wolves’ offense took just 1:08 to go 77 yards in seven plays, finishing off with an epic 12-yard run from Seth Hinsley. Zed Brown finished off the scoring with an interception return for a touchdown on the ensuing possession to put the game out of reach at 49-35.

So it came down to this. The Wolves had an 8-2 record, but with four Gulf South Conference teams among the top-6 in the region and West Georgia as the sixth team, there was no room for error if UWG was going to make the playoffs for the first time since the 2000 season. Six teams would go to the playoffs, and the Wolves had a tough road game at Shorter set for the final week of the regular season.

But no one could write the script so well, as a record-setting day got the Wolves their ninth win of the season. Senior running back Seth Hinsley would continue to essentially carry the team on his back. Against Shorter, he carried the ball 34 times for 196 yards and four touchdowns. He had one ball stripped on the goal line or he would have had five rushing touchdowns on the day.
In the end, the Wolves scored 14 unanswered points to close out the season with a 9-2 record. There was one game left to watch, as the 3rd-ranked team in the region, Tuskegee, played against the 7th-ranked team, Albany State, in the SIAC Championship game later that night. A win from Albany State would likely put the Wolves out of the playoffs. Albany State gave it a run, but Tuskegee pulled out a late victory.

On Sunday, November 15, the NCAA selection show for the playoffs came on at 6 p.m. With the team watching in the Athletic Operations Building, the NCAA announced that the University of West Georgia would compete in the playoffs for the first time since 2000, taking on Tuskegee on the road on Saturday, November 22.

The reaction from the players was somewhat subdued, and 15 minutes after the announcement, the team was back at work on the field, getting ready for the playoffs. When asked, the team said that the goal at the beginning was two rings, one for a GSC Championship and one for a National Championship. They missed out on the first goal, so hard work was the only thing that would get them to that ring.

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A Record Setting Season

The regular season was record setting in many ways. There were many firsts, but against Shorter on that final day, one record fell. The 2014 Wolves became the best rushing team in school history in terms of yards and touchdowns. Later during the week of the first round of the playoffs, more history would be made with the announcement of the All-Gulf South Conference Teams.
The first stop on the road in the 2014 playoffs was in Tuskegee, AL, as the 6th-seeded Wolves took on 3rd-seed Tuskegee in the first round. The game was touted as a battle of defenses, as both teams had a defense ranked among the best in the nation in all-around defense. In the first quarter, the game lived up to its billing, as neither team could push a score across.

West Georgia opened the playoffs with a 10-play drive that stalled near midfield, and that was the bulk of the offense in the opening quarter. The two teams then forced a combined five three-and-out possessions that covered the remainder of the first quarter. But as the quarter came to a close, the first substantial drive of the game began with an 11-yard pass from Dallas Dickey to Shaq Hall. That opened a 10-play, 42-yard drive that culminated with a one-yard touchdown plunge from Seth Hinsley and the Wolves were on the board. Two plays from scrimmage later, the Wolves had a 13-0 lead after David Singleton intercepted a Tuskegee pass on the first play of the ensuing drive. Then Dickey found Earvin Anumgba wide open in the end zone of the very next play to give the Wolves a two-touchdown cushion.

One of the biggest plays of the game came at the very end of the first half when Tuskegee drove 90 yards in less than two minutes. They were sitting at 2nd-and-goal from the UWG one as time wound down. But on the next play, the Tigers fumbled and Kori Gaines recovered the fumble, keeping Tuskegee scoreless in the first half.

In the second half, Tuskegee made things interesting with 10 unanswered points, pulling to within a field goal of the Wolves. But on the second possession of the 4th quarter, Dickey found Hall in the end zone for a 26-yard score to give UWG a 10-point lead with 10 minutes left in the game. Tuskegee scored a touchdown in that final 10 minutes and had the ball in the waning seconds of the game with a chance to tie or take the lead. But senior defensive tackle Tory Slater brought that rally to screeching halt with two sacks in the final four meaningful plays of the game to seal the Wolves’ first playoff victory in school history, 20-17 over the Tigers.

Hinsley rushed 23 times for 127 yards and a touchdown and Hall pulled down seven passes for 66 yards and a score to lead the Wolves to the second round of the playoffs. For Hinsley, it was his fifth 100-yard game of the year and fourth in the past six. But standing in the way in the second round was an old nemesis, the 2014 GSC Co-Champion Delta State Statesmen.

There were so many storylines surrounding this game. Would West Georgia’s highly-touted defense be able to withstand Tyler Sullivan and the high-powered Delta State offense again? If Sullivan broke out, would the UWG offense be able to keep up? Could the Wolves beat a team for the second time in a year away from home? All those questions loomed large for the West Georgia faithful heading into the second round, and for many, what happened in the second round was irrelevant. Fans felt that Coach Hall’s first season had been a success and it wouldn’t sting so much to lose in the second round, on the road, to a nationally ranked opponent. But no one told the UWG players and coaches that.

Instead of being satisfied with the first playoff win in school history, the Wolves came out on fire at Parker-McCool Field in Cleveland, MS. That fire burned through in the first quarter, as West Georgia raced out to a 21-7 lead in the first 10 minutes of the contest.

Wolves Win First Playoff Football Game in School History
Seth Hinsley opened the scoring with a one-yard touchdown, then Delta State answered with a 28-yard touchdown pass. UWG responded two minutes later with an 18-yard touchdown scamper from Denarius Appling. Dickey then connected with Shaq Hall for the second time in the playoffs for a six-yard touchdown. And that was all in the first 10 minutes of the game. Over the next 10 minutes, it was Delta State’s time to shine, as the Statesmen scored 20 unanswered points, and with 10:01 remaining in the first half, the Wolves found themselves in a 27-21 hole. But Seth Hinsley remedied that situation with a 34-yard touchdown run with 2:29 remaining in the half, tying the game at 27-27 heading into the locker room.

No one knew what would happen at the time, but West Georgia’s defense would completely dismantle the Statesmen offense in the second half. When the smoke cleared at the end of the third quarter, the Wolves had a 34-27 lead and Delta State had managed just eight total yards of offense in the period. A Hunter Heck field goal with 4:40 remaining in the game sealed the win and punched West Georgia’s ticket to the NCAA Quarterfinal round with a 37-27 victory.

If anyone thought there were a large number of storylines for the second round, the quarterfinals blew that out of the water, because awaiting the Wolves was the Valdosta State Blazers. West Georgia would have to head back to south Georgia to take on the Blazers as two of the final eight teams remaining in the country.
The 2014 South Region Championship game had everything that a sports fan could want. It was a battle between bitter rivals. Valdosta State had beaten West Georgia soundly on the same field earlier in the year, and the teams were 5th and 6th in the region heading into the playoffs.

UWG sent student and fan buses to Valdosta to help create a home atmosphere on their sideline, something that would come in handy during such a big game.

Valdosta State took the ball to open the game and picked up one first down before the UWG defense stiffened. VSU coach David Dean elected to punt to Denarius Appling, who returned the punt 36 yards to midfield, giving the Wolves great field position and opening up a drive that would eventually become one of the most memorable plays of the entire season.

The Wolves picked up a first down on the first play, Dickey then scrambled on fourth down for another and the Wolves were inside the VSU 20. Three plays later, Seth Hinsley bulldozed his way into the end zone for the first touchdown of the game, a three-yard run that put West Georgia ahead 7-0. The UWG defense held VSU to a three-and-out, putting the Wolves’ offense back on the field in short order. Dickey and the West Georgia offense would not be there long, as on the first play of the drive, the junior quarterback hit junior tight end Walter Hübner over the middle for a 54-yard touchdown, giving UWG a 14-0 advantage.

Dickey and the Wolves responded with another drive, going 75 yards in 12 plays. Seth Hinsley dove his way into another piece of UWG history with a 12-yard touchdown run. The score was Hinsley’s 15th rushing touchdown of the season, surpassing Nick Price’s previous record of 14, set in the 2001 season. The score, with 2:47 left in the half, gave the Wolves a 21-10 lead.

But the scoring wasn’t done for the first half, as Valdosta State used the right arm of senior quarterback Jake Medlock to go back down the field and score with 1:17 left in the period on a seven-yard pass to Chris Anderson, making the score 21-17. The Wolves marched back down the field, but Dickey threw an interception with 32 seconds left and gave VSU another shot to kick a field goal. On the third play from scrimmage and final of the half, Deroy Steels and Tony Slater sacked Medlock to keep the Blazers off the scoreboard.

A defensive struggle ensued for the next 27 minutes, as neither team was able to find pay-dirt until the 3:14 mark of the fourth quarter. At that point, Hunter Heck finished off a nine-play drive for 61 yards with a 26-yard field goal, putting the Wolves back up by seven at 24-17.

After the UWG defense forced another three-and-out, the storyline from earlier in the season returned, as Anthony Pistelli went back to punt for the Blazers, and punted to All-American return candidate Appling, who returned the punt 59 yards to put the game on ice at 31-17 with 1:35 left in the game. Valdosta mounted a small drive to try and pull closer, but that ended with a Tyrell Adams interception.

Dickey took a knee to send the Wolves to the semifinals.

Dickey was 13-of-21 for 237 yards and his top target was senior Earvin Anumgba, who had his biggest game in a UWG uniform with seven catches for 117 yards on the day. Hinsley rushed 12 times for 56 yards and added two scores.

This was another first for the West Georgia football team. It was the first South Region Championship in school history, won on the first UWG football game played in the month of December. Next was a trip to the thin air of Colorado, where the Wolves would face the Colorado State-Pueblo ThunderWolves in the NCAA Semifinals.
A magical season and incredible run through Super Region 2 came to an end that Saturday night in Pueblo, CO as the Wolves fell 10-7 to the Colorado State-Pueblo ThunderWolves in the NCAA Semifinal round.

In a defensive game where both teams were held significantly below their season averages, the Wolves out-gained the ThunderWolves 366 yards to 249 yards, but came up short in the end.

The first half was a defensive battle that saw UWG hold CSU-Pueblo to just 110 total yards and three points. The ThunderWolves came out hot on offense on their first possession, driving all the way inside the West Georgia 10-yard line, but the UWG defense was up to the task as the ThunderWolves were forced to settle for three points.

On UWG’s ensuing possession, the Wolves answered with a 10-play, 75-yard drive, capped off by a 30-yard touchdown strike from Dallas Dickey to Shaq Hall to put the Wolves up 7-3. West Georgia missed two opportunities to add points, as Hunter Heck’s first field goal was blocked, and the second sailed wide right.

The second half was another defensive showcase where neither team could get much going on offense. CSU-Pueblo got their only touchdown of the game in the fourth quarter on a reverse pass that eventually became the game-winning touchdown.

The Wolves had two more opportunities following CSU-Pueblo’s score, but a Dallas Dickey pass was intercepted in the end zone with just over five minutes left. The Wolves had one more shot at taking the lead after a defensive stop, but the pass fell incomplete.

Seth Hinsley led the UWG rushing attack with 73 yards, becoming the single-season record holder for rushing yards for West Georgia. Dickey finished the game with 166 yards through the air and one touchdown.

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It would be fitting that, in a season that broke records and set standards for years to come for UWG football, there would be records in the realm of post-season awards. Seven different Wolves were named All-American when post-season awards were handed out, including Denarius Appling as a nearly consensus All-American punt returner.

Five UWG football standouts were named as members of the 2014 USA College Football All-American Team. Two UWG stalwarts were chosen as first team All-Americans. Senior running back Seth Hinsley and senior linebacker Tyrell Adams captured the honor. Also, senior guard Garrison Ushery and senior return specialist Denarius Appling were named to the second team, while junior safety Carlos Hutton was chosen for a berth on the third team.

Appling, Ushery, and senior center Quincy Awa-Dubose were named All-American by BSN. Appling was again named All-American by Daktronics. In the D2Football.com media poll, Darrius Caldwell earned Honorable Mention All-American honors.

The Wolves were ranked 6th in the final Coaches Poll and 5th in the final D2Football.com poll, marking the highest final ranking of any UWG football team and the third-highest final ranking of any team in school history.
Record Breaking Season

- 12 Wins
- Most by any university in Georgia
- 1st Capital One Academic All-American
- 16 All-GSC Selections
- 7 All-Americans
- NCAA Division II Semi-Finalist
- Super Region II Champions

GSC Leader
- Interceptions and Sacks
- Kickoff return Avg & TDS
- Punt Avg & Net Punting
- Scoring Defense
- Rushing Offense
- Total Defense
- PAT Kicking

20 School Records