



VERSUS



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CINDERELLA FINISH?



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Win could defy season odds on senior day

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A first-year head football coach carries scattered expectations as scattered and at best educated guesses as the coach enters with an unfamiliar team and minimal time to make it his own.

So when the Croke Park Classic rolled around at the end of August, it was time to see what coach James Franklin could do with his new squad.

The season started out great for him. He probably couldn't have asked for a better first

month on the job. It started with a last-second field goal from Sam Ficken to secure a happy plane ride home from Dublin to Pennsylvania. He already knocked off a team that Penn State had lost to a year before, albeit a much different UCF team without Blake Bortles.

But nonetheless, Penn State did what Franklin always preached and went 1-0 for the week. And not only was it a 1-0 start, but it came with reassuring signs for what 2014 could have in store. Christian Hackenberg led an offensive outburst behind 454 passing yards — a Penn State single-game record — and the idea of a sophomore slump

seemed laughable.

The home opener came next and only reaffirmed all the hype surrounding Hackenberg following his standout freshman year. He passed for another 319 yards and three touchdowns as Penn State knocked off Akron in its home opener.

Better news was to come soon after. On Sept. 8, following a 2-0 start for Penn State, it was announced the bowl ban imposed as part of the 2012 sanctions would be lifted two years ahead of schedule. The Nittany Lions were eligible for postseason play for the first time since the 2011 season.

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