

CIAA, not Just a Basketball Conference

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What a day for football in the CIAA. Normally during the day on a Saturday, I would be calling the Shaw football game, but because the game versus St. Paul's in Roanoke, VA was not being broadcast, I found myself at home listening to many a Black college game. And did you know the three most intriguing games of the day were all CIAA games?

You see, the Eastern and Western Divisions were still up for grabs and there were a lot of different scenarios on both sides. In the East, if Virginia State defeated Bowie State, then Virginia State would win the Eastern division outright and secure their spot in the CIAA championship game on November 5 in Durham, NC. A Bowie State win and Shaw loss meant Bowie State would represent the East. But a Bowie State win and a Shaw win would mean a three-way tie in the East and those three names would have to be tossed into a hat and drawn to see who would play in the championship game.

I listened to the Virginia State broadcast of Sean Robertson and James Yodell. It was a good game as the Trojans got down early and tried to come back but to no avail, as Bowie State won 27-17 in Petersburg, VA. (The same thing happened last year when the Trojans had a chance to win the Eastern Division in Petersburg and fell to eventual CIAA champion Shaw.) And wouldn't you know it, after Bowie State helped the Bears, the Bears couldn't even help themselves, falling to St. Paul's 21-14. Now, it was bad getting blown out 43-10 at home the week before against Virginia State with a chance to wrap-up the East. And there is not ordinarily anything wrong with losing to St. Paul's because two weeks ago, the Tigers were in the mix as well. But if you are the defending CIAA champions, with a chance to still keep your postseason hopes alive, you cannot fall on neutral turf to a team that is playing in the CIAA for the first time since 1985.



Bowie State's Isaac Redman

In the Western Division, I listened to Kyle Serba call the North Carolina Central/Johnson C. Smith game. After a while the outcome was becoming obvious, so I turned to listen to the St. Aug's/Winston-Salem State game. St. Aug's was down when I tuned in. Of course, the Falcons have been in the driver's seat all year and were tripped up last week by a loss to Fayetteville State. No problem. Win at Winston-Salem State on their homecoming in front of more than 19,000 fans and you win the West. A St. Aug's loss and an NCCU loss (not possible) meant WSSU was in. The Rams would love to leave the CIAA with at least an appearance in the CIAA championship game, but would take a winning record and a victory in their last CIAA game. With the Falcons down 28-13, they scored to pull within 28-20. Then Winston-Salem State's De'Ron Middleton intercepted a pass and ran it back 74 yards for a touchdown with about four minutes left in the fourth quarter to give the Falcons a 35-20 lead.

At that point, I thought the game was over and even e-mailed Kyle, congratulating him on NCCU's win and his team representing the West in the championship game at their home stadium. But all of a sudden St. Aug's quarterback Darrell Nesbit brought the Falcons back as he

threw a touchdown cutting the Falcon deficit to 35-27, then unbelievably threw another touchdown with 54 seconds remaining cutting the Falcon deficit to 35-33. I listened intently to the broadcast, feeling a little silly about the fact that I may have prematurely e-mailed Kyle. I continued to listen to the attempted two-point conversion by the Falcons. "Nesbit rolls to his right, looking, looking..."

All of a sudden I heard the two WSSU announcers shouting and knew that the Rams had held and the Falcons, despite a valiant comeback, would go down in defeat.

What a day for football in the CIAA. Who would play in the CIAA championship game came down to six teams, three from each division, on the last day of the regular season and North Carolina Central and Bowie State emerged victorious. And there is every reason to think that the CIAA will get two teams into the Division II playoffs. Going into Saturday's contests, the Falcons were ranked #2 in the Southeast region, while the Eagles were ranked #3. Even Bowie State was ranked #12. The top six teams are taken out of each region so certainly a win in the CIAA championship game by the Eagles would put them in. You would have to figure that with St. Aug's schedule and an 8-2 record, they will be in as well. Even a loss by the Eagles, which would put them at 9-2, should still get them in because they had a pretty tough schedule as well and a win against Division I-AA and MEAC opponent North Carolina A&T.

There is not much drama in the other three conferences; Tennessee State now falls to 1-3 in the Ohio Valley Conference and Savannah State is winless on the season. The SIAC does have some drama with Fort Valley State, Tuskegee and Albany State with one loss apiece, but the conference does not have a championship game. In the MEAC, the battle is for second place as the defending Black college national champion Hampton Pirates finish the season with Bethune-Cookman, Florida A&M and Savannah State. In the SWAC where there is a championship game, Grambling State is running away with the Western Division and has already clinched the division, and Alabama State was running away with the Eastern Division, but was tripped up by Alabama A&M and still has Grambling State and Mississippi Valley State remaining. One more win and they will have the Eastern Division won.

The CIAA is a conference that in years past may not have had a team represented in the NCAA Division II Playoffs. But with the Earned Access Rule, which virtually guarantees that each conference will have at least one representative in the playoffs, the CIAA this year will not only have one representative, but two.

Yes, Virginia Union won the national championship in basketball last season. Yes, the CIAA Tournament is the third largest tournament in the country behind the ACC and the Big East. But football is on the rise. The teams as a whole are scheduling tougher opponents. Recruiting is up, with a lot of the teams recruiting nationally, not just regionally (45 of the 68 players listed on Shaw's roster are from states other than North Carolina and 14 of those players hail from Florida). This may be one of the CIAA's best years in football, ever.

Watch out world, here comes the CIAA, in football that is.