

Alabama A&M vs. Jackson State

AAMU/JSU Winner controls destiny in SWAC East

by Kerry Flagg

HBCSports Press Association

When Jackson State and Alabama A&M meet in Huntsville on Saturday the Tigers will no doubt be looking to avenge a 34-21 home loss last season. Additionally, the teams, bands and fans hope to put on their best show for the ESPNU cameras in attendance—the game will be broadcast on a tape-delay basis Saturday night. But, most important, the winner of the contest will be positioned atop the SWAC's Eastern Division with just two games remaining in the regular season. A look at the two teams:

Jackson State

After opening the season with two losses against non-conference opponents Delta State and Tennessee State, the Tigers have lost just once to league-leading Grambling two weeks ago. JSU doesn't do anything spectacular, but are very efficient, as evidenced by their scoring output (25.9 ppg, third in SWAC). The conference's fifth rated passing attack is led by senior quarterback Jimmy Oliver (57.7% completion, 1,369 yards, 8 TDs and 5 ints). His favorite receiving targets are 6-3 senior Chris Johnson (19-402-2 TDs) and junior Carlos Simpson (20-206) who is also the team's backup QB. 215-pound junior Erik Haw ranks fifth in the conference with 486 yards and 7 TDs on 110 carries (4.4 ypc) while 220-pounder Lavarus Giles has chipped in with 252 yards and a TD on 40 carries.

Defensively the Tigers give up just 18.5 points per game. The 267 total yards allowed to opponents makes this unit the stingiest in the SWAC and is led by junior LB Marcellus Speaks (58 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 2 sacks) sophomore DB Malcolm Palmer (52 tackles, sack), end Marcus Benard (6 sacks) and DB Dominique Johnson (4 ints.).

Senior Jaymar Johnson has returned a punt 75 yards for a touchdown this season while sophomore place-kicker has kicked a 50-yard field goal.

Alabama A&M

The league's most explosive offense, scoring 33.3 ppg and racking up nearly 417 ypg, both tops in the SWAC. The league's best rushing attack (197 ypg) is led by sophomore Ulysses Banks (126-752-6 TDs, 6 ypc) and freshman Anthony Green (63-364-5). Both weigh less than 180 pounds but have enough speed, strength and ability to get the job done. Senior QB Kelcy Luke has completed nearly 57% of his passes for 1,661 yards, 17 TDs and 6 ints. His favorite targets include sophomore Thomas Harris (34-577-5) and senior TE Charles Moody (28-282-2). In all, eleven Bulldogs have caught passes this season.

Alabama A&M's defense has forced 23 turnovers so far (12 fumbles, 11 interceptions) and have sacked opposing quarterbacks 34 times. The unit is led by LBs Carlton Rice (52 tackles, sack), Avery Moland (51, sack), linemen Jeremy Maddox (6.5 sacks) and Christopher Traylor (5 sacks) and DB Al Donaldson. Place-kicker Jeremy Licea is second in the conference in scoring with 64 total points.

- Kerry Flagg