

Tigers and Rattlers Hope Game in Atlanta is a Classic

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HBCSports Press Association

In Saturday's Atlanta Football Classic, Tennessee State (4-0, 1-0 OVC) will look to close their non-conference schedule undefeated, and after taking down three SWAC opponents the Tigers will face a rejuvenated Florida A&M squad. After losing to Delaware State by a touchdown on September 4, the Rattlers (2-1, 1-1 MEAC) bounced back mightily during their 51-24 win over Howard.

Tennessee State enters the game following a 34-10 victory over conference foe Eastern Kentucky, during which senior QB Antonio Heffner completed 20-of-28 passes for 312 yards, three touchdowns and two interceptions; he also ran for 48 yards. His accomplishments earned him OVC offensive player of the week honors and helped earn the Tigers their first 4-0 start since 2001. So far Heffner has completed 68% of his passes (70-103) for 1,058 yards, eight touchdowns and four interceptions. In comparison the MEAC's leading passer, Hampton's Herbert Bynes has 19 more pass attempts, but nearly 100 fewer passing yards.

Heffner's favorite targets include senior and conference leader Chris Johnson (21 catches, 462 yards, 2 TDs) and classmate Brandon Belvin (19-259-3). Against Eastern Kentucky both players gained more than 100 yards receiving and Belvin caught touchdown passes of 19 and 62-yards. Louisville transfer JaJuan Spillman is the team's third-leading receiver (13-202-1) and also leads the conference in kick returns with a 31.8 yard average (including one returned 94 yards for a TD). He gained 111 all-purpose yards last Saturday. Lest the Tigers appear one-dimensional on offense, senior Javarris Williams is the third-best rusher in the conference (70-291-5 TDs) and had his first 100-yard game against ECU with 117 yards on 17 carries. Heffner ranks eighth with 183 yards and a touchdown on 35 carries (5.2 ypc).

As solid and explosive as the Tigers' offense is (422.5 ypg and 35.8 ppg, both second in the OVC) their defense is just as stout. The unit ranks first in their conference in rushing defense (104.8 ypg) and total defense, and second in points allowed (20.8 ppg). If there is a "weakness" its defending the pass, where they allow opponents 209.5 yards per contest. Defensive leaders include senior DB Larry Williford (27 tackles, 2 forced fumbles), sophomore LB Rico Council (24 tackles) and junior LB Rodney Fritz (2.5 sacks).

The Rattlers enter the contest averaging 36 ppg, tops in the MEAC, but rack up just 302 ypg from scrimmage, placing them sixth in the conference. However, they do feature a balanced attack (150 yards rushing, 152 passing), led by first year head coach Joe Taylor. FAMU's offense utilizes two quarterbacks—Eddie Battle (26-48-359 and 2 TDs; 14 rushes, 62 yards, 2 TDs) and Curtis Pulley (10-17-int., 2 TDs; 15 carries, 160 yards)—who combined to complete 14-23 passes for 195 yards and a touchdown against Howard. Pulley also ran for 66 yards.

Regardless which QB is under center the favorite target is freshman WR Kevin Elliott (12-172-3 TDs). Nine other receivers have caught at least one pass for FAMU, including sophomore Isaac West (8-96), RB Phillip Sylvester (5-64) and redshirt freshman Adrian Smith (3-39-1). Leading rushers include Sylvester (33-167-3 TDs; ninth in MEAC with 55.7 ypg), Pulley and freshman Lonvontae Page (19-81-1).

And while FAMU's offense is capable of scoring with anyone, their defense provided the spark against Howard. After taking a 3-0 lead in the first quarter, Rattlers' DE Joseph Wims returned a Floyd Haigler fumble 65 yards for a score. On Howard's ensuing possession, CB Qier Hall

intercepted a Haigler pass and returned it 67 yards to the end zone. As a unit the defense allows opponents an average of 26 ppg and 382 yards per game, last in the MEAC, though that number is skewed by the loss to DSU when the Rattlers allowed the Hornets 398 yards and 35 points. FAMU has, however, intercepted six passes in three games. Defensive leaders include DB Leroy Vann (23 tackles, sack), LB Vernon Wilder (21 tackles), LB Alvis Graham (18 tackles, sack), DB Curtis Holcolmb (MEAC-leading 3 ints.) and Hall (2 ints, TD).

The game will be televised live on the Versus cable network.