

Bears and Vikings Meet for All the Marbles

Shaw is the defending championship; ECSU appears for 2nd time in 3 years

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All eyes will be on Durham County Memorial Stadium this Saturday afternoon when the Shaw Bears battle the Elizabeth City State Vikings in the eighth CIAA championship game. The defending champion Bears enter the contest with a 7-3 overall record and are 6-1 in the conference, their only league loss coming against Saint Augustine's on Oct. 4. Despite finishing tied atop the Western Division standings with Fayetteville State, the Bears were deemed champions by virtue of winning the head-to-head match up with the Broncos on Oct. 12. The Vikings, meanwhile, enter the game with an unblemished conference record, though they have lost three out of conference.

Statistically the game features two of the league's top offenses. The Bears have scored more points (41.1 ppg) and amassed more yards from scrimmage (430.8 ypg) than any team in the CIAA. The Vikings rank third in both categories scoring 35.4 points and gaining 366.2 yards per contest. Shaw's offense features one of the league's top passers in junior Travis Robinson (73-158, 1,350 yards, 17 TDs and 9 ints.) and a trio of the best rushers in sophomore Raymond Williams (96-672-8 TDs), freshman Johnny Wooten (103-479-5) and junior Aaron Ellison (70-467-5). When Robinson looks to pass, his main targets are usually junior DeAndre Okanji (30-611-6), senior Lenell King (25-563-5) and sophomore Julius Gregory (23-353-5). The unit is led up front by all-CIAA lineman Oliver Pazdry, a 6-3, 310-pound senior.

The Vikings also boast their share of individual talent on offense, led by CIAA offensive player of the year, senior quarterback Curtis Rich (115-221, 1,861, 17 TDs, 9 ints.). His favorite targets include first team all-CIAA receiver Dexter Manley (31-829-10) and tight end Karvin Gwaltney (9-153-1). Seniors Tashawn Lee (23-243-2) and Reggie Smith (21-284-3) are also reliable receivers for ECSU. Senior Dennis Hamilton (116-566-5) is among the league's leading rushers while six other Vikings have also run for touchdowns. Elizabeth City also features an all-CIAA performer on the line, 285-pound senior James Hartley.

With two explosive offenses on the field the key to victory may very well be which defense is stouter, and both teams have capable units. ECSU allows just 16.7 points per game, third in the CIAA, while Shaw's 19.1 ppg are good for fifth. Meanwhile, the Bears give up just 213 yards per game, best in the nation. The Vikings rank eighth allowing 334 ypg. Leaders for Shaw's unit includes the league's two-time defensive player of the year, end Louis Ellis who leads the league in tackles for loss with 24 and is second in sacks with 8. Other defensive standouts for Shaw include senior linebacker Monte Coleman (54 tackles), senior defensive back Gerard Jones (52 tackles) and senior linebacker Martellus Braxton (6 sacks). The Vikings are led by all-CIAA defensive backs Justin Hamilton (5 ints., 3 forced fumbles) and Rodrick Jones and senior DBs Lorinzo Lovely (58 tackles) and Rod Jones (3 fumbles recovered).