

Delaware State tries to sit atop MEAC

Match-up with Hampton on Saturday could make the determination

By Kerry Flagg

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When Delaware State travels to Hampton to face the Pirates on Saturday many MEAC observers expect to see the first steps in a changing of the guard. The Pirates, conference champions the past three years, entered the season needing to replace 20 seniors while the Hornets were seen as the team with enough talent to overtake the top spot by season's end. Winning on Saturday would be their first step toward making that a reality.

The Pirates enter the contest after holding off a feisty Morgan State squad last week. After surrendering a 17-point first half lead, Hampton needed overtime to defeat the Bears 24-17. Delaware State, meanwhile, is coming off of a bye week. Prior to the bye week the Hornets won their first two contests, against Coastal Carolina and FAMU, before losing 38-7 to Kent State, a game in which they only trailed 7-0 at halftime.

The Pirates have been somewhat of an enigma this season. They opened a big lead in the season opener at Howard, only to find themselves in a shootout by game's end. They followed with a 59-14 victory over North Carolina A&T, a game in which Hampton racked up more than 430 yards in total offense. Quarterback T.J Mitchell has thrown for nearly 800 yards in just three games, including 253 and three touchdowns against Morgan State, but has completed just 49% of his passes. As they enter a tough stretch—the Pirates face Princeton and South Carolina State in October—Mitchell will have to improve on that percentage. Fortunately for Hampton when Mitchell does connect with his receivers, he usually finds success. In 92 pass attempts he leads the MEAC with 258 yards per game through the air and has thrown nine touchdowns to just three interceptions.

Mitchell's favorite targets include the top two receivers in the league in terms of yards per game: juniors Jeremy Gilchrist (104, 3 TDs) and Kevin Teel (73, 2). In all ten Pirates have at least one reception, including defensive tackle Marcus Dixon who scored the first points against Morgan State. And though the Pirates had to replace All-American back Alonzo Coleman, several young players have stepped up to fill the void including Van Morgan (279 yards, 2 TDs), Dennis Mathis (87 yards, 5.8 ypc) and Kevin Beverly (39 yards, TD). Operating behind an offensive line that averages more than 300 pounds the Pirates lead the MEAC in scoring offense (38 ppg), pass offense (257.7 ypg) and total offense (407 ypg).

Delaware State will counter with a defense that ranks third in the conference in points allowed (21 ppg) and second in rushing defense (142 ypg allowed). They are paced by the MEAC's leading

tackler, linebacker Russell Reeves (10.3 tackles per game, 2 sacks, 2 forced fumbles), defensive back Akeem Green (20 tackles) and linebacker Josh Pope (19 tackles).

On offense the Hornets tend to go as junior QB Vashon Winton goes. He is only averaging 112 passing yards per game, but has completed 60% of his passes. Against Coastal Carolina he threw just 12 passes, completing seven, as the offense racked up 267 yards on the ground. But he showed his ability to move the ball through the air the following week against the Rattlers when he went 17-25 for 179 yards, 2 touchdowns and an interception. Winton's favorite targets thus far include standout senior receiver Shaheer McBride (12 catches, 158 yards, 3 TDs) and junior running back Chris Strother (8-79). In all nine Hornets have caught at least one pass, but the team doesn't have the explosive air attack of recent years. Thankfully several capable backs line up behind Winton, namely junior Kareem Jones (28-176-1), fullback Adam Shrewsbury (12-86) and Chris Strother (32-83). Even the signal caller has shown the ability to make plays with his legs (23-63-1). Delaware State will look to move the ball on the ground—Morgan State's Chad Simpson gained 142 yards against the Pirates last week—and keep it out of the hands of the emerging stars on Hampton's offense.

The Pirates counter with the best scoring defense in the MEAC (18.3 ppg allowed), led by linebacker Wakeem Goode (8 tackles per game), All American defensive end Kendall Langford (18 tackles, forced fumble) and the aforementioned Dixon (16 tackles, sack).