

SWAC Championship Game Preview: Arkansas Pine Bluff vs. Alabama A&M

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The fact that Alabama A&M and Arkansas Pine Bluff have known for about a month that they'd meet at season's end makes this weekend's SWAC Championship game no less exciting. In fact, when the Bulldogs and Golden Lions meet in Birmingham on Saturday it will mark the rematch of a 23-21 thriller won by UAPB on October 21. In that game Alabama A&M's comeback attempt fell just short after they trailed 23-7 with 12 minutes remaining in the game.

The Bulldogs (8-3, 6-3) won three consecutive games by more than a touchdown before closing the season with a 13-7 loss to Prairie View A&M. Alabama A&M will no doubt be looking to bounce back from that loss, during which they turned the ball over three times, including a fumble that was returned 20 yards by PVAM for the game-winning touchdown. Meanwhile, Arkansas-Pine Bluff (8-3, 7-2) enters the championship hoping to extend their 7-game winning streak. The Lions haven't lost since back-to-back setbacks against Alabama State and Southern Illinois in September. Neither team does anything spectacular in the way of statistics, but their consistency on offense, defense and in special teams is what has guided the teams to the top of their respective divisions.

There is one marquee match up, however, with UAPB's top-ranked scoring offense (29.1 ppg) squaring off against A&M and the league's best scoring defense (19.5 ppg allowed). Still, this match up has lost some of its luster with the announcement that the Golden Lions' signal caller Chris Wallace, who is the SWAC Offensive Player of the Year, will sit out the first half after being ejected in the third quarter from UAPB's game with Texas Southern on Nov. 18 after an altercation with TSU defensive back Stacey Thomas. While Wallace's numbers are impressive (123-of-199 for 1,978 yards, 19 TDs and 7 ints.) he is certainly not the Lions' only offensive weapon. Their offensive line is anchored by senior all-conference performers Jackie Skipper at center and Jamell Bass at tackle. In addition to giving Wallace time to find receivers Jason Jones (first team all-SWAC; 34 catches, 867 yards, 11 TDs) and Dedrick Poole (SWAC newcomer of the year; 29-504-4), they've also paved the way for sophomore back Martell Mallet to lead the SWAC with 1,104 rushing yards and 14 TDs on 223 carries. Mallet was also named first-team all conference. The Lions average just over 200 yards per game through the air and 343 total, both good for second-best in the conference.

Leading the defensive charge for Alabama A&M are all-conference players in lineman Kevin Lockhart (32 tackles, .5 sack) and linebacker Johnny Baldwin (third in SWAC with 99 tackles, 3 sacks, 3 forced fumbles). Other key defenders include junior LB Avery Moland (59 tackles, 2.5 sacks), senior DB Marcus Black (second-team all-SWAC; 47 tackles, 2.5 sacks) and sophomore DB Al Donaldson (45 tackles).

Alabama A&M struggles at times on offense, averaging just 23.9 points and 330 yards per contest, but are anchored by a solid offensive line. Senior linemen Kristian Smith and Jeffery Johnson were selected to the first team while senior Christopher Franklin and junior tight end Charles Moody made the second team. Together they pave the way for one of the conferences' best backfield trios. Junior quarterback Kelcy Luke finished fourth in the conference by completing 159-of-279 passes for 1,724 yards, 16 TDs and 8 interceptions. Luke's favorite receiving targets were senior Kevin Francis (41-389-3) and Thomas Harris (27-327-2). Luke is joined in the backfield by senior Ta'Mar Scott, fifth in the conference with 682 yards and 7 TDs on

142 carries. He also hands the ball off to his brother, Nic Luke, who has carried the ball 122 times for 566 yards and 3 TDs, good for 7th in the SWAC.

UAPB counters with a defense that has given up plenty of points (25.7 per) and yards (nearly 370, last in the SWAC) this season but has done just enough to hold off opponents. Leaders include senior LB Justin Bass (87 tackles, sack), sophomore LB Timothy Turner (80 tackles, sack), DB John Keith (74 tackles, 3 forced fumbles) and DB Amp Boone (71 tackles). If the game is close, Alabama A&M kick returner Ulysses Banks could be the difference-maker. The SWAC freshman of the year, Banks averaged 35.4 yards on 12 kick returns, returning two for touchdowns.