

The Battle of HU's

Howard and Hampton face off to open their seasons

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When Hampton travels to Washington, DC to face Howard in the season opener for both teams on Saturday, they will do so without some of their biggest stars from 2006 after losing 20 seniors to graduation. Meanwhile, when the Bison take the field under first-year head coach Carey Bailey they'll not only look to ride the momentum gained by defeating Bethune-Cookman and Delaware State to close the 2006 season, they'll also try to exorcise the demon that is the Hampton Pirates; since renewing their annual rivalry in 1994 Howard has won just twice, in 1995 and 1996. If that weren't bad enough, in those eleven losses the Bison were outscored by an average of 16 points, including last year's 46-7 rout in Hampton. Still, neither team knows quite what to expect when their season's kickoff this weekend.

The Pirates, three-time defending MEAC champions, enter the season having to replace several starters on both sides of the ball. On offense, gone are quarterback Princeton Shepherd, all-American back Alonzo Coleman, both starters at wide receiver and several offensive linemen. Fortunately for head coach Joe Taylor several youngsters saw time at key positions last season. Redshirt sophomore T.J. Mitchell takes over for Shepherd and after seeing significant action in just one game last year he's had good summer workouts. According to Taylor he, "...seems ready to take over the team." He'll be joined in the backfield by two players who gained valuable experience a year ago. Senior Kevin Beverly ran for 746 yards and 12 TDs sharing time with Coleman while classmate Van Morgan averaged more than five yards per carry. Both players weigh close to 220 pounds and have a good combination of power and speed. Jeremy Gilchrist, Kevin Teel, Kyle Lloyd and tight end Ernie Lomax will be counted on in the passing game as the Pirates lost their top three receivers to graduation.

The Pirates' main concern entering summer camp was their offensive line because three starters needed to be replaced. But following the team's second scrimmage last weekend, the coaching staff has seen "vast improvement" and are confident in the unit entering the season. On defense, Hampton will no doubt feel the loss of four starters in the secondary and all-everything linebacker Justin Durant, now a member of the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars. Fortunately for the Pirates, their stout defensive line returns intact, led by ends Kendall Langford and Marcus Dixon, and nose tackle Vernon Bryant. All three players weigh close to 300 pounds and will be counted on to stuff the run and pressure the quarterback while the other defensive players gain experience.

The Bison, entering the season under yet another new head coach, will rely on the experience of their defense while the offense finds its footing in a new system. The unit is led by all-American candidate Rudy Hardie an end who excels at getting to the quarterback and finding the ball-carrier behind the line of scrimmage (10 sacks and 22 tackles for loss in 2006). He is joined by talented veterans at linebacker in Robert Dowdy and Endor Cooper, and in the secondary with Thomas Claiborn, Ricky Jackson and Randall Means. Howard's defense has dominated the offense in preseason scrimmages so the Bison will need to limit the big play and try to win the field position battle against the Pirates.

While talent is not really an issue offensively for the Bison, discipline is and coach Bailey has not been happy with the number of turnovers and penalties that have plagued the unit in the past. Still, when Howard has the ball there are definitely weapons, players who can make things happen. Senior Brian Johnson took over as the starting quarterback in week seven last year and looks to be the frontrunner for the job in 2007. Though a capable passer (50% completions, 474

yards and 6 TDs) Johnson can cause major headaches with his legs, as evidenced by his team-high 516 yards rushing. He is joined in the backfield by two talented, yet underachieving backs in Frank Berchie and Karlos Whittaker. Berchie, a 210-pounder, ran just 27 times for 125 yards while Whittaker is attempting a return from a nagging knee injury. The two, along with converted wide receiver Terry Perry, have been the bright spots for the unit in preseason practices. Should the Bison running game be effective enough to keep Hampton's defense honest, and if the offensive line can give Johnson time, he'll have a multitude of receivers to look toward, including senior Larry Duncan, sophomore Brandon Sherman, senior Arlandus Hood and Jarahn Williams who returns after missing nearly two full seasons with a shoulder injury.

As stated, both teams enter the season-opener with several question marks, but by game's end on Saturday one team will leave the field with at least some of them answered. The other may leave with even more to think about.