



## **MEAC/SWAC Challenge Preview**

*Hampton, Jackson State hope to get the season started on a positive note*

By Kerry Flagg  
HBCSports Press Association

When the Hampton Pirates and Jackson State Tigers descend upon Orlando's Citrus Bowl for the Fourth Annual MEAC/SWAC Challenge, one team will be looking to pick up where they left off a season ago while the other hopes that change is for the better. The Tigers enter the contest after winning their first SWAC championship since 1996. They are led by third-year head coach Rick Comegy and several returning starters, including all four on the defensive line. Meanwhile, Hampton will look to kick off the Jerry Holmes era on Sunday. Holmes was the defensive coordinator under Joe Taylor who left the Tidewater area in the offseason to take over the program at FAMU. The Pirates have questions at QB and will also have to replace all-MEAC defensive linemen Kendall Langford and Marcus Dixon.

While JSU returns plenty of talent in the trenches, there are some questions that need answering at the skill positions, beginning with quarterback. Starter Jimmy Oliver is gone, as are his more than 2,500 yards and 20 TDs from a season ago. He'll be replaced by junior Trae Rutland who passed for just 302 yards (20-for-59) last season but has also shown an ability to make plays on the run. And he'll need to do so after the Tigers lost their top four rushers to graduation. Fortunately, several of last year's top receivers return, including Carlos Simpson, Rodney Gray and Cedric Dixon. Tight end Michael Frost is also back after missing 2007 with a broken leg. On defense, linemen Marcus Bernard, Dennis Coit, Sam Washington and Neil Pogue II return and bring with them 113 combined tackles and 14 sacks from a year ago.

The Pirates have plenty of holes to fill also, beginning with QB where last year's starter, T.J. Mitchell, may miss the 2008 campaign to focus on academics. His replacement, sophomore Hubert Bynes, lacks experience having thrown just 15 passes last season, but certainly passes the eye test at 6-5, 236 pounds. His transition should be eased by the return of the team's top two receivers, Jeremy Gilchrist and Kevin Teel. Dennis Mitchell returns at RB, as does 240-pound fullback Ralph Steward. The offensive line should be the Pirates' strength as they return all five starters. However, on defense they'll have to replace the aforementioned stars, among others. Ends Charles Young and Drefus Lane, along with tackles Dan Allen and Franklin Frazier, will attempt to fill the void up front but the unit will be substantially smaller in stature than last season. Luckily for the Pirates a trio of experienced LBs return in Wakeem Goode, Charles Robinson and Michael Swett, as do starters Sam Pope and Jackie Bates at corner.

The game will be televised live on ESPN2 as well as Classics Sports Radio Network.