

Historically, unlikely foes to decide MEAC Championship

Delaware State/Norfolk State winner will win MEAC Championship and automatic berth in playoffs

By Kerry Flagg

Under its current format, the MEAC does not hold an official football championship game at the end of the regular season. However, when Norfolk State travels to Delaware State on Saturday, for all intents and purposes, the conference title will be on the line. The Spartans (7-2, 6-1MEAC) enter the game having won five out of six following an early-season blowout loss to Rutgers. During that streak, NSU defeated Hampton for the first time since 2001 and Florida A&M for the first time ever. The Hornets (8-1, 6-0) haven't lost since a week two defeat at the hands of Kent State. Delaware State has looked impressive throughout, but needed game-winning field goals as time expired from Peter Gaertner to win their final two contests against South Carolina State and Winston-Salem State.

Norfolk State averages 25.3 ppg, second-best in the conference, and is led on offense by their 250-pound battering ram at running back, Daryl Jones. Following a season-low four-yard performance against Howard two weeks ago, Jones bounced back to gain 167 yards and score two touchdowns on 30 carries at Morgan State last Saturday. The third-leading rusher in the MEAC, Jones has tallied 989 yards and 12 touchdowns on 211 carries and also has 123 yards receiving. More of a workhorse type of back, Jones has rushed for more than 100 yards three times this season; in addition to last week's performance, he ran 38 times for 256 yards in the victory over FAMU.

Lining up under center for the Spartans is 6-5, 236 pound senior Casey Hansen, the MEAC's third-leading passer (133-252, 1,744 yards). Though those particular numbers are decent, he'd be better-served completing more than 53% of his passes, while boosting his touchdown (6) to interception (8) ratio. Hansen's favorite receiving targets are junior Dario Walker (32-441-1 TD), redshirt freshman Jeremy Wicker (19-441-3) and 6-4, 220-pound junior Jamar Johnson (31-391-3). Four other players have caught at least nine passes for the Spartans.

The Spartans' high-scoring offense will square off against the number one defense in the MEAC in terms of points allowed (15.9 ppg); as the saying goes, something has to give. The Hornets' defensive unit is led by senior defensive end Kelly Rouse (50 tackles, 3.5 sacks, 3 forced fumbles) linebacker Russell Reeves (56 tack., 3 sacks, 2 ff), senior defensive back Akeem Green (53 tacks., 3 ints.), LB Josh Pope (53 tacks.,2 ff) and junior LB Jackie Watkins (49 tackles, sack). DSU has forced 20 total turnovers this season.

When Delaware State has the ball, fans won't see an offense full of excitement and big plays; what they will see is an efficient unit that takes care of the ball. Statistically the unit ranks last in the MEAC (270 ypg), but features a multitude of talent nonetheless. Junior Vashon Winton, third-year starter at quarterback, has passed for 1,132 yards,10 TDs and 4 ints. while completing 57.6% of his passes. He's also rushed for 177 yards on the season and his ability and intelligence have kept more than a few DSU drives alive throughout the season. Lining up at tailback is 200-pound junior Kareem Jones (124-547-1 TD). Along with Winton, Chris Strother (86-278-TD) and fullback Adam Shrewsbury (31-157-TD) have also contributed to the running game. When Winton drops back to pass, his favorite target is senior all-MEAC performer Shaheer

McBride (42-564-8 TDs). Helping to take some pressure off McBride are senior Derrick McNeil (15-209) and Strother (15-124). Still, McBride has caught all but two of Winton's touchdown strikes this year, with the others being hauled in by little-used reserves.

Norfolk State's defensive unit is led by the twin terrors, linebackers Maguell (83 tackles, 2 sacks) and Marquez Davis (81 tackles, 2 sacks). The two combined for 26 tackles against Morgan State. Other defensive standouts include senior DB Anthony Olumba (49 tackles, 2.5 sacks) and sophomore DB Terrell Whitehead (41 tackles, 5 ints.).

Both schools are similar in the fact that both have found winning difficult in more recent years. Delaware State's football program has made a resurgence under fourth year head coach Al Lavan. The Hornets were always a contender in the MEAC in the '80's, but fell on hard times in the '90's and the first part of this decade. The Hornets had a chance at a share of the conference crown last year, but fell to Howard 20-17 on the final game of the season.

Norfolk State has not had a winning season since joining the MEAC in 1997. Third year head coach Pete Adrian appeared to have the program turned around last year after a 3-1 start. But the Spartans lost six of their last seven to finish 4-7

This is the first time since Norfolk State has joined the MEAC that the team has been in contention for the MEAC crown this late in the season, while the Hornets will be looking for their first crown since 1989.