

Tennessee State Looks to Continue SWAC Sweep

by Kerry Flagg
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When the two Tigers- Jackson State and Tennessee State -meet in Memphis for the Southern Heritage Classic on Saturday it should be quite the battle. JSU hopes to embark on a winning streak after bouncing back from a week one defeat at the hands of Hampton by taking down Stillman 17-7 in the first W.C. Gorden Classic. TSU, meanwhile, continues their non-conference schedule in hopes of defeating their third SWAC opponent in as many weeks. They opened the season by beating Alabama A&M 34-13 and followed with a 34-32 victory over Southern in the John Merritt Classic.

Jackson State 's offense, to this point, has been a contrast in styles as they are seemingly still trying to find their identity. Against the Pirates JSU used four and five-receiver sets to spread Hampton 's defense. The QB tandem of Trae Rutland and Michael Mosely combined to complete 18-of-39 passes for 248 yards, two touchdowns and an interception. During that game four ball-carriers, including the two QBs, combined to run for just 88 yards on 27 carries (3.3 ypc). However, against Stillman last Saturday RB Bloi-Dei Dorzon racked up 111 yards and a touchdown (on 20 carries) by himself. As a team JSU ran the ball 40 times for 218 yards (5.4 ypc) while Rutland completed just 6-of-13 passes for 57 yards and a score. JSU ranks near the bottom of the SWAC standings in passing yards per contest, but is third in rushing with 153 yards per game. Dorzon is the sixth-best rusher in the SWAC, though all but seven of his total yards came against Stillman. While no Jackson State receiver ranks among the conference's top ten, nine players including backs Dorzon and Terrell Walters have caught at least one pass. Carlos Simpson (6-94-TD), 6-5 freshman Keenan Tillman (6-73) and Rodney Gray (2-57-TD) lead JSU in receiving.

Jackson State 's offensive success may well hinge on whether or not they can strike a balance between the running and passing games as Tennessee State allows the fewest rushing yards (128) and points (22.5) per game in the Ohio Valley Conference so far this season. The unit is led by LB Rico Council (15 tackles), DB Larry Williford (12 tackles, int., forced fumble), LB Nashon Bingam (9 tackles, forced fumble) and LB Remond Willis (9 tackles).

Offensively TSU is led by the OVC's leading passer, senior QB Antonio Heffner. After earning conference Offensive Player of the Week honors for completing 23-of-29 passes for 315 yards and two touchdowns against the Jaguars, Heffner leads the league in passing yards (607) and TD passes (4) while completing 66% of his attempts with just two interceptions. His favorite targets, seniors Chris Johnson (13-285-2 TDs) and Brandon Belvin (9-83) and Louisville transfer JuJuan Spillman (7-162-2), are also among the league leaders in receiving yards and receptions per game. In all, seven players have at least one reception for TSU, but their running game is also one of the league's most successful. Running back Javarris Williams has carried the ball 40 times for 157 yards and three TDs and his 78.5 yards per game is second best in the conference. Heffner is the team's second-leading rusher, carrying the ball 13 times for 108 yards (6.7 ypc).

TSU's offense will face a Jackson State defense that has allowed just 24 points total in their first two games; they've allowed opponents 177 yards from scrimmage per game. Linebacker Marcellus Speaks ranks fourth in the SWAC with 19 total tackles, two forced fumbles and ½ sack. Other defensive leaders include ends Sam Washington (16 tackles, 2 sacks, 2 forced fumbles) and Marcus Benard (12 tackles, sack, fumble recovery) and LB Ryan Rich (9 tackles).