

Elizabeth City State, Virginia Union play for Eastern Division Crown

As we enter the final weekend of CIAA regular season play, football fans couldn't ask for a better scenario. Virginia Union and Elizabeth City State both won low-scoring games last weekend to set up this week's match-up with the CIAA's Eastern Division title on the line. Virginia Union (7-2, 5-1 CIAA) edged Bowie State 9-7 last Saturday and stands in second place in the division behind the Vikings (8-1, 6-0) who also got all they could ask for in a 7-3 victory over St. Paul's. The winner will attempt to dethrone defending champion North Carolina Central for the conference title on November 11. And oh yeah, this is Elizabeth City State's homecoming as well.

Both teams have been a bit of a surprise this season. Elizabeth City State last won the CIAA Championship in 1971 and Virginia Union in 1974, although they played for the championship but lost to Fayetteville State in 2003.

When Virginia Union has the ball:

The Panthers enter the season finale ranked second in the conference in scoring offense (28.2 ppg), first in rushing offense (179 ypg), fourth in passing (166 ypg) and first in total offense. They are led by multi-talented quarterback, sophomore Lamar Little, a 5'11", 200 pounder who has thrown for nearly 1,500 yards, 21 touchdowns and nine interceptions while running for 473 yards and ten more scores. He leads the conference in total offense with 230 all-purpose yards per game. Little is joined in the backfield by the CIAA's second-leading rusher Elihu Smith. Though he missed two games this season the 205 pound junior ran for 155 yards against Bowie State to up his season total to 625 yards on 125 carries (5 yards per carry). While the Little/Smith duo poses a formidable challenge to opposing defenses, they tend to focus more on the quarterback inside the 20, in large part because Smith has not reached the end zone this year.

Regardless, Little and Smith are protected by one of the best offensive lines in the conference—of the 12 linemen on their roster more than half weigh well over 300 pounds. When Little drops back to pass his main targets are sophomore Michael Hampton (19 catches, 456 yards, 5 TDs), 6'2" senior Herb Jones (21-293-8), junior Phillip Taylor (15-192-3) and junior Steven Miller (10-180-2). Kicker Hugo Flores-Diaz kicked a 43-yard field goal against BSU and has hit from as far as 48-yards this season.

Elizabeth City State will counter with the best scoring defense in the conference (11.3 ppg allowed), one that also ranks third in rush defense. However, if there is a weakness it's stopping the pass, where they are worst in the conference, giving up more than 155 yards through the air. The Vikings do have numerous standouts on that side of the ball, though, including the league's fifth-leading tackler, senior linebacker Emanuel Plummer (71 tackles, 6 forced fumbles, 4 fumble recoveries, 2 sacks). Joining Plummer on defense are junior LB Shawn Dickerson (49 tackles), freshman DB Justin Hamilton (5 ints., 2 forced fumbles), junior defensive end Greg Moore (7 sacks, 3 fumble recoveries) and sophomore DE Vitas Berrian (6.5 sacks, 2 forced fumbles, 2 fumble recoveries). The Vikings have a whopping plus-21 turnover margin having forced their opponents into 34 mistakes. Punter Kevin Dodson leads the conference with a 41.2 yard average.

When Elizabeth City State has the ball:

The Vikings sit directly behind Virginia Union in scoring offense (27.7 ppg) and also rank in the top three in pass (2nd) and rushing offense (3rd). They rank second in the CIAA, behind the Panthers, with 331 total yards per game and are led by junior QB Curtis Rich, Jr., who is second in passing average per game (187.3) and total offense (208). Rich has completed 52% of his 227 pass attempts for 1,686 yards, 19 touchdowns and just three interceptions. Both his favorite

targets are among the conference's top four receivers—converted RB Chris Carter (36-602-10) and receiver Marvin Jackson (39-566-5). Rich lines up behind an offensive line that averages 300 pounds and is joined in the backfield by senior Brandon Fields who's racked up 689 yards and five TDs on 171 carries. Rich is also able to gain yards using his legs, as evidenced by 254 rushing yards and four TDs. Freshman receiver Billy Wiggins hasn't been very involved in the offense but is a weapon at kick returner, where he averages nearly 20 yards per return and has scored twice.

The Panthers will take with them to North Carolina a very stout defense, but one that also has a glaring weakness. Virginia Union allows opponents more than 24 ppg due in large part to their inability to stop the run (160.7 ypg). However, as is the case with the Vikings, they have plenty of talent. Freshman LB Stephen Johnson has 51 tackles and 3.5 sacks and is joined defensively by fellow freshmen at linebacker, Hurley Hemphill (56 tackles, sack) and Brandon Smith (46 tackles, 3 sacks).