



In state bragging rights at stake in Florida Classic

Even with FAMU and B-CC out of the MEAC race fans in for another treat

By Kerry Flagg

HBCSports Press Association

Excitement is in the air for the 27th Annual Florida Classic. More than 70,000 fans are expected at Orlando's Citrus Bowl and the natural rivalry between Florida A&M (6-4, 4-3 MEAC) and Bethune-Cookman (5-5, 3-4) ensures they'll witness an intense, hard-hitting contest for 60 minutes. But beyond the history and pageantry that comes with the Classic there isn't a whole lot to play for. Neither team is eligible for the Division I-AA playoffs and both are coming off of blowout losses to the HU's—the Rattlers suffered a 59-7 home loss to MEAC Champion Hampton while Howard traveled to Daytona Beach to shut out the Wildcats 28-0.

Both teams have to put last week behind them and each should be able to do so as they look to close out the season on a high note by defeating their in-state rival. Bethune, in particular, should have no problem finding motivation; in the 59 previous meetings between the squads FAMU holds a 44-14-1 series edge. If that wasn't bad enough last year's game was a 26-23 overtime thriller won by the Rattlers. The last three meetings have been won by a total of 14 points. A&M head coach Rubin Carter expects this year's contest to be equally as close.

"The difference in the game will probably be two or three plays," said the second-year head coach.

If that ends up being the case both teams should be fairly well-prepared for the pressure, as each team has played in four games decided by four points or less. The Rattlers were victorious in all four while the Wildcats split their close calls. First and foremost, however, both teams will have to play much better than they did last weekend.

Against the Pirates, FAMU scored no offensive touchdowns and amassed just 157 total yards in losing to Hampton at home for the first time since 1998. Starting quarterback Albert Chester injured his ankle and was replaced by backup Leon Camel, neither of whom found much success. Chester's status for Saturday was up in the air at press time, and he certainly hasn't been the Rattlers' only key player to deal with injuries this season. All three starting linebackers missed the Hampton game and all-MEAC defensive end Tyrone McGriff has been sidelined with ankle and wrist injuries since October 14. If there is good news on the injury front it is the return of WR/KR Roosevelt Kiser who racked up 160 yards in kick returns against the Pirates.

Bethune's offense was also largely ineffective against the Bison, as they were held to just 158 total yards. On the flipside, Howard racked up 276 yards on the ground in the game, after which Wildcat head coach Alvin Wyatt remarked plainly "They came to play and we didn't". It was the first shut out loss for BCC since 1997.

Despite last week's poor showings the Wildcats and Rattlers are the first and second-ranked MEAC passing offenses even though both tend to use two quarterbacks. When healthy FAMU's Chester is one of the best in the conference, ranking second in passing yards per game (183). He has completed more than 61% of his passes for 1,647 yards, 13 TDs and five interceptions and, when combined with his 335 yards gained on the ground, he leads the MEAC in total offense with 220 yards from scrimmage. However, even before last week Camel saw time under center—in six games he completed 31-of-56 passes for 366 yards, two TDs and three ints. BCC, meanwhile, boasts two quarterbacks in the MEAC top ten. Junior Jimmie Russell ranks fifth (83-151, 1,122

yds, 8 TDs, 3 ints.) and classmate Jarod Rucker is seventh (71-117, 993 yds., 10 TDs, int.). Combined they've also run for nearly 500 yards and while both have been effective, coach Wyatt has not used dual quarterbacks by choice.

"Both [Russell and Rucker] were injured against South Carolina state and each week one or the other seems to be at around 60-65% health wise," said Wyatt, in his tenth year at his alma mater. "When these kids get healthy we're gonna be even more of a passing threat. This [two-QB system] was not by design. I prefer one quarterback."

Regardless who is under center each side has a plethora of capable receivers at their disposal. FAMU is led by the aforementioned Kiser who, despite struggling with injuries throughout the season, is the MEAC's second-leading receiver (55 catches, 577 yards, 4 TDs), third in punt return average (9.9) and fourth in kick returns (24.7). Joining him on the flank are Willie Hayward (42-553-3), Derek Williams (25-204-1) and Ronald Wright (23-345-2). Much like the Rattlers, BCC has a receiving star of their own in Eric Weems who leads the conference in receiving (62-864-8) and punt returns (17.4 yards, TD). Weems' 133.1 all purpose yards per game are second only to Kiser's 151.6. Russell and Rucker's other receiving targets include Jonathan Summers (32-403-3), Victor Johnson (15-210-1), Corey Council (11-133-1) and Paul Neufville (10-197-3).

Both teams enter the season finale with two of the least productive running games in the league, but both have capable, if not spectacular, ball-carriers in the backfield. The Rattlers are led by 212-pound sophomore Anthony Edwards (113-424-5), freshman Deitric Henry (58-360-2) and Chester. In addition to excelling at finding receiving targets downfield, Russell leads the Wildcats with 390 yards and three TDs on 101 carries. Not eye-popping numbers by any means but he, Justin Brannon (38-220-3) and P.J. Smith (34-198-4) lead 16 players who have helped BCC amass over 1,300 yards and 19 touchdowns on the ground.

While both teams have struggled defensively at times, both excel against the pass and boast the top two tacklers in the MEAC—FAMU's freshman linebacker Vernon Wilder is first with 9.2 tackles per game and BCC's Ronnie McCullough is second with 8.5. Other defensive leaders for the Rattlers include sophomore defensive back Jason Beach (62 tackles), junior LB Dannell Sheppard (49 tackles, 14.5 for loss, 2.5 sacks), freshman LB Michael McMillan (48 tackles) and senior defensive tackle Christopher Wooten (43 tackles, sack). BCC's coach Wyatt does not release his players' positions, heights or weights but we can at least tell you the names of other key defenders. Junior Bobbie Williams has 66 tackles and six ints. and is joined by teammates Rodney Hughes (39 tackles, 6 sacks), Travis Roland (63 tackles, 2.5 sacks, 2 forced fumbles), Dennis King (22 tackles, 2.5 sacks, 3 fumble recoveries) and standout linebacker Taurean Charles (61 tackles, sack). Should the game be played as closely as both coaches believe, Florida A&M may hold the advantage. Junior place-kicker Wesley Taylor has made 13 field goals this year, including a long of 47 yards. Meanwhile Bethune's Jesus Cortez has made just 3-of-6 from beyond 30 yards.

Said FAMU's Carter, "Coach Wyatt's team is always ready to compete and they take on the personality of their head coach. In a big game like this there are going to be momentum changes and you want to try to keep it [momentum] as much as you can."