

S.C. State/Hampton Match-up could decide MEAC Champion

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This weekend's football game between South Carolina State and Hampton Universities has a lot riding it. For starters, the contest pits the top two teams in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) against each other with the winner nicely positioned to receive a bid to the NCAA Division I-AA playoffs. A win for the Bulldogs will avenge a 52-36 loss suffered at home last season, while a win for the Pirates will send them one-step closer to their first undefeated regular season since 1993. Hampton will no doubt be anxious to play in the friendly confines of Armstrong Stadium for only the second time this season. And oh, but the way, Saturday, October 22 is Hampton's homecoming. Yet, Hampton coach Joe Taylor has mixed emotions when it comes to the latter.

"Returning home can be good or bad," said Taylor, whose Pirates defeated Delaware State 26-8 on October 1 at Armstrong. "With all of the folks around [for homecoming], they can get in the way."

On the football field, Hampton (5-0 MEAC, 7-0 overall; #4 in Division I-AA) hasn't let much get in their way, defeating opponents by an average of nearly 23 points while racking up 370 yards of offense per game. They are the only undefeated team in the Division I-AA Top 25 polls and their number four ranking is their highest since they were ranked second in week eight of the 1998 season. The Pirates have won 17 out of their last 19 games dating back to last season and are looking to extend their string of 13-consecutive regular season victories. And while Coach Taylor holds a 116-41-1 record during his 14 years at Hampton he realizes the players on the field will dictate the game's outcome.



Joe Taylor is 116-41-1 in 14 years as head coach at Hampton.

"Games of this magnitude are less about Xs and Os, and more about Jimmys and Joes," said Taylor.

The Bulldogs (5-2, 3-0; #19 in Division I-AA) certainly have their share of players who can make a difference in the game, led by running back DeShawn Baker who averages 192.7 total yards from scrimmage, second-best in the conference. Quarterback Cleveland McCoy has thrown for 883 yards and his favorite targets are juniors Chris Burgess (18.7 yards per catch, four TDs) and Kelly King (24 catches, 277 yards). As a team, the Bulldogs average a MEAC-best 401.2 offensive yards per game and score an average of 35.5 points per game. The team's best offensive weapon is probably return man Rondreikas Darby, who averages a nation's best 38.3 yards per kick-off return and 18 yards per punt return.

"They've always played sound offensively and had good special teams," said Taylor. "But this year's [SC State] team's defense is a lot better, more sound than they were last year."

The Bulldogs' defense is deserving of Taylor's respect. They are led by sophomore linebacker Tony White (45 tackles, 6 for loss and 3 sacks) and senior linebacker Terrance Bennett (35

tackles, 2 sacks). As a team they allow opponents just 16.3 ppg, second in the conference to Hampton. However, though his Bulldogs have numerous weapons of their own, fourth-year Coach Buddy Pough believes the Pirates' roster contains depth rarely seen on the I-AA level.

"Hampton is probably the best team, with the best talent, that I've seen since I've been here," said Pough who has compiled a 29-12 record with the Bulldogs. "It almost looks like Coach Taylor is getting ready for Noah's Ark."

Indeed, Hampton is seemingly two-deep at every position. Running back Alonzo Coleman (116 ypg, 13 TDs) ranks fifth in the nation in rushing yards (816) and Ardell Daniels (619 yards, 7 TDs) ranks fourth in the conference. Both ran for more than 1,000 yards last season and are on pace to become just the third pair in I-AA history to surpass 1,000 yards in consecutive seasons. And the Pirates are just as skilled when it comes to passing the ball as returning starter Princeton Shephard and Kent State transfer Antwan Smith have seen time under center this season, with Shephard completing more than 52% of his passes for six TDs and three interceptions. The Pirates regularly play eight defensive lineman and junior linebacker Justin Durant, a preseason All-American, ranks fourth in the MEAC, averaging nine tackles per game. Additionally, the Pirates have a special team's star of their own in place-kicker Andrew Paterini who last week tied a conference record by kicking a 55-yard field goal against Norfolk State.

Above all, SC State will be looking to avoid what happened in last year's game. The Pirates' trek to Orangeburg, SC was well worth their while as they scored 14 points in the first quarter and 28 points on defense. Daniels, playing for the injured Coleman, racked up 169 yards on 33 carries and the Pirates rolled to a 52-36 victory.

Said Coach Pough, "Offensively we'll probably try to play close to the vest so that we don't make the mistakes we made last year. We'd like to try to contain their offense, keep the game close going into the fourth quarter and maybe steal a victory."