FOOTBALL UPDATE

This league has three nationally ranked teams

For the avid fan, CIAA football has had more than its share of thrills and spills in '88. Going down to the final regular season games during the first weekend of November, both division titles were still up for grabs.

In the Northern Division, Virginia State appeared to have a lock on the crown when they defeated Hampton 24-21 in early October. But three weeks later, Virginia Union handed the Trojans their first conference loss, very surprising. Bowie State, Winston-Salem State and North Carolina Central were all ranked in the Top 20 of the Division II polls going into the first week of November. Neither Virginia State or Virginia Union were ranked in the division's first 20.

The South turned into an intriguing race when North Carolina Central upset Winston-Salem State, 20-19. But the following week, previously undefeated and untied Bowie State won last season.

When Central upset Winston, the Rams were ranked second in the nation. The game was decided with 2:46 left to play in the contest. The Rams led, 19-13 and had to punt from their own 20-yard line. However, NCCU pressured the snap from center. Punter David Hamlin got a bad snap, didn't get the kick off and was tackled on the five. Two plays later, quarterback Earl "Air" Harvey hit wide-out Kenneth Stevenson on a 10-yard scoring pass that provided the margin of victory.

It was an odd way for WSSU to lose, considering how they controlled the game clock. They kept the ball for nearly 75 percent of the game. But coach Pete Richardson's usually efficient team was only able to convert time of possession and four interceptions into four field goals by Dino Belegrinis and a TD run by Broderick Graves. In short, they didn't put enough points on the board with a passer like Harvey in the game. Harvey, by the way, threw two TD passes and reached the 10,000 yards mark in career passing in that game.

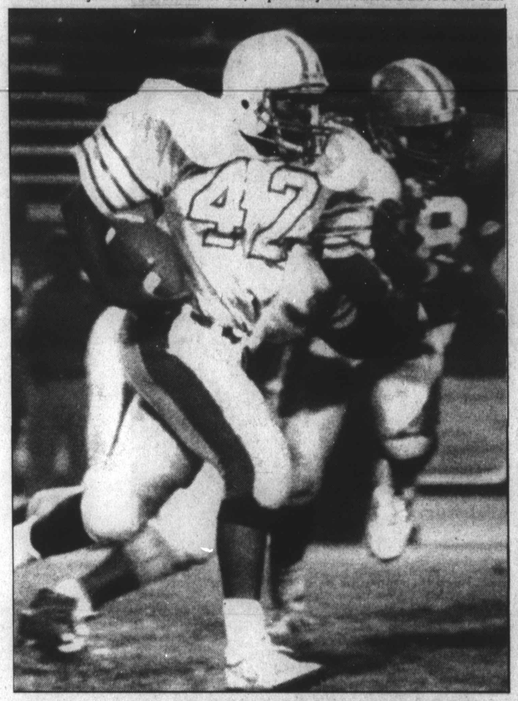

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

While Bowie, Winston and Central have enjoyed banner seasons, teams like Fayetteville State haven't been as fortunate. Above, Broncos running back Wayne Branch scoots for positive yardage, but FSU was 0-6-2, 0-3-2 going into November.

The next weekend, Winston belted Johnson C. Smith, 37-6. All they needed was help from Bowie, a team that has opened eveerbody's eyes this year.

The Bulldogs took a 21-13 lead over Central when linebacker Tony Bennett intercepted a Harvey pass and ran it back 75 yards for a touchdown. For the game, Bennett picked off two passes, was in on 14 tackles and recovered one fumble.

But NCCU drove 80 yards in four plays to score. On the final play of regulation, Harvey hit Edwin Hargrove on a 16-yard TD pass. That play was set up by Harvey's 44-yard strike to Parish Brown. On the conversion try, Harvey scrambled away from the pressure and hit Stevenson with a pass for two points which produced the tie.

Winston and Bowie entered the season finale ranked in the Division II Top 10 - the Rams at No. 6 and the Bulldogs at No. 10. Central was ranked 17th.

All season, observers felt that Bowie State was a team full of good fortune. But as the season wore on, more people started to believe -- especially those on the Baltimore campus. The Dogs had been down for so long, their winning ways became a refreshing change.

The team just kept winning, mostly with solid defense and sparkling play from the special teams. The formula being used by Bowie is quite simple. Play hard, don't make mistakes, and take advantage of your opponent's miscues.

Coach Dave Dolch changed the complexion of his squad by going out and getting a few new faces from the junior college ranks along with some freshmen to add to the holdovers. The Dogs were among the most miserly defenses in the conference, holding opponents to 13.4 points a game.

Bennett and strong safety Randy Norris comprise the best of the JUCO infusion. Then there's placekicker Mark Fitzpatrick who had hit on half of his field goals, the longest being a 51-yarder vs. American International. Adding that cast to people like Rufus Satchell and Jim Werking provided the team with a big mental boost. The Bulldogs secondary had picked off 24 passes entering the season finale. Anthony Johnson and Sam Muse have combined for 13 of those pass thefts.

As for the special teams, the Dogs have shown themselves to be special. They block punts and field goals, force and recover fumbles, and they run back punts, kickoffs and interceptions for touchdowns.

Speaking of return specialists, Bowie has two of the league's best in Don Janey and Tim Styles. Janey has returned two punts for TDs, while Styles is the league's top return man (30.2 yards per return). He also has one kickoff return touchdown.

In the CIAA North, the Trojans allowed Virginia Union to get back into contention as the Spartans claimed victory in the Gold Bowl. Virginia State took a quick 14-0 lead, only to see Union bounce back in the second half and take command of the game. Quarterback Ken Jones ignited his team running for two TDs and passing for the other. He rushed for 57 yards and completed 11 of 19 passes for 100 yards. Jones was named the Gold Bowl MVP. Defensively, Union was spearheaded by linebacker Leroy Gause, who had 15 hits and two sacks.

Virginia State's victory over Hampton was a case of classic Trojans football. VSU kept the ball for 38 minutes of the game and accumulated 415 total offensive yards.

VSU took a 14-7 lead on Anthony Hamilton's nine-yard TD run. But the Pirates regained the momentum on a six-yard TD sprint by Mark Brailey and a 21-yard scoring pass from Russell Johnson to Terrence. HU was up 21-14. After Robert Okonkwo's 27-yard field goal narrowed Hampton's lead to 21-17, quarterback Rudy Elliot gave the Trojans the lead for good on an eight-yard run in the third quarter.

The key to this game was VSU's defense against the run. They held Pirates runner Tim Dudley to 96 yards. At the time, Dudley was the CIAA's leading rusher. As a team, Hampton managed only 129 rushing yards, which was 115 yards below their per game average.

-Steve Zimmerman

CIAA
Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association

a resounding 26-14 beating in the Gold Bowl Classic played in Richmond, Va.

VSU was 6-3, 4-1 and needed a win against Norfolk State to secure the title. Union's record stood at 6-2, 4-2. Their chances for the championship hinged on whether or not the Spartans could pull off the upset. If so, Union would waltz into the conference championship match-up on Nov. 12 by virtue of their head-to-head victory over the Trojans.

The CIAA South, however, has been fought to a 21-all stalemate vs. Central (7-1-1, 3-1-1). That tie knocked the Eagles out of the running because of their earlier loss to Union, 52-36.

The season finale pitting Bowie (8-0-1, 4-0-1) against Winston-Salem State (8-1, 4-1) would be the game that determined the division champ. The Bulldogs only needed a tie to win the title. The Rams faced a "have to win" situation in order for them to defend their division title and earn the opportunity to defend the conference championship they

PROFILE

Huckaby is a true artist as return specialist

For opposing kicking teams, putting the ball in the hands of Florida A & M's Howard Huckaby is as dangerous as playing Russian Roulette with all of a pistol's barrels loaded.

The return specialist/wide receiver has made the opposition pay dearly this season. He's returned four punts for touchdowns -- a new single season Division 1-AA record. For his career, he has scored six TDs on either a kickoff or punt return and he needs one more score to tie the Division I-A and 1-AA record for return touchdowns (seven). Johnny Rodgers (Nebraska ,'70-'73) holds the 1-A record and the 1-AA mark belongs to Willie Ware (Mississippi Valley State, '82-'85).

Huckaby, 5-10, 170, brings an abundance of track speed onto a football field. He runs a 4.2 in the 40 and is the two- time MEAC sprint champion indoors (6.2 in the 55 meters) and outdoors (10.28 in the 100 meters).

Being a two-sport athlete works to Huckaby's advantage. One feeds off of the other. Huckaby explains: "Track is a tool to help my speed and stamina for football. After football season is over, I get right into track. So while I'm not in top condition for track, I'm in better condition than I would be if I didn't play another sport. The same thing applies to when fall football practice starts. I'm already in some kind of shape to get ready for the sport I'm participating in."

Huckaby has the ability to change the complexion of a game in the blink of an eyelash. Vision, he points out, is a prime asset for a successful return man.

"To me, returning punts is more difficult than returning kickoffs," he says. "You have to be able to take a quick look to see where the guys covering the punt are positioned. Then it's a matter of concentrating on catching the ball, then taking off. I look at it as being fun. It's me against the world. I'm the adventurous type anyway, so that makes it fun.

"On kickoffs, you can see what's happening a lot sooner, so you have a better opportunity to gain big yards. But regardless of whether it's kickoffs or punts, I know that all I need is two or three key blocks. After that, the rest is up to me."

The Baton Rouge, La. junior isn't a new face on the national return scene. In '87, he led Division I-AA in kickoff returns, averaging 30.1 yards per kick. At press time he was ranked fourth in 1-AA punt returns and had been No. 1 in that category a few weeks earlier.

October was an especially sweet month for Huckaby. He had three consecutive games where he returned a punt for a touchdown. Incidentally, the Rattlers are 5-0-1 when Huckaby scores on a punt return. This season, his most scintillating performance was against Jackson State in the Circle City Classic. He returned three punts for 98 yards, one which was a 74-yard TD that left the fans gasping in amazement. Huckaby was named the Circle City offensive MVP.

The following two weekends, he had punt return TDs against North Carolina A & T and Morgan State.

At this point in the season, opponents are all too aware of Huckaby's abilities. People have begun to just keep the ball away from him by kicking out of bounds. But that's the price that all dangerous return men have to pay for mastering their special skill. "I sort of hate it that teams are not kicking to me," he says. "But I guess I just have to deal with that."

The opposition has learned that it's the best way to deal with the Rattlers' game breaker. Don't even give him a chance.

He hates to fair catch the ball. "I've seldom made any fair catches during my three years," Huckaby adds. "I don't like to do it, because you don't get any yards that way."

As long as this speed guy can get his quick scan of where everyone is during a punt, he likes his chances disdaining the fair catch and making something happen. "Most people who cover punts come down very fast, and they're going so fast that they can't control which direction they want to go. When that happens, I can give them a quick move or two and go."

Teams are seeing more of Huckaby these days as FAMU has found that they can have a decent passing attack. As a wide-out, he's still learning the nuances of dealing with defensive backs and pass coverages. He's caught only five passes in seven games, but he's scored twice and averages 28.4 yards per catch. His longest in '88 was a 67-yard TD bomb vs. South Carolina State.

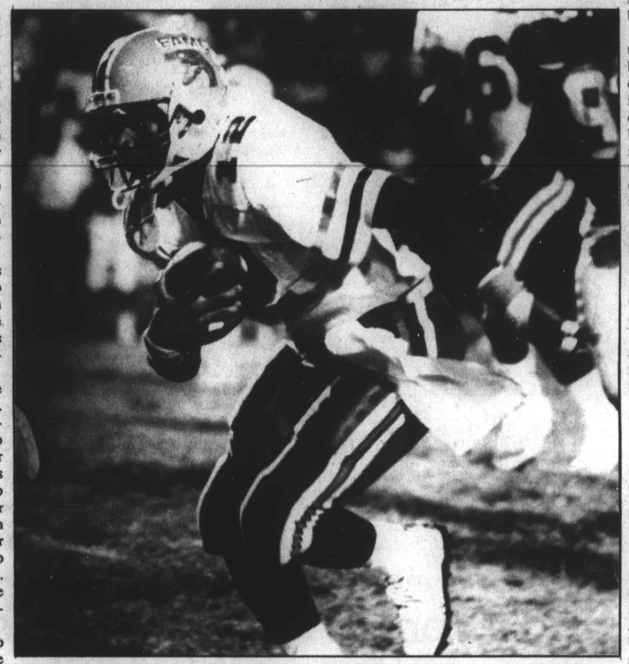

Photo by James Terry III

Kicking the ball to Huckaby is like fooling around with a loaded pistol.

"It's kind of different for me this year in that respect," Huckaby says of his new role as receiver. "I'm being utilized more and it's helping because in the past, our offense hasn't been known to be have a very productive passing game. So now I'm getting in the habit of catching the ball and concentrating on running the right pass patterns."

With Huckaby's productivity, people around Southern University around how SU let him get away. He was one of the state's top high school sprinters at Capitol High School and a good college football prospect. Otis Washington coached the Jaguars at that time and apparently didn't feel the need to pursue someone in his own recruiting territory.

Huckaby was surprised that he didn't get much attention from SU. "They (Southern) didn't look at me until after track season of my senior year," he says. "By that time, I had committed myself to attending FAMU. Why didn't they recruit me? You have to ask the coaches about that."

The man with jet star speed has had some measure of revenge against the school that overlooked him. Last year, when the Jags visited the Rattlers, Huckaby reeled off an 89-yard kickoff return for a TD which helped the Rattlers beat Casem's crew 24-17.

"That touchdown is my most memorable," Huckaby says. "It was against my home town college and we were behind at the time. That score put us back in the lead and gave the team some momentum."

Huckaby is a low-key type of guy. He isn't overly eager to bask in the media spotlight, but admits that it's nice to get some recognition,

"I feel like I can make things happen when I'm back to return a punt or kickoff," he admits. "But I also know that it's not all up to me. There are 11 guys trying to stop me and I have to have my teammates get some good blocks for me to do anything once I get the ball. So it's not so much what I can do, but what the team can do. They know that if they give me a chance, I'm going to give it all I have."

-Craig T. Greenlee