COVER STORY

WIMPS NO MORE!

Bowie State proved they were legitimate contenders in '88

There's an old saying that you can only kick a dog around for so long before the dog starts to fight back. That phrase is particularly apropos for Bowie State football, a program that had become accustomed to being every opponent's "sure win" in past years.

No doubt, past Bowie teams were frequently invited to be other school's Homecoming opponents.

A decade has passed since the Bulldogs last enjoyed a winning season. The last time that a Bowie football team finished over .500, Jimmy Carter was halfway through his tenure as U.S. president and Muhammad Ali lost his heavyweight boxing title to Leon Spinks.

In '88, Bowie reversed past history by going 8-2-1. They were six minutes away from winning the CIAA Southern Division, until Winston-Salem State surged and won 16-14. The Dogs finished the year ranked 19th in the Division II polls and they made the Division II football playoffs for the first time ever.

Other teams are thinking twice about Bowie being "easy." The Dogs have earned everyone's respect.

They are legitimate.

Much of the program's turnaround has to be attributed to head coach Dave Dolch who just ended his third season as the guiding force behind the Dogs resurgence.

"The reason we had as much success as we did is because of a lot of hard work," Dolch says. "And we got lots of support -- from the school's administration right on down to the grass roots level in the community.

"We were fortunate to have a lot of good chemistry on this team. Some of the guys -- like Jim Werking, Rufus Satchell, and Desi Pettyjohn, had suffered from all the losing for three years. Then we had new people like Butch Wilson, Mark Fitzgerald and Randy Norris who didn't know anything about losing. It turned out to be a very good mix for us. And when you put those factors along side of our coaching staff staying in tact, you have the ingredients for success."

Dolch notes that he could see the fruits for this season beginning to bear itself during the '87 campaign when the Dogs finished at 4-6-1. They could very easily have been 6-4-1, but they lost two close games that they had the chance to win. But the main point, he stressed, was that his team was in position to win.

The tone for the entire season was set during the first two games. In both cases, the Bulldogs came away with victories in tightly contested duels. In the opener vs. Livingstone, they trailed 16-3 in the third quarter. Don Janey's TD closed the gap to six and then Henry Frazier fired a 19-yard scoring pass to tight end Brian Forbes, giving BSU a 17-16 win. Bowie sealed their victory by stopping Livingstone on a scoring drive, forcing a fumble by Carl Robinson. Lewis Freeman recovered and the Dogs had their first opening day win since 1978.

Against highly favored Hampton the following weekend, Dolch's Dogs shocked the Pirates 28-27 on their home turf. Norris blocked a Hampton punt that led to a BSU touchdown which tied the game at 21-all in the fourth quarter.

Minutes later, Joe Green recovered a fumble in the Hampton end zone and Bowie led by seven. The defense came to the rescue again with time running out. HU's Tim Dudley scored on a six-yard run, but Bowie shut the door, preventing the Pirates from getting the two points conversion.

In Dolch's mind, those games were turning points for his surprising team.

"Going into the season, we knew we had to come out strong," the coach adds. "Winning those close ball games really got us going. From that point, we knew that with each passing week, we couldn't let up. We were down against Livingstone and came back and we showed that we were a contender when we played Hampton. That game boosted our confidence."

Bowie's playing style is your basic blood and guts, win the war in the trenches type of football. There's no finesse involved. The Bulldogs pounded opponents at the line scrimmage, forced opponents' mistakes on both sides of the ball, and took advantage of every miscue.

"Controlling the line of scrimmage and creating turnovers is what we wanted to do," Dolch explains. "When you do those kinds of things, you're always in the ball game."

Bowie was able to make the quantum leap by getting a mixture of new faces to mesh with the holdovers from the last couple of seasons.

Dolch pulled off a coup of sorts by landing some overlooked junior college players along with some decent high school prospects. Of those dozen newcomers, seven played prominent roles in the Dogs '88 metamorphosis.

The addition of inside linebacker Tony Bennett and strong safety Norris really bolstered the defense. This pair of junior college transfers gave Bowie the impact players they needed. Norris was an all-conference pick (88 tackles, seven sacks, two forced fumbles, six recovered fumbles, two interceptions, and three blocked kicks). Bennett(97 tackles, two sacks) didn't make all-league, but his overall play dictated that he should have.

Offensively, Dolch beefed up his front line in a big way, added a running back plus an accurate placekicker. JUCO transfers Maurice Jenkins (6-3, 287 guard) and Darnell Rankins (6-0, 290 center) brought bulk and experience to the offensive line. Freshman Fitzpatrick proved to be especially valuable, converting eight of 16 field goal attempts, including a 51-yarder vs. American International.

Defense and the play of the special teams proved to be the Bulldogs trademark. BSU was awesome in the category that counts the most -- points allowed. Dolch's defense finished second in the conference, yielding an average of 13.7 ppg. Only Winston-Salem State was better. They held opposing rushers to an average of 2.8 yards per carry. The team's big hitters (Bennett, Werking, Satchell, and Norris) averaged 93 tackles each for the season.

The Dogs weren't slouches when defending against the pass either, leading the league in interceptions -- 26. DBs Sam Muse and Anthony Johnson combined for 14 of those pass thefts (seven each).

Tim Styles and Janey produced a lot of spark on the special teams. Styles, a diminutive 5-5, 147, led the CIAA in kickoff returns with a 28.5 yards per return average, while Janey was ranked among the league's top five punt return specialists.

On offense, Bowie didn't have any stars per se. You won't find many Dogs ranked among the league leaders in individual offensive categories.

What they have fashioned is a rock-solid offensive line that averages 268 lbs. from tackle to tackle. Joining Rankins and Jenkins were tackles Winston Lattiboudere (6-2, 263) and Marcus Williams (6-5, 250); and guard Wallace Hayes (6-0, 251). Forbes is no lightweight as the tight end at 6-5, 245.

The front wall excels at run blocking and oftentimes, they clear paths as well as any miniature bulldozer can.

Senior fullback Tony Atwater led the team in rushing with 515 yards and he averaged four yards per tote. Styles saw considerable action in the backfield as an all-purpose type (669 yards) and he'll be back for his final campaign in '89.

The passing game was used very sparingly. The Dogs threw less than any team in the conference (115 attempts for an average of 10.5 per contest). They used three quarterbacks during the year in Clarence Boykins, Frazier and Janey. Janey ended the year as the starter.

For the better part of the season, Bowie was the mystery team of the CIAA and black college football. With 10 years of losing tradition, the tendency was to wait and see if they were for real or not.

With each victory, more questions were raised. Were the Dogs just plain lucky? Were they playing a weak schedule that allowed them to start off as well as they did?

Even with all their wins going into the last part of the season, there were still questions. Many felt they didn't deserve to be nationally ranked.

Bowie answered the critics during their last two games vs. North Carolina Central and Winston-Salem State. They went 0-1-1 in that span, but they proved that their success was no fluke. Against Central, the game was theirs. They led 21-13 with only minutes left to play, thanks to Bennett's 75 yards interception return for a touchdown. But Earl "Air" Harvey had the last possession and engineered a late drive that produced a 21-21 deadlock.

The Dogs visited Winston in early November with a chance to win their conference's Southern Division championship. And for all but six minutes, outplayed, outhustled, and outmuscled the favored Rams. They held a 14-0 lead with the game clock ticking off the final moments.

No team had won the line of scrimmage against the proud WSSU defensive like Bowie did that afternoon. Except for some bad decisions made in the passing game, the Dogs would have won the division crown and played for the conference title the next week. They lost the game by two points, but they came away earning the full respect of the Rams and those who witnessed the Bowie style on the gridiron.

Going into that game, the Dogs were ranked No. 9 in Division II, the Rams were No. 5. It didn't seem possible that when the rankings came out within the next few days that they would fall to No. 19. Dolch didn't take too kindly to the way the pollsters rated his team after that defeat.

"All people had to do was look at our schedule," he says, " and compare it to any other team in Division II. We won six games on the road. We tell our kids not to put a lot of stock in the polls. All we're out to do is prove week in and week out that we're a quality program. It's just amazing that people doing the voting for the polls make subjective judgements on a team that they've never seen play."

What had appeared to be program that was destined to always be at the bottom is now at the top and should get even better. For Dolch, recruiting in the D.C. -Virginia area shouldn't be as much of a tough selling job as it used to be.

"The university is excited and so is he community," the coach says. "It feels good to know that those wins will carry over into the off-season."

-Craig T. Greenlee

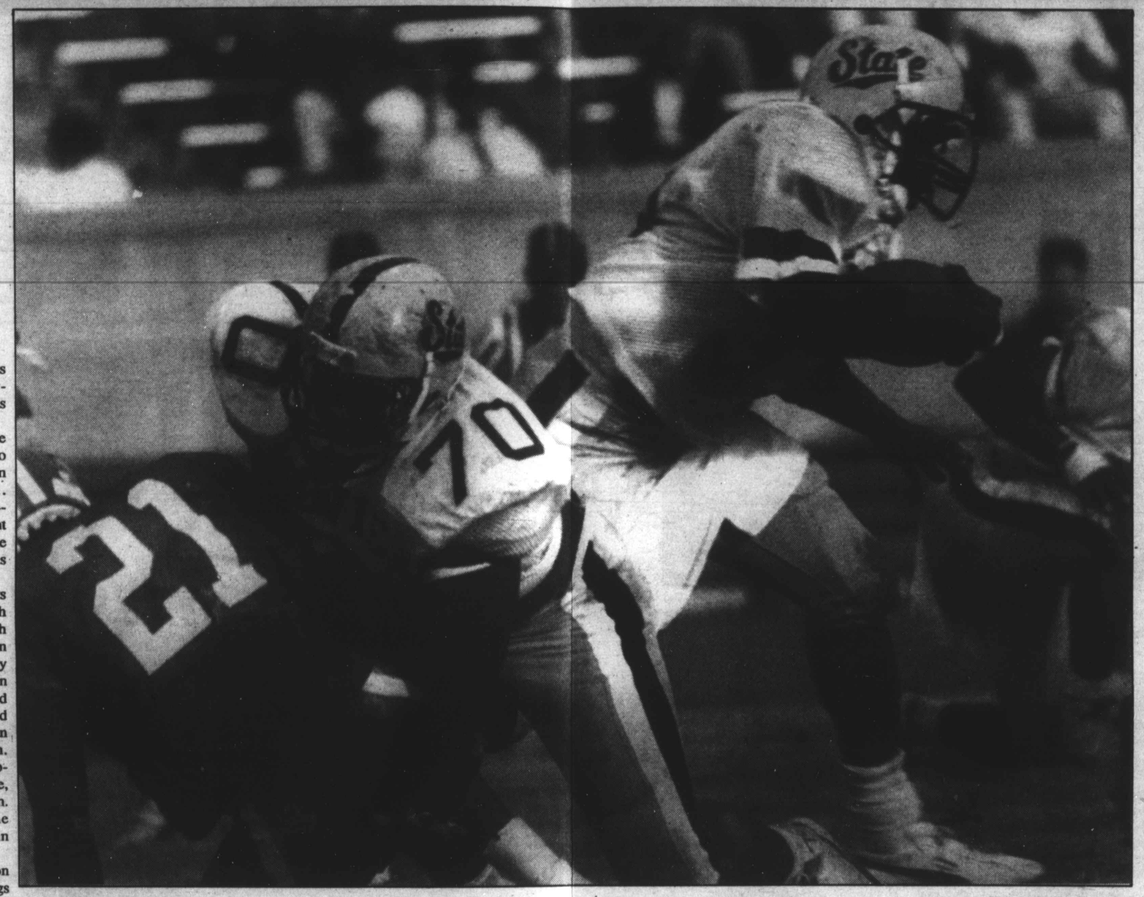

Photo by the Magnificent Eye

Bowie State epitomized power football with a hefty front line that was able to bulldoze defenses. Andre Cooks blasts through an opening created by the block of offensive guard Wallace Hayes (70). The Dogs ground game was the staple of their offense. The main aim was to physically wear opponents down, and most of the time, that's what they did.