FOOTBALL PLAYOFFS

Central State has the role of 'Lone Ranger'

Five black college teams made it to the post-season football playoffs -- four in the NCAA and one in the NAIA. Only two teams made it past the first round. Going into the first week of December, one team remained. Coach Billy Joe's Central State Marauders were still in the hunt for the NAIA championship.

Here's a breakdown by division and athletic sanctioning organization;

NCAA Division I-AA

Jackson State was never able to establish any offense as they dropped a first round decision to Stephen F. Austin, 24-0.

The Lumberjacks (10-2) scored the only TD of the first half in the first quarter. Todd Hammel threw a 73-yard pass to Joe Bradford. Austin kept Tigers running back Lewis Tillman bottled up all afternoon, limiting him to 48 yards. It was only the third time this season that he had been held to under 100 rushing yards for a game.

In all, Jackson State had 159 yards of total offense.

Cornerback Johnnie Hendrix came up with the big play on defense for the Lumberjacks in the second half. He intercepted a pass and ran it back 48 yards for a touchdown.

For JSU, All-America safetyman Kevin Dent had 17 tackles and one pass broken up. The Tigers finished the season at 8-1-2.

No MEAC rep in 1-AA

The MEAC is usually represented in the playoffs, but the conference has been left out for the past two years. The primary reason is because of game schedules.

Florida A & M had the best chance to go because their overall record was better than anyone else in their conference. Plus they had cracked the 1-AA Top 20. But all that ended when they lost to Central State 27-23, *at home*.

Had A & M beat the Marauders, they still wouldn't have been chosen for the playoffs because they scheduled a game against Bethune-Cookman the same weekend as the first round of the 1-AA playoffs. The NCAA mandates that for teams to be considered for post-season play, they must conclude their regular season before the playoffs begin. If not, they don't play, regardless of overall record and/or national ranking.

In the meantime, Delaware State beat Howard 28-21, to win the conference crown. Because the MEAC didn't have an automatic playoff bid, the champion would have to be selected on an at-large basis. DSC's 6-4 overall record put them at a distinct disadvantage in terms of receiving a bid. The selection committee apparently felt that even though Del State won the MEAC, there were other teams with better records who deserved an at-large bid.

The same thing happened to Appalachian State (1-AA) when they tied Wake Forest (1-A) on the final weekend of the regular season. Appy State finished at 6-4-1, but it wasn't good enough, in spite of playing a higher level opponent on equal terms.

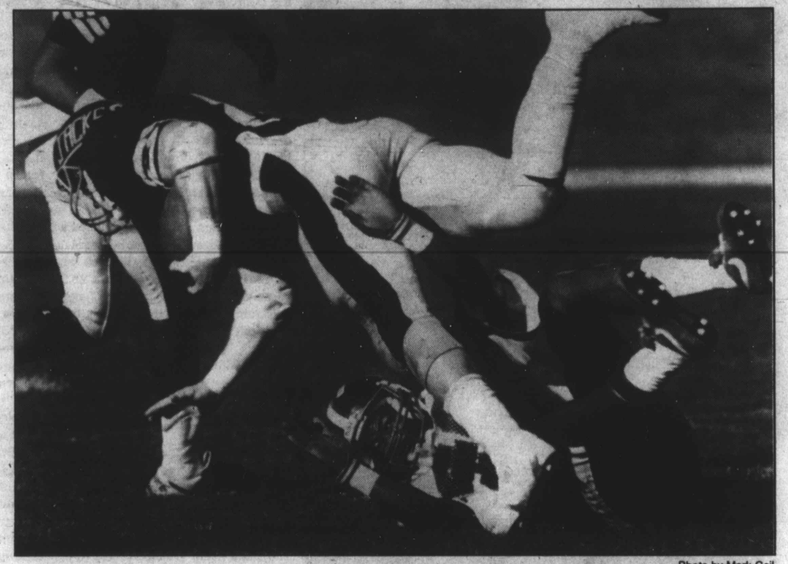


Photo by Mark Gail

It was a long day for Jackson State in the Division I-AA playoffs vs. Stephen F. Austin. JSU's Mark Wallace makes the stop on Lumberjack running back Billy Haynes.

NCAA Division II

This was a feast or famine proposition for the black college conferences involved. The CIAA sent three teams into post-season play -- Winston-Salem State, North Carolina Central, and Bowie State. The SIAC, on the other hand, failed to have a team go to the playoffs once more.

In all likelihood, the SIAC opportunity for representation went out the window when Albany State (ranked No. 12 in Division II at the time) suffered a 28-22 upset at the hands of Savannah State in the regular season finale.

As a result, North Carolina Central got the bid that Albany most surely would've received. Winston-Salem State (No. 5 in the polls) were a solid bet since they won their conference championship over Virginia State.

Bowie State got the other bid, not because it is a member of the CIAA, but because the school is located in the East region. In the expanded playoff field of 16, the NCAA divided the country into four regions, selecting the top two teams in each region based on overall record, then choosing the next eight teams at-large.

A black college team advancing past the first round was guaranteed when the playoff selection committee paired Winston-Salem State with North Carolina Central.

Sources close to the committee reported that the pairing was made in an effort to attract the largest audience. Winston doesn't draw as well as you might think. Central, however, has few problems packing their stadium for home games so the contest was played in Durham, NC.

The Eagles were sharp in round one. Earl "Air" Harvey played a masterful game in guiding his team to a 31-16 victory. Harvey ran for two scores, passed for another, and completed 15 of 30 passes for 235 yards. H e accounted for 70 percent of Central's 434 total offensive yards.

Winston wasn't at full strength. They came out of their CIAA championship win minus some of their top people -- five starters. On offense, running back Broderick Graves (broken hand), quarterback Kenny Jones (twisted ankle) and wide receiver Keith Torrence (sprained ankle). Graves was the league's leading rusher and scorer. Defensively, strong safety Darrell Hall was out due to strained ankle ligaments and linebacker David Graves had a badly bruised leg that greatly negated his effectiveness.

The following week, NCCU went west to play Sacramento State in the quarterfinals. They may have fared better facing a hurricane. Sac State jumped on them early and often and walked away with a 56-7 triumph.

The Hornets had taken a 21-0 lead before Central ever recorded initial first down of the game. They had 691 yards of total offense for a whopping 11.1 yards per play average.

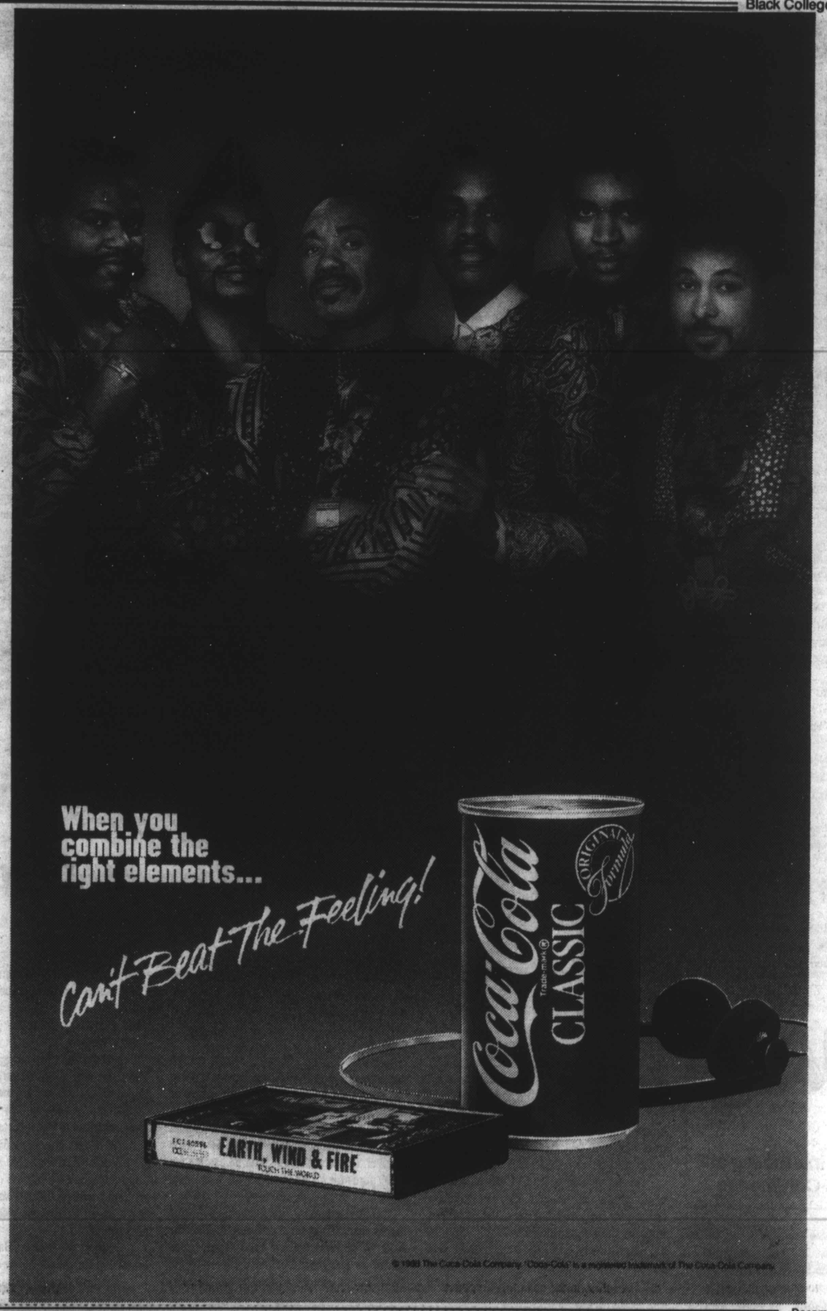
Sac State put the clamps on Harvey and the offense, holding them to 189 total yards. Harvey completed 10 of 24 passes for 162 yards. The Eagles lone score came in the third quarter on a 73-yard pass from Harvey to Anthony Cooley. Before that score, the Hornets had stung NCCU to the tune of 42-0. Central ended their season at 9-2-1.

NAIA Division I

Central State had the luxury of facing their first playoff opponent on their home field. They obliged the home folk by with a 24-10 victory over Catawba College.

The Marauders grabbed a 14-0 halftime lead. Their first score came on a 39-yard pass from Melvin Taylor to Jerry Jones. Antonie Harris added the second score in the same quarter on a three-yard run.

Catawba made their run in the third quarter. Randy Brown kicked a 30-yard field goal early in that period. The Indians cut the deficit to 14-10 when Stacy Waltington recovered a Harris fumble and ran it in from the Marauders five-yard line. Taylor put the game away late in the quarter on a 22-yard scoring run.

At presstime, CSU was 10-1. They traveled to play Hillsdale (Mich.) in a quarterfinal round match-up on Dec. 3.

-Steve Zimmerman