



No Go

Virginia Union's David Banks (43) makes life miserable for Winston-Salem State running back James Johnson in the Panthers' 34-7 CIAA championship victory. The loss not only cost WSSU a title, but a spot in the national rankings as well. Still, the Rams are young and deep (photo by James Parker).

MEAC, SWAC To Clash In First Freedom Bowl

By LARRY BARBER
Guest Columnist

Ken Free, commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, had a dream two years ago.

Come Saturday, Jan. 14, that dream -- a postseason football game matching top seniors from the SWAC and the MEAC -- will become reality.

The newborn SWACMEAC all-star game was publicly unveiled as the "SWAC/MEAC All-Star Bowl" last June 2 at a press conference in Atlanta.

Since then, the game has been officially dubbed the "Freedom Bowl All-Star Classic." That announcement was made recently by Free and SWAC Commissioner James Frank in conjunction with Unique Affairs Inc., the game's promoter.

Free says he took so much time in developing the game because he wanted to establish a firm foundation and research every aspect of the idea before actually attempting to pull it off.

Part of that groundwork was securing the support of each conference, the NCAA and the hosting city. Plus, Free says, he wanted to iron out the myriad details that accompany an all-star game on the college level.

He has become increasingly pleased with his pet project. "The purpose of the game is to give some of our senior players postseason exposure, and to offer the two conferences additional fundraising opportunities," Free says.

Unfortunately, but obviously, few players from black institutions are invited to play in older all-star bowls, such as the Senior Bowl. Yet, those games are high priorities on a professional scout's list, as well as the media's.

Free hopes to attract the same scouts and media coverage to the Freedom Bowl.

"We believe that this game will help more of our athletes get drafted by professional football clubs," he says.

So did the organizers of other black all-star games that have not done well. The first one was held in Houston in 1971. In 1976, another was played in Los Angeles. Two more games were played in the New Orleans Superdome in 1979 and 1980. The last black college all-star game was played before thousands of empty seats in Jackson, Miss., in 1981.

What makes the Freedom Bowl different?

One major difference is that those earlier games adopted a geographical concept, and attempted to involve players from each historically black institution.

Free, on the other hand, decided on a two-conference concept because, he says, it would involve fewer complications, both conferences are members of NCAA Division I-AA football, and for years fans have debated as to which league would be better on the field, head-to-head.

At the June press luncheon in Atlanta, Free added fuel to the debate when he revealed that the

MEAC's slogan for the game would be "Smack the SWAC."

Dr. Norris Edney, SWAC president, replied with a "SWAC smacks back" battle cry.

Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young also appeared at the press gathering. "I am extremely grateful to both athletic conferences, and their institutions for bringing this event to Atlanta," said Young. "We will do our best to make the venture a success."

Why was Atlanta chosen? Free readily cites three reasons: "City officials and corporate heads assured me sincere support, Atlanta is an ideal location geographically, and the game will end a week-long celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday."

As if the appearance of the Young and the two league bosses wasn't enough ammunition, Grambling's Eddie Robinson, the winningest active football coach in the country, also spoke at the Atlanta conference. "I've fostered this idea and been for this kind of game for years," he said. "I don't see how it can possibly fail with the kind of people we have involved with it."

As for further details concerning the game, Free noted, "The 1983 conference-winning coaches will act as head coaches of the two all-star squads. There will be 35 players on each team, and seniors on the league's all-conference teams will automatically qualify for the game. The remaining players will be selected by the coaches, and at least two players from each institution will be chosen."

For those of you whose memories need refreshing, the MEAC members include Bethune-Cookman, Delaware State, Florida A&M, Howard, Maryland-Eastern Shore, North Carolina A&T and South Carolina State.

The SWAC's members are Alabama State, Alcorn State, Grambling State, Jackson State, Mississippi Valley State, Southern University, Prairie View A&M, and Texas Southern.

Here's how the two conferences match up on paper: The MEAC began league competition during the 1971 football season, just 13 years ago. The SWAC has existed since 1920.

Through the 1982 football season, MEAC members had played 62 games against SWAC members with the SWAC holding a 46-14-2 advantage in the overall series.

At this writing, the 1983 football record was 3-1 in favor of SWAC. But these are individual matchups and have no bearing on an all-star contest. Or do they?

Plans for future Freedom Bowls call for participation by the CIAA and the SIAC.

As for the inaugural Freedom Bowl Classic, the kickoff is set for 1 p.m. at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium and the Florida A&M and Grambling bands are scheduled to perform at halftime.

Advance tickets are \$5.00 for students, \$7.00 for adults. On the day of the game, adult tickets will cost \$10.00, but prices will remain the same for students.