

JCSU, Livingstone play to escape CIAA cellar

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"Everything's mental, and that's where we have to go back and keep working with our kids and looking at their mistakes," McNeill said. "As long as they see it's their mistakes, that's fine. No one has

really beaten us except for Glenville (State in the opener). You've just got to keep pushing."

For the third consecutive year, both schools are winless going against each other and are the only CIAA teams without a win. Livingstone,

under first-year head coach and former Garinger High, N.C. Central and NFL stand-out Robert Massey, fell to 0-5 with a 49-27 road loss to Shaw last week. Over the past six games, the teams have split 3-3.

"We're going to play hard,

do the best we can and good things are going to happen to us," said McNeill, who returned to Smith this year and was previously head coach from 1995-96.

After Livingstone, Smith's schedule turns murderous. Road games against unbeat-

en St. Augustine's, two-time CIAA West champion Fayetteville State and Winston-Salem State loom before the regular-season finale against undefeated N.C. Central. McNeill still believes the young Bulls can salvage the season with more

consistency.

"Honestly, I thought we would be 5-0 or 4-1," he said. "You can go back through every game and find three or four plays here or there, and we could honestly be that. I just hate it for our (five) seniors. They deserve better."

Lester puts up career-best results in NASCAR Truck Series

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Indianapolis 500 (1991, 1993) and the first to compete full-time in the Championship Auto Racing Teams series. George Mack, a former Morehouse College student, had the best Indy 500 finish (17th) in 2002 and was the first African-American to campaign an entire Indy Racing League

season. But both left open-wheel racing for lack of sponsorship, the mother's milk of big-league motorsports. Ribbs later joined NASCAR's Truck Series in 2001, making him the first black driver in that sanctioning body's modern era.

Lester, who eclipsed the \$1 million mark in earnings this year, has benefitted

from top-flight equipment with BDR and the backing of Toyota. Although Lester has yet to get into Victory Lane, he's won three career poles, including a couple in 2005. He also recorded a career-best finish of fourth this season at Kansas Speedway.

"In a nutshell, I've got to be happy with how the season has gone," Lester said. "I'm

happy because I'm doing what I want to do in my life. I'm working with a great team in Bill Davis Racing and a great manufacturer in Toyota. We've had good runs, we just haven't gotten all the results we want. Until you get that first win and become a force to be reckoned with, there's always room for improvement."

As Lester's results improve, so has his stature. As NASCAR's diversity efforts take root with initiatives like Charlotte-based Drive for Diversity, a pipeline of new drivers may be established. Meanwhile, Lester is the black face of a sport that's lacking in that regard.

"What I'm trying to do is bring more exposure to kids

of color and you can do anything you want to do with your life," said Lester, who is in his fourth Truck campaign, the first with Bill Davis Racing. "That's a tremendous response, but it's secondary. I don't see myself as a black race driver; I'm a race car driver who happens to be black. If kids see me and want to be like me, that's great."

Smith at top of his game since return

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one the leading receivers in the NFL. He's currently ranked third in the league in receiving yards with 342 yards and tied for first in

receptions with 23. As the Panthers' go-to-guy on third down situations, he leads the league in third down receiving yards with eight catches for 116 yards.

Smith sees himself as a playmaker rather than a leader on the team. He says that the fear of failure is what he thrives on to make plays. And when he makes plays,

he's bound to have fun doing it.

"When it's all said and done, hopefully I maintain and keep doing what I'm doing and I'll be on the right path," said

Oklahoma City to reap benefits from Hornets

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OKLAHOMA CITY - The relocation of the NBA's New Orleans Hornets to Oklahoma City will bring an estimated \$57 million impact on the local economy, according to a study released by the city.

The study shows money from the NBA team spreading to all corners of the state, helping government budgets and bolstering business.

And while local businesses stand to reap tens of millions of dollars, officials say other long-term rewards are in store as well.

"The biggest benefit we're going to get out of this whole deal is Oklahoma City's name being in every newspaper, on every TV, every radio station for the whole season and beyond," former Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norick said. "You cannot buy that kind of publicity."

Bricktown business own-

ers hope NBA fans will fill hotels and pack bars and restaurants. The games will enhance revenues during the traditionally slow winter season.

"It's going to boost revenues for everybody," said Jeremy Drum, assistant manager at Mickey Mantle Steakhouse in Bricktown. "It's going to be like 35 concerts coming to our city."

Purchases on game days for lodging, food and entertainment should total \$31 million for the season, the city study shows. That would generate about \$915,000 in sales taxes for the city and more than \$1 million for the state.

The city expects Hornets players to spend some of their salaries in Oklahoma, generating more tax money and helping business. But their major financial contribution may be in income tax applied to their combined

\$57 million salary.

The state will get about \$3.6 million of that in income tax collections.

Ticket sales could generate money for the city, the state and a local business group if revenues pass \$42.5 million. As part of the city's contract with the team, profits past that mark get split in half between the NBA and the three risk-sharing partners.

Chris Granger, the NBA's vice president of business development, said ticket sales so far have "exploded beyond our expectations."

"The phones haven't stopped ringing" for season and packaged ticket sales, he said.

Most officials and business leaders interviewed said they're not worried that the Hornets might only be here one year, as is established in their contract with the city.

It's all about building toward the future,

Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce Chairman Fred Jones Hall said.

Hall called this kind of national publicity "priceless." He said the chamber had already marked the past two years as "breakout years" for Oklahoma City. The goal of that label was to move Oklahoma City from a city with regional recognition to one with national status.

"This puts us in that pantheon" of spotlight cities like Chicago and Cincinnati, he said.

MEAC finding its voice in Triangle

The first thing MEAC Commissioner Dennis Thomas noticed was my shirt. Besides the eye-blinding bright orange color, the letters "CIAA" appeared on the upper left shoulder.

Grossly out of place at the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference game between North Carolina A&T and Hampton in Greensboro Sept. 15, Thomas quipped "We've got to get you another shirt."

The MEAC staff will need to pass out more than just one shirt if they plan to garner half of the recognition and economic empowerment as the six-year run of the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association tournament.

Thomas was like a kid in a candy store because the Thursday night game was being broadcast on ESPNU.

"Look at this - the pageantry, the excitement, the enthusiasm," he said. "That's what Division I brings to the table. This is great."

Great for the 4 million or so who could actually see the game. Four mil is no chump change mind you, but well below the 85.6 million that watched the CIAA tournament on ESPN2 or ESPN Classic.

Ironically, the MEAC's identity challenge is similar to that of ESPNU. The latest spinoff to ESPN is still finding its own voice and respect from cable operators.

The city of Raleigh knows the MEAC is another HBCU basketball tournament. It's just not sure who or what it's all about.

Thomas is hoping the MEAC's Division I status will be the selling point.

"We play North Carolina and Duke and other ACC teams," he said. "Our tournament winner goes to the Big Dance."

True. Who can forget - especially Carolina fans - when Hampton strolled into Chapel Hill in 2001 and whupped the Tar Heels 77-69? Or Hampton's bone-chilling upset of No. 2 Iowa State in the first round of the 2001 NCAA Tournament.

Thomas has hired two marketing/public relations firms to promote the event, and from the looks of things, they have their hands full.

"We need to educate the Wake County com-

munity about the MEAC," Thomas said. "They need to know about our product. We're going to start meeting with the public, meeting with different groups so that they can get to know us. It's being set up now."

The MEAC has scheduled its basketball media luncheon for Oct. 13 at the RBC Center. There is just one problem - at least for those organizations with a small sports staff - the CIAA basketball luncheon is set for the same day at the exact same time at the Charlotte Convention Center.

Hopefully, the MEAC will reschedule; if not, that means Thomas is trying to make some sort of statement against the CIAA. One he's bound to lose.

Despite the bad blood between the city and the CIAA, there are three area schools that belong to the conference, which should take precedence over a new conference that has yet to establish itself in the area.

Besides, if Raleigh acts anything like it did during the CIAA's first year, skeptics will abound until the final receipt slip is counted after the MEAC tournament in March.

Bonitta Best is sports editor at *The Triangle Tribune* in Durham.

GOLF ROUND

Sons of Allen tournament

Greater Bethel AME Church will host the Sons of Allen brotherhood golf tournament Friday at Sunset Hills Golf Course.

Registration is 8:15 a.m. and play starts at 9 a.m. Registration fee is \$50 per player and covers green fees, cart, bucket of balls and lunch. Trophies will go to top five scores.

For information, call (704) 502-6870 or (704) 724-4052.

• Andre Robinson won the Tee to Green Golf Association tournament Sept. 24-25 at River Bend Golf Club in Shelby.

Robinson fired a two-round total of 147 to finish a pair of shots ahead of Otis Worthy. Kendu Dunlap was third in the championship flight at 150.



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