

Williams-led Tigers figure (again) to be at top of ACC heap

By **BRENDAN MATHEWS**
Staff Writer

Is there any doubt Clemson will win the ACC?

The Tigers are on an entirely different level than the rest of the conference. While most of the ACC is hoping for a winning record, Clemson has a legitimate shot at a national title. UNC is starting over, N.C. State is rebuilding, and Maryland is comatose.

Meanwhile, the Tigers just keep getting stronger.

How do they do it? Well, start with the fact that football is a religion in South Carolina, add in coach Danny Ford's ability to consistently recruit the nation's top high school players, and finish off with a schedule that this year keeps them home in Death Valley for their toughest games (Florida State, South Carolina). It's easy to see why Clemson will be heading for its second straight New Year's Day bowl game.

Last year's 35-10 dismantling of Penn State in the Florida Citrus Bowl proved to the country that the Tigers were more than just the big fish in the Atlantic Coast pond. Senior quarterback Rodney Williams silenced the "they can run, but how about putting it in the air" critics by dissecting the Nittany Lions' secondary for 214 yards. When it was all over, Clemson had run up 499 total yards and stood primed to carry that momentum over to the '88 season.

But the Tigers aren't perfect, as last year's 30-28 loss to N.C. State and their season-ender with South Carolina proved. Against the Gamecocks, they played like, well, a typical ACC team. Final score: South Carolina 20, Clemson 7.

That's all history, though. This year, Clemson's traditionally rock-solid defense will once again carry them through the fall.

The line took a beating with the graduation of All-American Michael Dean Perry and All-ACC choice Tony Stephens. With the team's leading tackler, outside linebacker James Earle, joining Perry and Stephens in line for a diploma, things looked bleak for the defense.

But wait, this is Clemson, where restocking defensive lines are no problem.

Monster senior Raymond Chavous will step in to pick up where Perry left off. Chavous, a veteran of three bowl games, will continue to do what he does best — stop the drive up the middle with his 6-foot-5, 280-pound frame. The rest of the line will be anchored by seniors Richard McColough and J.C. Harper, and junior Otis Moore.

The dominant man in the defensive front is senior end Jesse Hatcher, who came on strong late last year with seven sacks. The other end, sophomore John Johnson, will be a threat to opposing quarterbacks all season long. A freshman All-American in '87, Johnson runs the 40 in 4.55.

The weakness of the defense will be at linebacker, where no top prospects have emerged. "We have a little bit of depth along the defensive line," Ford said. "Our problem will be at linebacker, where we don't have many players coming back. Henry

Carter is passing up his fifth year, his redshirt year, so we have to depend on some young people like (Doug) Brewster."

As a freshman, Brewster racked up 38 tackles in the last four games of the season. Joining him will be Dorian Mariable, the defensive MVP of the Citrus Bowl. Although he started only three games, Mariable led all linebackers with 61 tackles.

Without a doubt, the star of the Clemson defense will be senior cornerback Donnell Woolford, a first-team All-American last year. In man-to-man coverage last season, only seven passes made it by him. In addition, he led the team in punt returns, passes broken up and interceptions.

As if Woolford wasn't enough, the other three starters from last year's secondary — which broke up a Clemson-record 42 passes — are all back. Junior James Lott, at the other corner, is joined by seniors Gene Beasley (strong safety) and Richard Smith (free safety).

Not to be outdone by the defense, Clemson's offense also showcases power, speed and potential All-Americans.

Williams returns for his fourth year at the helm of the Tiger offense. He can't throw like Vinny Testaverde, and he can't run like Jamelle Holieway, but that doesn't seem to bother Ford.

"We've got a quarterback that only knows how to win," said Ford, summing up the Williams mystique. "He's not very flashy, but he usually wins."

Williams has always been an option quarterback, and there are no signs that's going to change. His passing has been, and will continue to be, inconsistent, although Williams' performance in the Citrus Bowl showed what he is capable of.

But why go to the air when you've got a running game as potent as the Tigers? The ground attack features the '87 ACC Rookie of the Year, tailback Terry Allen, who rolled to 973 yards and eight touchdowns. Junior tailback Wesley McFadden led the ACC with 5.7 yards per carry en route to picking up 781 yards for the season. McFadden's 226-yard explosion against Virginia Tech last year helped earn him an all-conference honorable mention.

Always a believer that too much is never enough, Ford also has Joe Henderson in reserve at tailback. The junior scored five touchdowns and gained 386 yards in limited playing time last year.

Clemson also has a potent weapon in fullback Tracy Johnson. His nine-touchdown season and three dives across the line in the Citrus Bowl sparked the Tigers.

The Clemson offensive line is one of the most experienced in the conference, returning four of last year's starters and one from the '86 roster.

Leading the way will be All-ACC senior tackle Mark Nunamacher, whose 6-2, 300-pound frame poses a

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