

# Rams season: tight losses, dramatic conclusions

The Winston-Salem State football team had a 2009 season filled with growing pains.



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SPORTS EDITOR

The Rams, who played their last year in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, saw an emotional exit to their head coach Kermit Blount. Blount is a 1980 WSSU graduate and a former four-year starting quarterback for the Rams. He held the head coaching position for 17 years.

"Having known Kermit for so many years, I have tremendous respect for him," said Bill Hayes in a recent statement to WSSU Media Relations. Hayes will become the University's new athletic director in January.

"However, I support a change in leadership for the football program in order to improve our recruiting efforts, to create more excitement and enthusiasm for the program among the students, and to build support among the alumni and within the community."

The Rams posted 10 points in each of their first four games, all which were losses, including a 16-10 overtime defeat by Morgan State on the road during the Urban Classic League. Their losses to NC A&T, Florida A&M, Morgan State, and South Carolina State were by margins of nine, 24, six, and 17 points.

Their closest loss was a four-point 7-3 defeat from Howard University Oct. 3.

After an open date, the Rams traveled to Davis, Calif. to take on the University of California, Davis. Three fumbles by the Rams helped to secure the 45-14 victory for the Aggies.

WSSU did not reach their first win until Oct. 24, a 16-10 victory over Bethune-Cookman in Daytona Beach, Fla. during the Wildcats' homecoming. The Rams win was propelled by two scores in the last nine minutes of the game with a rushing touchdown by junior running back Cedric Hickman and a field goal by Landen Thayer.

The following week during their own Homecoming the Rams suffered a 16-13 overtime loss to Hampton.

WSSU concluded the season with three more close losses to Delaware State Nov. 7 with a final of 24-21; to NC Central Nov. 14 with a score of 18-10; and to Norfolk State Nov. 21 with a score of 28-21.

"It was a disappointing season," said Chedrick Marshall, a senior who plays linebacker from Greensboro. Marshall finished second on the team in tackles with 60 behind sophomore Akeem Ward with 70.

"We could have finished games a lot better. More plays should have been made in the fourth quarter and less mistakes," Marshall said.

WSSU's young offensive line gave up 32 sacks, an improvement from the 36 given up in the 2008 season.

The Rams lost 14 fumbles and eight interceptions, while averaging 12.5 points a game.

WSSU totaled 138 points on the season compared to their opponents 244. Thayer was the Rams scoring leader with 42 points. He was 9-16 on field goals and 15-16 on extra points. The West Forsyth High School graduate also served as the Rams punter averaging 40 yards per punt.

"I did the best I could for the team, just like they did their best," Thayer said.

The Rams had their struggles in the running game. Despite running the ball more than 62 percent, the Rams averaged a stagnant three yards per carry and did not record a 100-yard rusher during the 2009 campaign.

In the wide receiving corps, junior Omar Kizzie averaged 10.5 yards a catch, and he also scored four of the Rams final five touchdowns of the season.

WSSU's defense had a solid season overall. The Rams surrendered 21 points a game, 166 yards passing, and 134.5 yards rushing.

Of the 118 Division I-FCS teams in the country, the Rams defense placed in the top 25 in two statistical categories; 19th in pass efficiency defense and the 300 yards given up per game put them in 23rd place.

"Every player on defense wanted to make all the plays," Marshall said.

"As a defensive guy, I know this was the best defense this University has ever had."

During the Rams transition to the Division I level, WSSU defeated every team in the MEAC at least once, except for Norfolk State and S.C. State.

Going back to Division II next season, the Rams will re-enter the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association, a division where they have won several championships.

"Next year, we'll make back to the CIAA, going back down to Division II," said senior linebacker Devease Simpson also from Greensboro.

"The good thing is a lot of the athletes are returning. We only had about six to eight seniors, so you will see a lot of returning faces.

"We will see what the 2010 season has to offer."

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done that, and we're very proud of that."

Stokes informed Chancellor Reaves and her team of the decision to move on from coaching before the season began; however, there has not been a coach-in-waiting named.

Bill Hayes, who will take over as Athletic Director Jan. 1 will choose Stokes's replacement.

According to Reaves, however Stokes said she would not turn down the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process.

"I would like to have some input if they will allow me to because I want this program to continue to grow," Stokes said.

"I want WSSU to continue to be an outstanding program in the future. I don't want it to take a step back, so

hopefully, I will be able to have input on who the next coach will be," Stokes continued.

"I will offer my service if that's what's needed."

Stokes said that although coaching is not a priority for her right now, it would be more of a secondary role, and she may juggle coaching with administration. She said she wants to have a greater influence on young people.

"Basketball has been a part of my life since I was four years old," Stokes said.

"It will always be a part of my life. Just because I'm not coaching, doesn't mean I won't be involved in basketball. I'll still attend games. I will always be a fan. I won't step away in that regard.

"I just won't be roaming the sidelines."

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