

SPORTS

NCCU, NC A&T to Play Oct. 4 Football Game At Memorial Stadium in Charlotte

In order to accommodate an anticipated crowd that exceeds the capacity of its own stadium, North Carolina Central University will move its home football game against long-time rival North Carolina A&T State University to Memorial Stadium in Charlotte.

The 80th gridiron contest between the Eagles and Aggies will kickoff at 5 p.m. on Oct. 4. "We are excited about partnering with the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department to bring this historic rivalry to Charlotte," said NCCU Director of Athletics Ingrid Wicker-McCree. "Memorial Stadium provides a terrific atmosphere for college football, and I am sure the fans will enjoy the many accommodations the Queen City has to offer."

A crowd of 19,320 witnessed the last meeting in 2007, played inside Aggie Stadium in Greensboro. Since 1994, the average attendance at an NCCU versus NC A&T football game is 35,478, including a high of 48,001 at Carter-Finley Stadium in Raleigh in 1997.

NCCU's O'Kelly-Riddick Stadium seats 10,000 spectators, while the move to Memorial Stadium in Charlotte will allow up to 24,000 fans to enjoy the historic match-up by more than doubling the seating capacity of the Durham venue.

"Memorial Stadium allows us to accommodate the tremendous fan support for this event, while keeping ticket prices affordable and providing an enjoyable experience for our student-athletes and fans," Wicker-McCree said. As the Eagle/Aggie rivalry itself, Memorial Stadium is also historic.

Constructed in 1936, Memorial Stadium has played host to a speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, the Shrine Bowl from 1937 to 2000, and, more recently, the filming of the movie "Leatherheads," starring George Clooney, in April 2007.

"We are delighted that NCCU has chosen Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte to play this football game at the historic Memorial Stadium," said James Garges, director of the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department. "We are excited to host this game based on the fact that the rivalry started with an inaugural game in 1924. We stand ready to make this game a memorable event."

For ticket information, contact the NCCU Ticket Office at 530-5170 or visit www.NCCUEaglePride.com.

Boston's Lester has a different kind of return home

By Tim Booth
SEATTLE (AP) - In the span of a week, the homecoming of Boston pitcher Jon Lester went from being a footnote to the centerpiece everyone wanted to talk about.

"It's been crazy," the 24-year-old native of Tacoma, Wash., said. Lester walked in the front door of his parents' home, about 35 miles south of Seattle, on May 25 the proud owner of a no-hitter. If that didn't make enough front-page news, his father's current battle against cancer also became public knowledge over the weekend.

"I really haven't had time to do much other than show up to the field talk to the media and go work out. That's kind of been my routine lately," Lester said before the Red Sox opened a three-game series against the Mariners on May 25. "It's kind of calming down. After today things will probably get back to normal and I'll resume my normal routine."

In an ESPN interview that aired Sunday, Lester revealed that his father, John, was diagnosed with a highly treatable form of lymphoma about a month ago. The pitcher missed part of the 2007 season after being diagnosed with a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

He returned late last season to go 4-0 in 11 starts late in the regular season, then got the Game 4 victory as Boston completed a World Series sweep of Colorado last October.

If those accomplishments didn't already make Lester a cult hero in Red Sox lore, he added the 18th no-hitter in Red Sox history in a 7-0 win over Kansas City on May 19. Even a week later, Lester has yet to watch his entire performance against the Royals, viewing only highlights.

"It's been crazy just worrying about my next start. I'm sure things won't really hit home until after the season," he said.

Ex-NFL players' suit to move ahead despite suicide

By Harry R. Weber
ATLANTA (AP) - A former hedge fund manager's suicide has no effect on a lawsuit filed by six former NFL players - most of them former Denver Broncos - against the league and its players union over \$20 million they say they lost in an investment scheme, an attorney for the plaintiffs said Monday.

The lawsuit claims the union endorsed Kirk Wright's services even though he had liens against him.

Wright hanged himself in a suburban Atlanta jail on Saturday, three days after he was convicted of leading an investment scheme that caused clients, ranging from the former NFL players to his mother, to lose millions of dollars while he

spent the money on jewelry, real estate and a \$500,000 wedding.

Wright, 37, faced up to what would have amounted to a life sentence. He hanged himself with bed sheets, said John Mansch, chief of the Union City jail. He did not leave a note and officials had "no indication whatsoever he intended to do any harm to himself," Mansch said.

An attorney for the former players said they weren't planning on using Wright as a witness in the case.

"The point of the lawsuit is to make sure what happened does not happen again," attorney Marlon Kimpson said.

Attorneys for the NFL and its players union, the NFLPA, did not immediately respond to e-mails

Monday, a national holiday. However, the union has countersued the ex-players, arguing it does not endorse any of its registered financial advisers and is not responsible for what happened. The union also claims the players breached union rules by not exhausting internal remedies before filing the lawsuit.

The former NFL players are Steve Atwater, Ray Crockett, Al Smith, Blaine Bishop, Carlos Emmons and Clyde Simmons. Most are former Broncos. No trial date has been set for the lawsuit.

The criminal charges against Wright were related to the 2006 collapse of his Atlanta-based hedge fund company, International Management Associates.

According to authorities, Wright and his company collected more than \$150 million from thousands of client accounts since 1997 and used false statements and documents to mislead some of them to believe the value of those investments was increasing. Much of that money is missing.

Wright was arrested in May 2006 at a hotel in Miami Beach, Fla., where he was staying under an alias. Authorities have said nearly \$30,000 in cash, several fake ID's and seven prepaid cell phones were found in Wright's hotel room.

As part of Wright's criminal sentence, he also faced a fine of up to \$16 million and could have been ordered to pay restitution to his victims. A spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Atlanta declined to comment Monday on what affect Wright's death will have on the payment of any restitution.

Wright already had been hit with a \$20 million judgment as part of a civil suit filed by the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Titans' receivers ready to prove they can do job

By Teresa M. Walker
NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) - The first round of the NFL Draft went by, then the second round and the third without Tennessee spending a pick on a wide receiver. To the Titans on the roster at that position, nothing could have been a bigger endorsement.

"It's great," receiver Brandon Jones said. "Being a wide receiver, you always look at that. It's good (coach Jeff) Fisher has that trust in us we can go out there and get the job done. We have the confidence in ourselves. We work hard enough. We want to go out and get it done ourselves. We don't look at us we need to get some help to bring it in."

Questioning the Titans' receiving corps is easy enough based on production in 2007.

Only three Titans caught more than 33 passes, and one of them was tight end Bo Scaife. Justin Gage and Roydell Williams each finished with 55 catches, but Tennessee managed only nine touchdowns receiving for a passing offense that ranked 27th in the NFL averaging 179.9 yards per game and not enough to counter the NFL's fifth-best rushing offense.

But Fisher changed offensive coordinators in January, bringing back Mike Heimerdinger, who showed a deft touch with receivers and the passing game while holding the job here between 2000 and 2004. He liked what he found enough that he didn't lobby to use a high draft pick at receiver.

"The whole group worked pretty hard, ran good routes and had pretty good technique, so I wasn't sure that there was a drastic need to go out and just go take a receiver because everybody thought we needed a receiver. They all looked like they had some talent," Heimerdinger said.

After Heimerdinger rejoined the team, the Titans signed Gage to a new four-year deal with \$6.5 million guaranteed.

"Justin Gage is a good technique guy," Heimerdinger said. "I don't know how many chances he had to catch a deep ball. You can't say he doesn't have the ability to go deep."

They also signed Justin McCareins, a former draft pick traded away to the Jets a few years ago, to a one-year deal. McCareins thinks the Titans have a very good group of receivers.

"We think we can be as good as anybody if we continue to improve and continue to pull together and know what we're doing out there with this new offense," he said.

The Titans currently have 11 receivers, five of those are draft picks including two from last year in Paul Williams who never got on the field in 2007 and Chris Davis who had only five catches. Lavelle Hawkins, a fourth-round pick out of California, was the only receiver drafted this year and joined the veterans for the first time Friday.

Paul Williams, who shares that last name with three other Titans receivers including Mike Williams (the 10th pick overall in 2005) and undrafted rookie Edward, had several nice catches Friday using long arms that have earned him the nickname Inspector Gadget.

"And they're all there to get (jobs) whether it's Gage who just got new money or me that's working to have a good year to get new money or stay here longer," Mike Williams said. "Everybody's going for the same thing: To win and to play. This

offense, Coach Dinger's record. Play for him, chances are you probably are going to be doing pretty good."

Heimerdinger threw open competition on the first day, telling the receivers to show him what they've got. Gage and McCareins are working first in the rotation while Roydell Williams' ankle heals followed, so far, in the rotation by Biren Ealy, a 6-foot-3 receiver who was an undrafted free agent in 2007, and Mike Williams.

But Heimerdinger demands consistency and the ability to make plays.

"I had no preconceived notions about who should be where and what they should do or where they should all go. It's a clean slate for those guys, a chance to show what they can do," he said.

Time to catch on.

Past time to speed baseball up

By Tim Dahlberg
(AP) The Red Sox apparently didn't get the memo in time, which caused a lot of consternation when all J.D. Drew wanted to do was slather some "Manny Mota Grip Stick" on a new piece of wood.

The Mota stick itself wasn't the problem the other night in Oakland. Not since George Brett went berserk 25 years ago have many umpires begrudged a player the right to make his bat handle as sticky as he wants.

Drew's crime was that he was wasting time, though it was hitting coach Dave Magadan who served the sentence when he was tossed for arguing the new enforcement of rules for speeding up a game that almost every player will tell you doesn't need speeding up at all.

There's a lot of fans who might differ.

They're the ones who take the family out to the ball game and have to plead with their bored kids to stay until the end. They're the ones who get bored themselves sitting around between innings waiting for the interminable commercials to be played.

Just how bad has it gotten? On Sunday in San Diego, it took the Padres and Cincinnati Reds 5 hours, 57 minutes to play a game - and that's with the umpires watching, making sure no one was dawdling.

OK, so that game did take 18 innings to play. But on the same day only two nine inning games in the National League were played in less than three hours.

Give commissioner Bud Selig some credit for recognizing that games are lasting far too long and asking both umpires and teams in a series of recent conference calls to pick up the pace, mostly by enforcing and abiding by rules that are already in place but have long been ignored by both umpires and players.

I say give him some credit, because he called for the same thing 13 years ago, about the same time owners decided to make umpires return to the traditional strike zone. Since then, efforts to speed up play have been enforced about as often as umpires have called letter-high strikes.

There's not a lot of reason to be optimistic that it will be different this time around. The game keeps slowing down, and a few memos and a conference call or two aren't enough to speed it back up again.

Pitchers stroll on and off the mound like they are in a yoga session, pausing often to contemplate the meaning of the inside of their glove. Batters act like hyperactive children who can't stop playing with their uniforms, and seem to fear the batter's box has some sort of strange force inside it that repels them away after every pitch.

Managers change pitchers constantly in later innings, which outside of added commercial time is probably the biggest contributor to long games. The age of specialty pitchers comes with a price, and that is a long delay every time a manager plods out to the mound, signals for a reliever to plod in, and then watches as he is given even more time to warm up after already doing so in the bullpen.

And then there's at least 40 minutes worth of commercial time for every game, while teams often stretch the breaks between innings with promotional stunts, music and videos to keep short attention spans up.

It all adds up to nine inning games averaging nearly three hours, up 18 minutes from 1981. Games like the one the White Sox and Angels played in 2:05 on Sunday are the aberration when they once were the norm and, even with that quickly played contest, games averaged 2:58 on Sunday compared to 2:28 the same Sunday in 1968.

Blame part of that increase on simple greed. Baseball added another television commercial between innings in 1985, which increased games at least 10 minutes, and there are even more in the playoffs. Each World Series game last year averaged 3 hours, 46 minutes, ending on the East Coast long after most kids had been ordered to bed.

Predictably, both players and managers reacted to the enforcement effort by either making fun of it or saying it wasn't necessary. Tigers manager Jim Leyland did both, first by saying he can't hurry to the mound because he smokes three packs of cigarettes a day, and then adding that part of the allure of baseball is that it doesn't have a clock like other sports.

"To me a baseball game is like a movie," Leyland said. "If it's a good movie, you stay. If it's a bad movie, you leave."

If people keep seeing too many bad movies, though, they stop buying tickets. Selig seems to grasp that idea, even if the people on the field don't.

Maybe this time the umpires will do us all a favor and play along. Who knows, they might even call a high strike or two.

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