

Davis sees pluses at JCSU

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years, responded with a 7-3 record in 1996, the Golden Bulls' first winning season since 1982.

"I'm definitely interested because it's home," Davis said. "My mentor (former Smith coach Eddie McGirt) is there. My family lives near there. My wife's mother lives just behind the campus. There's a lot of pluses there."

In addition to coaching, Davis will assume the athletic director's role from Steve Joyner, who remains men's basketball coach. Spring practice has been pushed

back a week and ends April 19 with an intrasquad scrimmage.

Davis, who was on Tennessee State's faculty, is popular among Smith alumni, who had grown accustomed to losing before McNeill's arrival. Davis, who applied for openings at Savannah State and Delaware State only to be passed over, said he can build on McNeill's success.

"If I get the chance to come to Charlotte, it would be coming back to the way it used to be," he said. "I see great promise in the program to get it back to where it was."

Davis has been a mentor to his assistants who have moved on to launch winning careers. There's McNeill, one of the hot young stars among black college coaches, and Joe Crosby, who succeeded Davis at Savannah State and is now at Morris Brown in Atlanta. In a way, their success mirrors Davis'.

"We have a long track record," he said. "They have the Bill Davis flavor. The thing I miss about coaching is to see them make contribution."

"The one thing coach (McGirt) told me was to take care of your own."

McNeill era ends with a flurry

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the Bulls' first winning season since 1982. Leaving was the last thing on his mind, but Savannah State's package, which includes a television coaches' show, was enough to convince him to move.

"I definitely have a lot of feelings that's indescribable," McNeill said. "I wanted to finish what I started, but Savannah State put together an outstanding package that I couldn't turn down."

Smith's turnaround last season came after McNeill sprinkled junior college transfers with holdovers from former coach Ray Lee's tenure. Leaving those players, especially in the middle of spring practice, is awkward, but McNeill had nothing but praise for them.

"They are my heroes because of where they've come from, he said. "They're my biggest con-

cern."

Along with his former players, McNeill credits the JCSU community with helping turn the football program around. Smith President Dorothy Cowser Yancy and athletic director Steve Joyner helped create a winning atmosphere on campus, which spread to success on the field.

"I can't thank Doctor Yancy for the things she's done for me and coach Joyner for sticking with me," McNeill said. "It's a real heartfelt place for me and I'll always have a place in my heart for Johnson C. Smith."

Although Smith gives only 13 scholarships, least in the nine-team CIAA, McNeill put together a team that led the league in fewest points allowed and improved its record by five wins. Still, putting more resources into football can help make the program more competitive, a

complaint of coaches who have quit in frustration or passed on the job.

"We can win at Johnson C. Smith," McNeill said. "There's nothing wrong with what we have, but what if we had a little bit more?"

Savannah State, which starts spring practice April 24, had been without a coach since Wendell Avery was fired in November. In McNeill, the Tigers have one of the top young coaches in black college football and will be expected to challenge Albany State for the league title. In the future, McNeill said he'd like to schedule Smith.

"I'd like to do that," he said. "What I really hope is we'll be playing in the Pioneer Bowl (the new postseason game pitting the CIAA and SIAC champions) in December."

Braves take on a different look

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media and snippy with management.

In the end, though, the Braves couldn't afford to pass up a player who is probably the best lead-off hitter in baseball, with 323 stolen bases since 1992 while Atlanta has only 455 steals as a team during that time. The trade also frees up playing time in the outfield for 19-year-old phenom Andruw Jones.

"I'm just glad to go somewhere where they win," Lofton said. "The rest will take care of itself."

The Braves have done plenty of winning since 1991, mainly because of three pitchers who have won the last six Cy Young awards. John Smoltz (24-8, 2.94 ERA) broke Greg Maddux's four-year streak in 1996 when Maddux "slumped" to 15-11 with a 2.72 ERA.

Atlanta also has 1991 winner Tom Glavine (15-10, 2.98) and Denny Neagle (16-9, 3.50), who was acquired last season from

Pittsburgh and now slides into the fourth starter role formerly occupied by Steve Avery, who became a free agent and signed with Boston.

The bullpen was shaky in the postseason, so the Braves are counting heavily on two players who have missed most of the last two seasons with injuries. Kevin Rogers earned a spot as the top left-hander, while former Angels and Marlins closer Bryan Harvey is likely to work in middle relief once he recovers from a pulled muscle in his side.

The closer is Mark Wohlers, who had a club-record 39 saves last season but was marred by Jim Leyritz's three-run homer in the World Series. That blow in Game 4 was the clear turning point in a series that began with two straight Atlanta victories and ended with New York winning the last four.

Wohlers and the rest of the Braves insist there won't be a hangover from their stunning loss to the Yankees. Atlanta has

been to the playoffs every non-strike year since 1991, but has only one World Series title to show for it.

"People can say what they want," Chipper Jones said. "We're very proud of what we've accomplished the last six years. We're the best team in baseball over that period of time. We have been over the long haul. Some teams may come up and beat us in October, but that's going to happen every once in a while. No one is going to take anything away from us."

Florida would like to take away something from the Braves: their run of divisional titles. The sleepy NL East took on a whole new dynamic during the offseason when the Marlins spent \$89 million on free agents and hired Jim Leyland as manager.

"Whoever's got the best team is going to win," Jones said with an unconcerned shrug. "If they're better than we are, we'll tip our caps to 'em."

Mason puts his best foot forward

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"Mase is one of the guys that can consistently just back a guy in and get right to the rim, draw a foul and draw a double team."

As eager as Cowens is to have Mason's 16.5 points, 11.4 rebounds and 5.7 assists in the lineup, there's no way he'll rush the power forward back.

"It's whenever he's ready to come back and he feels comfortable coming back," Cowens said. "I don't think there's going to be a big lag in terms of when he's going to be ready to get his game legs underneath him again. I don't think that will be a big issue."

Despite the frustration of losing two tight games last week, Geiger says the team has to take

some positives from those games.

"There's some promising things," he said. "I feel like I'm playing better with Mase's absence, so we're getting minutes to some other guys on our team that hadn't been getting them."

"That will make us that much better when Mase comes back but this team can win without him, we just got to go out there and do it."

Another player getting extra playing time is veteran forward Donald Royal. He's a good defender who can also be an offensive asset. He says it's not just one person that can fill in for Mason.

"All the guys in this locker room have to step up with Mason going down because (he's) a guy leading the league in minutes," Royal said. "It's going to be a team effort to try and replace

him, not just an individual."

"Friday (against Indiana game) you saw us collectively come in and do a decent job off the bench in his absence and that's what we have to continue to do, to hopefully either move up in the standings or stay where we are."

When Mason does return, he doesn't expect the Hornets to go through an adjustment period. That already happened at the start of the year.

"I'm not the type of player that you have to switch anything for," he said. "I'm the type of player that can fit in, I'm the type of player that does a few things, does so many things, that it's easy to fit in. Whatever is lacking is whatever I go after."

Including helping the Hornets get back on track towards their most successful regular season ever.

Bullets

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themselves - and whoever they happen to be playing.

"If we don't, that means that we're out of focus," Washington's Tracy Murray said. "We have to keep putting people away. We have to be cold-blooded and just keep pounding them when they are down."

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