

McNeese quarterback, offense excel in spread

Top rusher, receiver from '07 gone

BY PENN ELY
STAFF WRITER

For the second straight year, North Carolina opens its football slate with a Division-I-AA school.

McNeese State, two-time defending conference champions, was again selected as the preseason favorite to win the Southland Conference.

The Cowboys finished the 2007 regular season undefeated and untied for the fourth time in school history. The squad received the No. 2 seed in the playoffs but was trounced by Eastern Washington in the first round.

Last season's Conference Coach of the Year, Matt Viator, returns for his third year at the helm. But the Cowboys lost leading rusher Kris Bush and leading receiver Carlese Franklin, both seniors last year.

The team also graduated 2007 SLC Player of the year Bryan Smith. The two-time All-America defensive end's absence and the

attrition of five other defensive starters leaves the squad with many defensive questions heading into 2008.

The Cowboys return seven starters on offense. Most notably, the team returns Derrick Fourroux, the team's leading passer and second-leading rusher last season. Fourroux amassed more than 500 yards on the ground last season, only 101 fewer than the starting running back.

Arguably one of the school's all-time greats, Fourroux is tied for sixth all-time total offense in school history. And the Cowboys' option-based spread offense should throw a monkey wrench into the Tar Heels' preparation for the game.

"Guys are going to have to be disciplined in their responsibilities," said coach Butch Davis. "Who's got the quarterback, who's got the pitch — and still have the ability to play the pass because they will throw the football very well."

The special teams are bolstered

by All-America wide receiver and kick returner Steven Whitehead. The explosive athlete won the 2006 SLC Player of the Year but was sidelined last season with a leg injury.

Whitehead is currently fourth all-time in school history for kick returns and eighth in punt returns. His presence should be a legitimate test to see if the Tar Heel special teams unit has improved since 2007, a major point of concern for Davis during the offseason.

This is the first game against an ACC school in program history though the Cowboys met then-Big East Miami in 2000 and won't shy away from the competition.

McNeese State will march into Kenan Stadium with talent of its own — 17 Cowboys were selected to the 2008 SLC preseason all-conference teams.

"It's obviously a tremendous challenge anytime you go play an ACC team with high expectations and a good coach," Viator said. "It's going to be a tough challenge. But our kids are excited, and it's a good opportunity for our program."

Scarlet Knights hope to recapture winning ways

Replacing Rice will prove difficult

BY CHRIS HEMPSON
STAFF WRITER

The New Brunswick train station has stood at the corner of French and Albany streets for more than a century.

Although still in use, the terminal seemingly doubles as a two-story brick monument, a salute to an era long past. In much the same way, the town's football team, the University of Rutgers, has obediently followed.

In 1869, the team was forever enshrined in football lore by participating in the first ever collegiate football game against Princeton.

Though victorious on that day, 6-4, for decades to come the team's fortunes would tilt in the opposite direction. Yet when head coach Greg Schiano joined the program in December of 2000, the frustration seemed to be at an end.

But as the sun beats down on Rutgers Stadium this fall and the chinstraps tighten, the team once more faces the persistent question of uncertainty. After posting an 11-2 record in 2006, the team slipped to 8-5 in 2007.

Plus, with the losses of All-Big East offensive lineman Jeremy Zuttah and a Heisman-caliber running back, the offense is due for a change.

For starters, the highly-emphasized running game of years passed will be toned down. With the departure of running back Ray Rice to the NFL last summer, no one has stepped in to fill his shoes.

But offensive coordinator John McNulty appears up to the task. His first objective will be playing to the squad's strengths — namely, the passing game.

He returns two-year starter

Mike Teel at quarterback, with junior Kenny Britt and senior Tiquan Underwood back at the wide receiver positions.

Though hampered by inconsistency because of an injured thumb last year, Teel looks poised to at least improve his touchdown to interception ratio of 20 to 13 from a year ago.

Teel will never be a deep-ball threat with his arm, but he has the talent and accuracy to make the midrange throws with relative ease.

The other side of the football sees a core of eight starters returning from a year ago.

The defense looks primed to be the best of Schiano's tenure, with hard-hitting free safety Courtney Greene the unanimous leader.

In the trenches, the defensive line appears solid but not spectacular with senior linemen Jamaal Westerman and Pete Tverdog providing experience and toughness.

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