

Tigers favored for 4th straight ACC title

By NEIL AMATO

Staff Writer

Tradition is on their side:

* three straight Atlantic Coast Conference titles

* an .806 winning percentage over the last three seasons, sixth best in the country

* three consecutive bowl wins

Who are they? The Clemson University football team, of course.

The old saying is good things come in threes, but Tiger coach Danny Ford would like to make the good things in fours. Ford, who enters his 11th year as head coach, is gunning for his sixth ACC crown of the decade as well as a seventh straight Top 20 finish. But the Tigers' past conference dominance may be grinding to a halt, not because Clemson is any worse, just the other teams are catching up.

Granted, the Death Valley boys are coming off a fantastic 10-2 season including a 13-6 win over Oklahoma in the Florida Citrus Bowl. And, yes, Clemson's only defeats (a 10-3 upset at N.C. State and a 24-21 loss at home to powerhouse Florida State on an unforgettable fake punt) were by narrow margins at the hands of excellent squads. But how good can a team be, despite returning seven defensive starters, when they'll also put seven new faces on offense?

Rodney Williams and Tracy Johnson are two offensive cogs that will be sorely missed due to graduation. Williams, Clemson's all-time leader in passing yardage, was not a

pure passer or a superior athlete, but he just seemed to come through in the clutch. Williams threw for 1,144 yards while only tossing four interceptions all season. He led the Tigers in total offense in '88 while rushing for six touchdowns.

Johnson, a workhorse fullback who scored eight TDs, was better known for his blocking ability. The Kannapolis native still was a punishing runner used to grind out the tough yardage.

Enough with what the Tigers don't have. Let's get to the pluses — something they still have in many areas besides just personnel:

* A semi-easy schedule. Except for away contests at Florida State this weekend and a visit to South Carolina, Clemson has a fall lineup that could thrust them into the national spotlight. Assuming the Tigers can go through the ACC schedule unscathed, the key game will be in Tallahassee.

* An excellent home field advantage. The Tigers boast an .833 winning percentage in Memorial Stadium over the last three seasons, as well as an all-time mark over 70 percent. Why? Clemson consistently produces good gridiron squads (they haven't had a losing season since 1976) and its players have a crowd worth playing for, a sea of orange die-hard fanatics. This season, the Tigers will play six games in Death Valley, a name synonymous with the postgame condition of visiting teams. In fact, Clemson already has one home victory, a 30-0 pasting of defending I-AA national champion Furman.

* A stifling defense. With a unit that returns seven starters, Clemson proved its defensive prowess Saturday against the Paladins. The Tigers held Furman to a mere 58 yards of total offense and only three first downs. Leading the defense are free safety James Lott and linebacker Ed McDaniel. The other Kannapolis resident will anchor a secondary that must replace Chicago Bears first-round draft choice Donnell Woolford. Lott, the only three-year starter on the Tiger roster, is a solid hitter as well as a fine special-teamer.

McDaniel, a red-shirt sophomore from Batesburg, S.C., was the first frosh in a while to lead the Tigers in tackles. Although his size may be a question mark (5-11, 223 pounds), he'll be a key versus the run.

* A strong ground game. Even though Clemson lost the consistent Williams, any quarterback can hand the ball off. Currently, who will start at QB is still up in the air, but it's between senior Chris Morocco and sophomore DeChane Cameron. One sure thing is that junior tailback Terry Allen will have the ball in his hands as much as possible. The Commerce,

Ga. native, who was suspended for the Furman game because of a driving under the influence charge, will be cashing in plenty this season. The running back who finished second to ex-Tar Heel Kennard Martin for the '88 ACC rushing title needs just 750 yards to become the Tigers' career leader on the ground.

Allen has an excellent blocking fullback in front of him in senior Wesley McFadden. Also around to open up some monster holes is right guard Eric Harmon. The 6-1, 269-pounder from Camden, N.J., has started 24 straight games since com-

ing to Clemson.

When the Tigers do have to put the ball up, they have an exciting wideout known for the big play. Gary Cooper, a senior from Ambridge, Pa., is first on the all-time Tiger list in terms of yards per reception with a whopping 26.1. Against the Paladins, Clemson fared well in the air. Morocco went 8 of 14 with 99 yards while Cameron was perfect on all six of his attempts.

* A fantastic kicking game. Sophomore Chris Gardocki continues a long line of quality booters which include Obed Ariri, Donald Igwebuike and

David Treadwell. Gardocki, who attended the same high school as Chicago Bears kicker Kevin Butler, nailed 19 field goals last season, including a 52-yarder against UNC. Gardocki also will handle the punting duties this season after compiling a 42.7-yard average in limited action.

Despite several problems surrounding the Tiger program — the Allen situation and a preliminary NCAA investigation — one thing will be as sure as the orange tiger paws on the South Carolina highways: The Clemson football team will continue its traditional greatness.

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1988: 10-2 (beat Oklahoma in Florida Citrus Bowl), 6-1 ACC, first place.
 43 Returning Lettermen, 9 Returning Starters
Key Offensive Starters Back: Two-time All-ACC tailback Terry Allen, kicker Chris Gardocki, guard Jeb Fleisch, big-play wide-out Gary Cooper.
Key Defensive Starters Back: Linebackers Doug Brewster, Levon Kirkland, Ed McDaniel, free safety James Lott.
Key Losses: Quarterback Rodney Williams, split end Keith Jennings, fullback Tracy Johnson, All-ACC tackle Jeff Nunamacher, safety Gene Beasley, All-ACC middle guard Mark Drag, All-America cornerback Donnell Woolford.
Strengths: Good schedule, winning tradition, running backs, linebacking corps, team speed, kicking game.
Question Marks: Defensive line, overall depth, Can new QB replace the cool, steady hand of Williams?, Will turnovers become a problem?

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