

COLLEGE SPORTING NEWS 2008 PRESEASON ALL-AMERICAN TEAMS

FIRST TEAM

QB
Armanti Edwards, Appalachian State
RB
Herb Donaldson, Western Illinois
Mike McLeod, Yale
FB
Joe Casey, Rhode Island
WR
Terrell Hudgins, Elon
Ramses Barden, Cal Poly
TE
Scott Sicko, New Hampshire
C
Kheon Hendricks, Delaware
OG
Stephen Field, Cal Poly
Colin Dow, Montana
OT
Adrian Brown, Delaware State
Joel Bell, Furman
DE
Matt Marcorelle, Delaware
Jovan Belcher, Maine
DT
Mark Huygens, Northern Iowa
Mychal Savage, Youngstown State
LB
Pierre Banks, Appalachian State
Bobby Daly, Montana State
Mario Brown, Gardner-Webb
CB
David Hyland, Morehead State
K.J. Gerard, Northern Arizona
S
Colt Anderson, Montana
Lardarius Webb, Nicholls State
K
Taylor Rowan, Western Illinois
P
Robbie DeHaze, Northern Arizona
RS
Jeremy Gilchrist, Hampton

SECOND TEAM

QB
Jonathan Dally, Cal Poly
RB
Tyler Roehl, North Dakota State
Jarvarris Williams, Tennessee State
FB
Bobby McClintock, Portland State
WR
Aaron Boyce, Eastern Washington
Andre Roberts, The Citadel
TE
Clay Harbor, Missouri State
C
Jason Cox, Cal Poly
OG
Chaz Millard, Eastern Illinois
Dennis Conley, Hampton
OT
Keith Buckman, North Dakota State
James Williams, Harvard
DE
Greg Peach, Eastern Washington
James Cloud, Southern Illinois
DT
Brian Jackson, Lehigh
John Faleotese, UC-Davis
LB
Jason Williams, Western Illinois
Chauncey Mixon, Southern Illinois
Bobby Abare, Yale
CB
Domonique Johnson, Jackson State
Patrick Stoudamire, Western Illinois
S
Al Donaldson, Alabama A&M
Brandon Gathof, Eastern Kentucky
K
Jon Striefsky, Delaware
P
Kevin Cook, Eastern Illinois
RS
J.T. Rogan, San Diego

THIRD TEAM

QB
Dominic Randolph, Holy Cross
RB
Rashad Jennings, Liberty
Jordan Scott, Colgate
FB
Javid Milton, Western Illinois
WR
Eddie Thompson, Idaho State
Johnny Gray, Northern Iowa
TE
Shaun Fitzpatrick, Northern Arizona
C
Jonathan St. Pierre, Illinois State
OG
Eman Naghavi, McNeese State
Matt McCracken, Richmond
OT
Tim Silver, Richmond
Britt Leggett, Coastal Carolina
DE
Pierre Walters, Eastern Illinois
Danny Batten, South Dakota State
DT
Lance Witherspoon, E. Washington
Ronald Green, Miss. Valley State
LB
Zach East, Prairie View
Mike Brannon, Sacramento State
Andy Romans, Lafayette
CB
Sam Pope, Hampton
Courtney Robinson, Massachusetts
S
Terrell Whitehead, Norfolk State
Cyrus Igono, Northern Arizona
K
Gavin Hallford, Jacksonville State
P
Ryan Coyle, Princeton
RS
Dominic Bolden, Liberty

Big Sky Conference 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Eastern Washington
2. Montana
3. Montana State
4. Portland State
5. Northern Arizona
6. Idaho State
7. Weber State
8. Sacramento State
9. Northern Colorado

Offensive Player of the Year: Matt Nichols, QB, Jr., Eastern Washington
Defensive Player of the Year: Bobby Daly, LB, Sr., Montana State

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Kroy Biermann, DE, Montana

Biermann was the second ever Buck Buchanan Award winner in Big Sky history (Jared Allen, Idaho State, 2003). He led Montana led the Big Sky Conference and finished second in the nation in scoring defense, surrendering just 14.8 points per game. Montana led the Big Sky in total defense at 333.8 yards per game, and was first in pass defense efficiency and second in rushing defense. Biermann finished his standout career with 33 sacks, 45 tackles for loss, nine forced fumbles and seven fumble recoveries in 52 career games. Biermann was selected in the fifth round of this year's NFL Draft by the Atlanta Falcons.

* * *

The Big Sky Conference has been one of the top FCS leagues in the history of the sub-division but the league has not been so great as of late. The BSC has not had a team to the national title game since Montana lost the title contest to James Madison in 2003 and last won the title with Montana winning in 2001.

A year ago, Montana looked like a good bet to return to Chattanooga as the FCS Playoff's third seed and 11-0 regular season record. The Grizzlies, however, would not last past the first round and were not even the last Big Sky team playing. Montana was upset by the Southern Conference's Wofford and on the same day, last year's second place Big Sky team in Eastern Washington upset the second playoff seeded McNeese State on the road. The Eagles would lose to eventual champion Appalachian State the next week in the quarterfinals.

Looking to change the leagues' fortunes this year, Eastern Washington, despite being under a new head coach, should be the team to beat with a number of

stars back. Montana, however, will still be in the running but will need to replace much on the defensive side—the team's strength over the past few seasons.

Montana being a part of the playoffs is almost a routine but Eastern Washington is almost as common. The Grizzlies have a current FCS best-ever streak of 15 straight playoff seasons but the Eagles have competed in the postseason three of the past four seasons. The Grizzlies and Eagles will likely have the most opposition from Montana State, Portland State, and Northern Arizona for Big Sky supremacy.

Eastern Washington is welcoming new coach Beau Baldwin, who directed nearby Division II Central Washington to a 10-3 record in 2007 and, like the Eagles, to a quarterfinal appearance in the NCAA Playoffs. Baldwin is the head coach in Cheney this year due to former coach Paul Wulff leaving for the same position at FBS Washington State. Baldwin hopes he and the Eagles can get past the quarterfinal playoff round and should have a veteran team this year to potentially achieve it. The Eagles return 15 starters this fall for their new coach, who actually was the Eagles' offensive coordinator for four seasons—last being in 2006. Baldwin will have a tough first two games at his stint in Cheney—road games at the Big 12's Texas Tech and Colorado.

Baldwin helped the Eagles to one of the best offensive attacks in 2005 and 2006 with quarterback Erik Meyer and receiver Eric Kimble. He will have a similar luxury in 2008 with reigning BSC Offensive Player of the Year Matt Nichols and fellow All-American wide out Aaron Boyce. The two juniors led the Eagles to a nation's fifth best 462.3 yards per game. Nichols turned things around from a poor freshman season (threw a school record 17 interceptions) to a memorable sophomore campaign a year ago with a school record 34 touchdown passes and 3,744 yards. Boyce had 85 catches for 1,308 yards and 10 touchdown receptions to rank 14th in FCS in receptions (6.5 per game) and sixth in receiving yards (100.6).

Four other starters are back for the EWU offense and two of those are All-BSC honorees. Junior wide receiver Brynsen Brown and senior running back Dale Morris are those honorees. Brown caught 52 passes for 755 yards and four touchdowns and Morris, whose brother Maurice plays for the NFL's Seattle Seahawks, rushed for 930 yards and 12 touchdowns a year ago. He also finished the season with 11 catches for 77 yards and a score. He will have senior fullback Alexis Alexander leading the way for him. The biggest question mark for the Eagles this season will be the offensive line, where four starters were lost. Senior center Charlie Wulff, the nephew of the Eagles former head coach, is the lone returning starter on the line.

The Eagle defense also returns a number of all-stars including All-American Greg Peach. The senior defensive end recorded 63 tackles, including 11 sacks to rank fifth-best in school history and 11th in FCS (0.85 per game). Senior defensive

tackle Lance Witherspoon earned second team All-BSC honors and also earned All-America accolades as an honorable mention selection. Seniors defensive tackle Shawn Powell and defensive end Jason Belford round out the entire front four and both were also named to the All BSC squads. Junior linebacker Makai Borden (52 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 2 INT) is the other All-BSC member returning to the 2008 team. Senior cornerback Ira Jarmon (77 tackles, 3 INT) should be the Eagles' anchor in the secondary.

If there were any reports of **Montana's** demise for 2008, they should be greatly exaggerated. While it is true the Grizzlies are somewhat in a rebuilding mode on the defensive side of the ball, Coach Bobby Hauck's team will likely be able to rebuild like they have in the past when they have won or shared the past 10 Big Sky titles—a Division I record bested only by Oklahoma's 12 straight such seasons in 1948-59, which at the time was the Big 7. The Griz will also look to their experienced side of the ball—the offensive side—to be better than they have been over the past couple of seasons. The Griz also increased their schedule strength, which includes an opening road contest with one of the West's perennial top squads Cal Poly.

The offensive side for the Griz will be led by quarterback Cole Bergquist, who threw for 2,623 yards and 20 touchdowns in 2007. While the Griz defense last year received more notoriety, the Bergquist led offense was 23rd in the FCS in total offense with 415.3 yards a game and 24th in scoring offense at 31.4 points per contest. The senior signal caller will have six other starters around him including four offensive linemen (junior guard Terran Hillesland, senior guard/center J.D. Quinn, senior center Colin Dow, and senior tackle Brent Russum). He will also have a returning tight end as well in either junior Dan Beaudin (6 receptions, 55 yards, 1 TD) and Steve Pfahler (8 receptions, 77 yards), who both combined to start all of the Griz games a season ago.

The specialty offensive performers are less abundant from a starting experience point of view but receivers senior Mike Ferriter and junior Marc Mariani, and junior running back Thomas Brooks-Fletcher all have starting experience. Ferriter was actually the top Griz receiver a year with 49 catches for 733 yards and four touchdowns. Mariani added 15 receptions for 231 yards. Brooks-Fletcher was a key member to the Griz two years ago in their run to the FCS playoff semi-finals and 126 yards and touchdown on limited carries.

The Grizzly defense ranked as the second best FCS defense last year in giving up just over 14 points per game. The Montana defense was 21st in rush defense (125.4 yards a game) and 32nd in total defense (338.8 yards a game). The biggest defensive loss for Coach Hauck is Kroy Biermann, last year's Buck Buchanan winner, but the Griz also lost a total of nine Big Sky All-Conference selections. The Griz return three starters and all three were also named to one of the All-BSC squads so the defense will have some experience to guide the younger members. The defensive line will be anchored by junior tackle Craig

Mettler and senior end Mike Stadnyk. Mettler recorded 46 tackles and Stadnyk added 44 and will need to be the anchor for the young defense this year. The Griz secondary will be headed by senior strong safety Colt Anderson, who led the team in interceptions with four last year. He will be joined by sophomore cornerback Jamaine Olson, who started three times a year ago and recorded 33 tackles and 6 pass breakups. The linebacker group will be entirely new this fall but should have senior Tom Martin and junior college transfer Tom Bauer to lead the bunch after both had impressive springs.

Moving east in the Treasure state, **Montana State** will get its first full season under Coach Rob Ash. The new Bobcat coach was hired in June of last year and the late hiring surely contributed to MSU finishing just 6-5 a year after the team made the FCS playoffs under former coach Mike Kramer. Ash, however, finished with a winning record—a first for a first year MSU coach since Sonny Lubick achieved that feat in 1978. The Bobcats return 14 total starters including their two kickers and will have another year under Ash to likely finish better than their six wins from a season ago. The Bobcats, like EWU, however, will face two FBS opponents (Kansas State and Minnesota) so they will have little wiggle room to get back to the FCS playoffs.

Defensively, the Bobcats return five starters with none more important than linebacker Bobby Daly. The senior backer finished last year sixth in the Buck Buchanan balloting and should be one of the nation's top candidates this year for that prestigious defensive award this year. He ranked fifth in the country with 12.3 tackles/game and had a total of 15.5 for a loss in 2007. Another All-BSC performer should aid the defense in senior safety Kevin Retoriano, who was second to Daly in tackles on the team with 58 and led the team in pass breakups with eight. Junior defensive end Dane Fletcher should anchor the men up front after leading the BSC in tackles for loss with 19.

The Montana State offense will return seven starters but lose their top two signal callers of Jack Rolovich and Cory Carpenter. The quarterback position is an open contest and Coach Ash has three players vying for the position including junior college transfer junior Mark Iddins and FBS Oregon sophomore transfer Cody Kempt, along with returning youngster sophomore Mark Desin. Iddins and Kempt are virtually tied going into the season for the starting signal caller spot.

Whichever quarterback is selected; he will have two viable running backs behind him in senior Demetrius Crawford and junior Aaron Mason. Crawford led the team in rushing a year ago with 868 yards and five touchdowns. Mason was second last year in an injury plagued season (226 yards, 3 TD) after leading the team in rushing in 2006 with 645 yards and nine touchdowns. The new quarterback will have a veteran offensive line with four returning starters including All-BSC performer junior guard Jeff Hansen. The new signal caller will also have two returning wide receivers to find down field in senior Deon Toliver

(451 yards, 25 receptions, 2 TD) and junior Derek Green (357 yards, 27 receptions, 1 TD).

Moving way west, **Portland State** was hyped to be a playoff contender last year under new coach and former NFL headman Jerry Glanville. That, however, did not happen mainly due to the change of offensive philosophies and Vikings finished with just a 3-8 mark. Former coach Tim Walsh's offensive style was more of a running style and Glanville's (with Offensive Coordinator Mouse Davis) is nearly to pass on every play in the so called "Run and Shoot" attack. Coach Glanville will lose 13 starters from last year this year but should be better after another year of experience in the new offensive attack, although a number of student-athletes were not retained for this season.

The Vikings offense started the 2007 season with some growing pains—scored under 20 in three of their first four games and lost those three to Top 25 McNeese State, UC Davis, and FBS San Diego State. After that, PSU defeated FCS playoff participant Eastern Washington and nearly defeated Montana, Northern Arizona, and Weber State (lost those three games by fewer than seven points each). The Vikings had a FCS leading 360.9 passing yards per game in 2007 despite season-ending injuries to the Vikings' top two quarterbacks. This year, there will be a battle for playing time at quarterback once again as sophomore Drew Hubel and junior Tygue Howland both return. Howland, the first game starter in 2007, was injured in the opener and missed the final 10 games. Hubel took over as a starter later in the year, and set a national record with nine touchdown passes in one game (against Weber State). A thumb injury limited Hubel late in the year, and junior Jimmy Collins came on for effective playing time late in the season.

Five other starters return on the offense but replacements must be made for All-Americans; wide receiver Tremayne Kirkland and center Brennan Carvalho. Along with Kirkland, three other of the top receivers are gone and Glanville will hope FBS Idaho transfers, juniors Ray Fry and Tracy Ford, can fill the void. Junior Mario D'Ambrosio, who had 11 catches for 132 yards and one touchdown last season, is the most experienced wide receiver returning. The offense will get a boost with fullback Bobby McClintock, who sustained a season-ending injury in the Vikings' 2007 opener, should help with his blocking, running and receiving abilities.

The PSU defense should have their strength with their linebackers. Andy Schantz and KJ McCrae, both seniors, and sophomore Ryan Pederson, combined for 210 tackles, 32 for losses and 13 sacks a year ago. All three were honorable mention All-BSC in 2007. This group hopes to improve a defense that gave up over 425 yards and 38 points per game in 2007.

The biggest offseason news for **Northern Arizona** is a new playing surface in their home of the Walkup Skydome. It is the first of the first removable

REALGRASS™ system to be installed in the United States. The players playing on the new surface hope this year to increase their record—6-5 the past two seasons. The senior coaching member of the Big Sky in Jerome Souers enters his 11th year in Flagstaff and returns 11 starters to try to improve on that record.

The Lumberjack defense will be led by senior cornerback K.J. Gerard, a first-team all-BSC pick last season, and safety Cyrus Igono, a first team All-BSC special teams player and an honorable mention pick on defense. Gerard intercepted a league-high six passes and added 57 tackles in 2007. Igono was the leader, just ahead of Gerald on the team in tackles with 79. Junior linebacker Cody Dowd should be the leader from his position after he recorded 35 tackles with four for a loss.

The NAU offense will have Coach Souers take over the added responsibility of offensive coordinator this coming season and should continue the running game which led the Big Sky in rushing per game with 232.3 yards per game. The rushing game will be headed by junior Alex Henderson after rushing for 908 yards and six touchdowns last season. The offense will also have a strong quarterback in All-BSC quarterback in senior Lance Kriesien and an honorable mention All-American tight end in senior Shaun Fitzpatrick. Last year, Kriesien added 686 on the ground with eight scores and threw for another 1,897 yards and 10 touchdowns. Fitzpatrick caught one of those touchdowns and had a total of 28 catches for 360 yards.

The Lumberjacks also possess an All-BSC kicker in senior Robbie Dehaze, who handles both the place kicking and punting duties. Dehaze made 18-of-24 field goal attempts, which lead to a fourth nation best 1.64 FG/game and averaged 43.3 yards per punt.

Like NAU, **Idaho State** hopes to finish better than they have in the past few seasons. The Bengals have just five total wins in the past two seasons including a 3-8 mark under now-second year Coach John Zamberlin. The Bengals have 14 total starters returning so the goal of finishing with more than three wins this year should be obtainable even though ISU will play their two FBS in-state foes of Idaho and Boise State on the road to begin their schedule.

The Bengals return eight starters on offense, including honorable mention All-American wide receiver Eddie Thompson. A year ago, Thompson caught 83 passes for 907 yards and six touchdowns. A top priority for the offense is to find a replacement for Josh Barnett, who exhausted his eligibility as the school's all-time leading rusher. Ken Cornist, who has seen extensive action the last two seasons, and Clint Knickrehm should vie for the starting job. ISU will also return sophomore quarterback Russel Hill, who threw for 2,313 yards and 14 touchdowns a season ago.

On defense, the Bengals return three-year starter senior D.J. Clark at cornerback after a four interception season that included two touchdowns, including a 100-yard return. Senior Ryan Phipps, a captain last year at middle linebacker also returns after leading the team with 116 tackles in 2007.

The Bengals will also have an honorable mention All-American returning for their special team in kick returner JD Ponciano. The junior returner, who will also play at wide receiver this year, averaged 27.9 yards on kickoff returns, and recorded 95-yard and 100-yard returns a year ago.

Weber State hopes a good finish in 2007 results in a good start in 2008. The Wildcats won three of their last four games to finish 5-6 overall but averaged 57.6 points per game in those three wins. Coach Ron McBride hopes his offense can continue that type of production this fall and should have a good chance of doing so with eight starters back on this side of the ball, while he has six on the defensive side.

The high output offense will be headed by sophomore quarterback Cameron Higgins—last year's Big Sky Newcomer of the Year. Higgins started six of WSU's final seven games, helping the Wildcats to a 5-2 record down the stretch. Higgins completed 56.2 percent of his passes for 1,959 yards with 17 touchdowns and averaged 178.1 yards of total offense per game. He will be joined by two time leading BSC rusher junior tailback Trevyn Smith and All-BSC fullback senior Marcus Mailei. Smith was the only BSC rusher to go over 1,000 yards a year ago with his 1,314 yards and he also recorded seven touchdowns. Mailei was a prime reason Smith rushed for the yardage he did but he added 15 receptions for 131 yards.

Honorable Mention All-American senior kick returner Bryant Eteuati should also provide a spark on the offense as a wide receiver. Eteuati led FCS in All-Purpose Yards per game (207.50). As a kickoff return specialist he set a Weber State and Big Sky Conference single season mark for kickoff returns in a season (43) and kickoff return yards in a season (1,199). He averaged 27.9 yard per kickoff return and had an 84-yard return for a touchdown.

The Wildcat defense will also be a spark with three of the six returnees being 2007 All-BSC performers in defensive linemen senior Bryce Scanlon and junior Kevin Linehan, and senior linebacker/rover J.D. Folsom. Linehan led the team in tackles for loss with 12, while Linehan was second with seven. Folsom was the second team leading tackler with 73.

Another team hoping to continue improvement in 2008 is **Sacramento State**. The Hornets lost eight of their first nine games but finished with two wins over Idaho State and Northern Colorado to finish 3-8 overall. Second-year coach Marshall Sperbeck was rewarded with a contract extension and hopes are higher

than they have been in some time in California's state capital with 12 returning starters of a better season this fall for the Hornets.

The biggest question marks for the Hornets will be on the defense, where they only return four starters. Two of the starters, however, are All BSC performers and should be the team leaders on this side of the ball in seniors Mike Brannon and Cyrus Mulitalo. A year ago the linebacker duo led the defense to a league best against the rush with just 117.5 yards per game.

The offense for Sacramento State will be led by a running back duo of sophomores Travon Jones and Bryan Hilliard. The two combined for 1,560 yards and nine touchdowns in 2007. Fellow sophomore Jason Smith may be the Hornet quarterback this fall after throwing for 1,826 yard a season ago but must turn around his touchdown (10) to interception (17) numbers. He could, however, be pressed by fellow sophomore in FBS UCLA transfer McLeod Bethel-Thompson. The Hornet quarterback's biggest target will be senior Tony Washington (29 receptions, 414 yards, 3 TD, who is the leading receiver returning. Two All-BSC members in senior tackle Ray Navar and junior guard Matt Lemley will anchor the Hornet offensive line.

Northern Colorado finally got over the hump a year ago and snapped a 16-game losing streak with the upset victory over then #19 ranked Montana State. That win was the Bears first against a fellow Big Sky member in their two year history in the league. While this would be the Bears only win in a 1-11 season, third year Coach Scott Downing has hopes of bettering his team this in returning seven starters each on the offensive and defensive sides of the ball.

The biggest hope for the Bears comes from former Florida quarterback Bryan Waggener, who transferred to the Greeley school this past winter. Waggener will be a senior this year and should replace last year's starter (senior Mike Vlahogeorge). The Former Gator signal caller was rated a four-star junior college quarterback at Glendora (CA) Citrus College before being signed by Florida. Waggener was expected to compete for playing time this season behind Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow, but broke his foot early in spring practice a year ago to slow him from playing at all in 2007. Waggener actually last saw game action at Glendora CC in 2005 since he redshirted his first season at Florida in 2006.

Senior tight end Ryan Chesla (37 receptions, 444 yards, 4 TD), who became the school's first All-Big Sky First Team selection and senior linebacker Cristian Sarmiento (135 tackles, 6.5 TFL), a second-team All-BSC last year, anchor the team's offense and defense, respectively. The defense also had linebacker Joe Kenney (86 tackles), defensive end John Eddy (12.5 TFL) and defensive back Ryan Lutz (26 tackles) earn honorable mention All-BSC honors a year ago to return to this year's squad.

* * *

Big Sky Games of the Week

Idaho State at Boise State, Aug. 30

The Bengals face their former in-state Big Sky, turned BCS buster Broncos.

Montana at Cal Poly, Sept. 6

This is an early West non-conference showdown to see who will be the supreme conference in the West—the Big Sky or the Great West.

Portland State at UC Davis, Sept. 13

The Vikings hope for some revenge on the road against the GWFC's Aggies after losing 26-17 to UCD last year at home.

Texas State at Northern Colorado, Sept. 20

The Bears hope to handle the FBS hopeful Bobcats in Greeley.

Portland State at Sacramento State, Sept. 27

The improving Hornets hope to get a good start to the conference season at home against the Vikings.

Eastern Washington at Portland State, Oct. 4

This will be an early 'Sky road test for the conference title hopeful Eagles at PGE Park.

Montana at Eastern Washington, Oct. 11

The Eagles get their second straight tough conference tilt against the Grizzlies.

Northern Arizona at Idaho State, Oct. 18

The winner of this contest between the Lumberjacks and Bengals will likely remain the conference race.

Weber State at Northern Arizona, Oct. 25

The Wildcats hope to duplicate their efforts from a year ago against the Lumberjacks—scoring 52 points in a victory.

Northern Arizona at Montana, Nov. 1

How will the Lumberjacks fare in this late Washington-Grizzly Stadium contest against Montana?

Weber State at Idaho State, Nov. 8

These two rivals will meet this year in Holt Arena. Will the home field lead to a Bengal win over the Wildcats?

Portland State at Montana State, Nov. 15

The Bobcats get a home game late against the Vikings. Will MSU be looking ahead to next week's Montana game and overlook the talented Vikings?

Montana State at Montana, Nov. 22

The Grizzlies get the home game this year in the Brawl of the Wild. A conference title may be on the line as well in this contest to go with the Treasure State's bragging rights.

* * *

Eastern Washington Eagles

Location: Cheney, WA

Stadium: Woodward Field (8,600)

Head Coach: Beau Baldwin (0-0, EWU, 10-3 Overall), 1st Season

Who's Gone: OL Matt Alfred, OL Rocky Hanni, TE Tom McAndrews, DB Ira Jarmon, DB Bryan Jarrett.

Who's Back: QB Matt Nichols, WR Aaron Boyce, DT Lance Witherspoon, WR Brynson Brown, RB Dale Morris, DT Shawn Powell, DE Jason Belford, LB Makai Borden, DB Adam Macomber.

Historical Fact: Former Eagle quarterback Erik Meyer won the 2005 Walter Payton Award presented by The Sports Network to the top player in the NCAA Championship Subdivision. He and wide receiver Eric Kimble were EWU's first-ever back-to-back All-America selections at their positions.

Last Season: The Eagles made the postseason and upset #2 seeded McNeese State in the opening round before falling to eventual national champion Appalachian State in Round Two.

This Season: New Coach Baldwin takes over for former Paul Wulff, who takes over at FBS Washington State. Baldwin will have a talented squad that will likely challenge for a Big Sky title.

Idaho State Bengals

Location: Pocatello, ID

Stadium: Holt Arena (12,000)

Head Coach: John Zamberlin (3-8, ISU, 66-49 overall), 2nd Season

Who's Gone: RB Josh Barnett, P Dan Zeidman, OC George Yarno.

Who's Back: QB Russel Hill, WR Eddie Thompson, WR Jaron Taylor, OT Evan Dietrich-Smith, OG Bryce Metcalf, TE Trevor Messersmith, LB Brad Rife, LB Ryan Phipps, CB D.J. Clark.

Historical Fact: Idaho State won the FCS 1981 national title with a 34-23 victory over Eastern Kentucky.

Last Season: In Coach Zamberlin's first season in Pocatello, his Bengals finished just 3-8 overall.

This Season: The Bengals hope to turn things around next fall with 14 starters returning, including eight on offense.

Montana Grizzlies

Location: Missoula, MT

Stadium: Washington-Grizzly Stadium (23,183).

Head Coach: Bobby Hauck (52-14, UM & Overall), 6th Season

Who's Gone: DE Kroy Biermann, LB Tyler Joyce, RB Lex Hilliard, WR Ryan Bagley, K Dan Carpenter.

Who's Back: QB Cole Bergquist, OG J.D. Quinn, OT Brent Russum, SS Colt Anderson, DT Craig Mettler, WR Mike Ferriter, RB Thomas Brooks-Fletcher

Historical Fact: The Grizzlies have made it to five national title games and won two titles in 1995 and 2001.

Last Season: The Grizzlies finished the regular season undefeated but were upset in the opening round of the playoffs by Wofford.

This Season: Another year of high expectations for the Grizzlies as the team hopes to improve on the 16th straight playoff season streak.

Montana State Bobcats

Location: Bozeman, MT

Stadium: Bobcat Stadium (13,500)

Head Coach: Rob Ash (6-5, MSU, 182-104-5, Overall), 2nd Season

Who's Gone: CB Michael Beach, LB Epikopo King, DT Aaron Papich.

Who's Back: OG Jeff Hansen, TE Brandon Bostick, RB Demetrius Crawford, DE Dane Fletcher, LB Bobby Daly, S Kevin Retoriano.

Historical Fact: The Bobcats are the only school to win a national football title at the NAIA, Division II, and Division I levels. Their FCS title came in 1984 in a 19-6 victory over Louisiana Tech.

Last Season: Coach Ash's first season in Bozeman was not as successful as hoped but still the Bobcats finished with a winning record for the first time under a first year head coach since Sonny Lubick did that task in 1978 for MSU.

This Season: The Bobcats look to improve to a playoff caliber team in Coach Ash's first full season at the helm after a year away from the postseason.

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks

Location: Flagstaff, AZ

Stadium: Walkup Skydome (15,300)

Head Coach: Jerome Souers (55-59, NAU & Overall), 11th Season

Who's Gone: WR Alex Watson, CB Ricky Wilson.

Who's Back: TE Shaun Fitzpatrick, QB Lance Kriesien, RB Alex Henderson, K/P Robbie Dehaze, LB Cody Dowd, CB K.J. Gerard, S Cyrus Igono.

Historical Fact: NAU made its first NCAA I-AA Quarterfinal appearance in 2003 in winning their first Big Sky Conference title since 1978.

Last Season: The Lumberjacks finished 6-5 for the second straight season.

This Season: Coach Souers will take the added responsibility of offensive coordinator this year in the hopes of returning the playoffs for the first time since 2003.

Northern Colorado Bears

Location: Greeley, CO

Stadium: Nottingham Field (8,500)

Head Coach: Scott Downing (2-20, UNC & 15-25-1 Overall) 3rd Season

Who's Gone: OC Jake Gable, TE Clint Wright, S D.J. Kraft, LB Asa Matthews.

Who's Back: TE Ryan Chelsa, DE John Eddy, LB Joe Kenney, LB Cristian Sarmiento, DB Ryan Lutz.

Historical Fact: The Bears won two Division II national titles in 1996 and 1997 before moving up to the FCS ranks in 2002.

Last Season: Northern Colorado notched its first league victory in 2007, upsetting Montana State 16-13—but was their only win in a 1-11 season.

This Season: QB Bryan Waggener, a transfer from BCS Florida, will look to lead the Bears to their best Big Sky Conference season in their third campaign in the league.

Portland State Vikings

Location: Portland, OR

Stadium: PGE Park (20,000)

Head Coach: Jerry Glanville (3-8, PSU & Overall) 2nd Season

Who's Gone: OC Brennan Carvalho, WR Tremayne Kirkland, LB Jordan Senn.

Who's Back: LB K.J. McCrae, LB Ryan Pederson, LB Andy Schantz, ST Logan Dose, QB Drew Hubel.

Historical Fact: PGE Park is also home to baseball's Triple AAA Portland Beavers and the United Soccer League's Portland Timbers and was resurfaced with FieldTurf™ before this season.

Last Season: Coach Glanville and the Vikings struggled to a 3-8 season in 2007, after beginning the season ranked in the top 15 in the nation.

This Season: The Vikings enter their second season under Glanville and return six starters on each side of the ball to more than likely improve over last year.

Sacramento State Hornets

Location: Sacramento, CA

Stadium: Hornet Stadium (21,195)

Head Coach: Marshall Sperbeck (3-8, CSU-S, 112-61 Overall) 2nd Season

Who's Gone: WR Ryan Coogler, OT Ray Navar, OC Kyle Leitzke, DT Dallas Mauga, S Brett Shelton.

Who's Back: LB Mike Brannon, LB Cyrus Mulitalo, RB Travon Jones, RB Bryan Hilliard, WR Tony Washington, OG Matt Lemley, K Juan Gamboa.

Historical Fact: Hornet Stadium was the home of two professional football teams—the World League of American Football's Surge and the Canadian Football League's Gold Miners.

Last Season: Coach Sperbeck and the Hornets closed 2007 with victories over Northern Colorado and Idaho State to finish 3-7.

This Season: Coach Sperbeck is in his second year at the helm and hopes to build on the two game winning streak.

Weber State Wildcats

Location: Ogden, UT

Stadium: Stewart Stadium (17,500)

Head Coach: Ron McBride (15-18,WSU & 103-81 Overall) 4th Season

Who's Gone: OT David Hale, OG Dimitri Tsoumpas, S Ty Sparrow.

Who's Back: QB Cameron Higgins, RB Trevyn Smith, FB Marcus Mailei, WR/RS Bryant Eteuati, DT Bryce Scanlon, LB J.D. Folsom, WR Tim Toone, DE Kevin Linehan, P Mike Snoy.

Historical Fact: Coach McBride was previously a head coach at FBS Utah starting in 1990. He served there for 13 seasons, with six being bowl game seasons.

Last Season: Weber State closed the 2007 season by winning three of its last four games. In the three victories, Weber State averaged 57.6 points per game.

This Season: The Wildcats and Coach McBride hope to build on the late season success and turn into more victories this year.

Big South Conference 2008 Preview

By Myron Hosea, CSN So South Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Liberty
2. Coastal Carolina
3. Gardner-Webb
4. Stony Brook
5. Charleston Southern
6. VMI

* Presbyterian

*Games do not count in conference standings in 2008.

Players of the Year

Offense:

RB Rashad Jennings, Liberty, Sr. and Tim Maypray, SB/KR, VMI, Jr.

Defense:

LB Mario E. Brown, Gardner-Webb, Sr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill

Jerome Simpson, WR, Coastal Carolina University – Simpson etched his name throughout the Chanticleer record book, serving as one of the key elements in the team's 39-17 record in just five years. He is the Big South career leader with 2,720 receiving yards and 44 receiving touchdowns. He also caught 161 passes during his career. From his first year, when he was Big South Freshman of the Year, Simpson proved to be the definition of clutch receiver for Coastal Carolina. The Cincinnati Bengals drafted him in the second round of the 2008 NFL Draft.

* * *

One definition of the adjective "upstart" is an entity "raised to a position of consequence." The Big South Conference certainly is working hard to be the upstart league on the block in the Football Championship Subdivision.

Eyeing that spot on the horizon when the hoped-for expansion of the Football Championship Subdivision playoffs occurs, the Big South gradually has been building a foundation for a solid conference. The league has set the goal of capturing an automatic berth should the NCAA add to the number of spots in the postseason. The formula for the Big South to succeed in this endeavor involves actions on and off the field.

The conference has been taking care of the off-field actions. Beginning this fall, the Big South possesses the requisite minimum of six established scholarship football programs. The Big South accomplished this by defying geography and going north to add Stony Brook from New York State. Once these current six teams – Charleston

Southern, Coastal Carolina, Gardner-Webb, Liberty, Stony Brook and VMI – play together for two years, the Big South will be fully eligible to garner an automatic bid should it become available. Plus, Presbyterian College has joined the Big South as an all-sport member and will become the seventh football team in the conference when it completes its transition period in 2011.

Now, the conference's football teams must focus on success on the gridiron. Liberty dominated league play in 2007 en route to a 4-0 mark and its first Big South title. The Flames hoped their resume was playoff worthy, but the conference's overall record against the top FCS conferences probably kept that from happening. Coastal Carolina's 2006 playoff appearance has been the lone one for this league that began sponsoring football in 2002. Greater success on the field offers short-term and long-term benefits: improving the chance for at least the Big South champ to get a postseason bid while building a case for the conference to earn a future automatic berth.

In 2007, Big South teams recorded a 1-14 mark against teams from the eight conferences currently holding the automatic qualifier slots. Gardner-Webb's victory over Austin Peay was the lone triumph. Liberty's losses to Elon and William & Mary no doubt cast a shadow on its playoff hopes. Since 2002, the Big South has won just 23 percent of its games against those eight FCS conferences.

This year, Big South teams will play 15 games against teams from those conferences. The number rises to 19 if you include Presbyterian, which meets four Southern Conference squads early in the season. Liberty plays two games against the SoCon (Western Carolina and Elon), one against the Patriot (Lafayette), and one against the Gateway (Youngstown State). Overall, Big South teams face five games against the Colonial Athletic Association in 2008.

Improving its record in these key games – Big South teams play six teams receiving preseason Top 25 ratings – would be a vital step forward for the conference. The league is showing improvement and several of the best players from 2007 return, including top rushers Rashad Jennings of Liberty and Howard Abegesah of VMI along with one of the more dazzling multipurpose players in VMI's Tim Maypray. Seven of the league's top eight rushers, six of the top 10 receivers, and the top four quarterbacks all return. Also, six of the top 10 tacklers and eight of the top 10 in interceptions and fumbles forced are back. Those numbers don't include Presbyterian players, which set a school mark for total offense in the school's first year in Division I.

The Big South has the players to make the battle for the conference title an exciting one. It remains to be seen whether those players can begin to turn around the Big South's fortunes against the rest of the FCS and make it a league of consequence.

While rolling to its first Big South football championship, **Liberty** finished strong, winning its last five games by a combined 239 to 82 points. The 8-3 Flames fell three times on the road, including a seven-point overtime loss to William & Mary and a one-point defeat at FBS Toledo. Head coach Danny Rocco and his staff will have to show how good a

foundation they've built in Lynchburg as 22 seniors, 12 of them redshirt seniors, have moved on. That group included nine members of the All Big South First Team.

Liberty, though, does not have the feel of a rebuilding team. Plenty of talent remains, including three players who accounted for 88 percent of the offense's total yards. Senior Brock Smith grew into not only an all-conference quarterback but also the leader of the offense. He passed for 2,226 yards and 19 touchdowns. Despite missing three games between them, running back Rashad Jennings and Zach Terrell combined to score 28 touchdowns in 2007. Jennings' 1,113 yards on the ground placed him 13th nationally in rushing. Dominic Bolden came on strong as a receiver (six receiving touchdowns) and kickoff returner. He will have to be a go-to receiver as the Flames lost Wynton Jackson and Brandon Turner who made more than half of Liberty's receptions in 2007.

The offensive line will be retooled as three all-conference performers were lost. Center Mike Godsil and right guard Britt Stone return to anchor the line. The Flames have a deep contingent of linemen, most of whom have redshirted at one point, waiting for their chance to clear the way for the potent backfield.

Defensively, the Flames lose several players who were important pieces to the revival of the program. They include defensive end Steven Ackley and linebackers Vince Redd and Stevie Ray Lloyd. Six starters do return, however, and linebacker Nick Hursky (78 tackles, 7.5 tackles for loss) and cornerback Patrick Calvary (4 interceptions) show that the Flames might not have a drop off in effectiveness.

Defensive end Kevin Richard and nose guard Colin Dugan, both seniors, return to lead the front wall of the defense. Tim Smith is one of the linemen with a shot at playing time. Hursky will have three new starters alongside him in the 3-4. Ian Childress, Kyle O'Donnell, Chad Brown and newcomer Doncel Bolt could figure into the mix. Along with Calvary, cornerback Kent Hicks and strong safety Ryan Greiser are returning starters in the secondary. Donald Manns, Larry Clairborne, Chuck Duffy and Brandon Saunders are battling for a spot in the secondary rotation.

Both placekicker Noah Greenbaum (101 points kicking) and punter Zac Kolegue have to be replaced, but whoever steps up can count on all-conference long snapper Dan Pope to get them the ball. Bolden averaged 32 yards per kickoff return, taking one for a score. Jonathan Crawford returned just six punts, but he averaged 23 yards and returned one for a touchdown.

All football programs go through peaks and valleys. It's just that **Coastal Carolina** had not hit a valley. Until 2007.

The Chanticleers came out of the gate with a charge, posting winning records and three Big South titles in their first four seasons. Then, a big chunk of players that helped start the program finished their eligibility, putting Coastal in the spot of rebuilding in 2007 against a tough schedule. The Chanticleers found themselves 1-4 after losing to playoff teams Delaware State and James Madison as well as to Georgia Southern and Furman.

They won four of the final six to finish 5-6, and a key comeback victory over Gardner-Webb helped Coastal finish second in the Big South at 3-1.

This year, head coach Dave Bennett – who has 39 victories at Coastal Carolina and 102 overall – will field a more experienced team with 15 starters returning. Leading rusher Mike Tolbert is gone, so the Chanticleers will turn to a group of backs to lead the ground game. Jamie Fordham (444 yards), Eric O’Neal (325 yards), Arthur Sitton (176 yards, 3 TDs) and Tommy Fraser (5 rushing TDs) can pound the ball.

Quarterback William Richardson had his tough moments, but he finished with almost 1,600 yards passing, tossing 13 touchdowns to just seven interceptions. However, he won’t have clutch receiver Jerome Simpson, who completed his career with 161 receptions and 44 receiving touchdowns. Jamar Anderson is the top returning receiver (25 catches).

Richardson and the running backs do benefit from the return of the entire offensive line, led by All Big South lineman Britt Leggett.

The Chanticleers finished third nationally in passing yards allowed per game, but gave up more than 200 a game on the ground. They hope that having most of the defense return will lead to improvement in overall proficiency.

All Big South defensive back Marrio Norman and Brandon Autry are among the key returnees. Norman led the team with five interceptions. Also back in the secondary are Dominique Davenport (61 tackles, 5.5 tackles for loss), Whitman Reese and Keon Cunningham.

Coastal Carolina should field a solid linebacking corps with the return of Phillip Obah (8.5 tackles for loss and 4 sacks), Derrick Fraser, Chase Howe, and D. J. Rice. Up front, Coastal will look to a trio of senior defensive ends – Clarence Donley, Warren Jennings and Ronnie Mason to improve its defensive results. New faces will be called on to fill the space in the middle of the defense.

Despite the losing record, the Chanticleers have much to build on. Though they barely outgained opponents (360.4 to 360.3 in total yards per game), the Chants outscored opponents 28.7 to 26.1. They also forced 32 turnovers while surrendering the ball 17 times.

Special teams should be a plus in 2008. Sophomore placekicker Justin Durham hit 12 of 17 field goals and 32 of 36 extra points. Sitton (27.5 yards per return) and O’Neal (26.4) are among the best kick returners in the league. Anderson can handle punt returns. Punter Ben Erdman averaged 35.2 yards a kick, dropping 13 kicks inside the 20.

Gardner-Webb won the first two Big South titles but has struggled to break out of the median since. The Runnin’ Bulldogs have gone 2-2 in the league each of the last four seasons with overall records of 5-6, 5-6, 6-5 and 5-6.

By late in 2007, Gardner-Webb had fought through a tough schedule that included its first two FBS opponents (Ohio and Mississippi State) and Appalachian State and Wofford – all on the road. It stood 5-4 and 2-0 with Coastal Carolina and Liberty between the school and a conference title. The Bulldogs were leading Coastal late in the game but lost 17-14. Liberty, by then on a full-fledged steamroll, defeated them to drop the Dogs back to the middle.

The Bulldogs will strive for the 2008 conference title without two-time Big South Defensive Player of the Year Brian Johnston. He racked up 74 tackles last year, 6 sacks and 24 tackles for loss. He helped Gardner-Webb lead the conference in defense, allowing 345 yards a game.

The defense does not lack talent, however. All conference performers Mario Brown and Cedric McGowan return at linebacker and cornerback, respectively. Brown is a three-year starter with 213 career tackles. McGowan led the team with four interceptions and broke up 11 passes. Also back at linebacker is Big South Freshman of the Year Jeffrey Williams, who finished second in the league with 120 tackles. Seven other starters return, including linebacker Quantavis Jackson, free safety Daniel Cooke and the rest of the front four.

The Bulldogs have to replace a career leader on offense as well. Wide receiver Duvaughn Flagler finished with 194 career points and caught at least one pass in each of his last 37 games. Flagler placed second in the league with 59 receptions and nine touchdowns receiving. Wide receiver Dobson Collins (51 catches) returns to lead the receiving corps. The Dogs hope sophomore Tyson Petty will step up to help fill Flagler's shoes.

Gardner-Webb ran a two-quarterback system last year, often going with the hot hand. Both Stan Doolittle (1,475 yards and 9 touchdowns) and Devin Campbell (846 yards, 6 touchdowns) return. They once again can hand off to runningback David Montgomery, who paced the team with 736 rushing yards and 35 receptions. Brandon Jackson and Patrick Hall rushed for 239 and 238 yards, respectively.

Four of five starters return up front, paced by three-year starter and all-conference tackle Demario Deese (6-4, 320). Fellow seniors David McCarthy and Bailey Walker return at center and right tackle.

All-conference punter Michael Hanna (40.6 per punt) headlines the special teams along with sophomore placekicker Evan Kay, who kicked 11 of 15 field goals. Taylor Ports connected on all 28 extra-point attempts. Petty averaged 20.9 yards on kickoff returns. Collins handled the punt returns last year.

This is more than a new season for **Stony Brook**. It's a new beginning. The Seawolves join the Big South as a football affiliate, giving the school an opportunity to build its program while the conference gets the critical sixth member for a future run at an

automatic qualifier spot in the playoffs. What head coach Chuck Priore and Stony Brook will bring to the league is a solid, experienced team with several returning starters.

The one key spot that's vacant is quarterback. Josh Dudash threw for 2,345 yards and 18 touchdowns as the Seawolves finished 6-5 in 2007. Three players – senior Dan Sweeney, junior college transfer Matt Dardenne and sophomore Dwayne Hoffman – are vying for the job. Only Sweeney threw any passes (four) for Stony Brook a year ago.

Whoever wins the job will have plenty of talented, experienced help at runningback and receiver. Junior running back Conte Cuttino led the team with 940 yards rushing while senior Brandon Mason added 651 yards. They combined for 12 touchdowns. Wide receiver Lynell Suggs caught 75 passes for 962 yards and six touchdowns. Fellow receiver Dwayne Eley added 59 catches, 695 yards and six scores. These skill players will benefit from the return of four starters along the offensive line.

Defensively, only two starters are gone from a defense that finished 25th nationally in total defense (326 yards allowed per game). Linebackers Andre Jean-Pierre (63 tackles), Tyler Santucci (56) and Greg Weeks (55) all return along with last year's leading tackler, defensive lineman Adam Soivilien (70).

The secondary features Chris Brevi (51 tackles), Mike McCoy (three interceptions) and Cory Giddings.

Both kickers return to guide the special teams. Senior Luke Gaddis was 10 of 12 on field goals and 32 of 34 on extra points. Sophomore punter Andrew Powell averaged 39.4 per kick.

The Seawolves are heavy on seniors and juniors in key spots, which offers the opportunity for the team to make a splash in its first Big South season. The team gained experience against a tough 2007 schedule that included Richmond, Youngstown State, Hofstra and Elon. With the new conference slate and nonconference games against Colgate, Elon and Hofstra, Stony Brook will need those experienced players this year.

A year after winning nine games and two years after taking a share of the Big South title, **Charleston Southern** fell back a step with a 5-6 record and a 1-3 league finish. The Bucs opened with losses to two of the best in the Southern Conference (The Citadel and Wofford) and went a long way to play their first-ever FBS team, Hawaii. They let a lead at Gardner-Webb slip away but showed fortitude by rallying to defeat North Greenville, VMI and Presbyterian.

In his five years as head coach, Jay Mills has placed the Buccaneer football program on an upward trend. After a 1-11 record in his first season, Mills led the squad to 5-5, 7-4, 9-2 and 5-6 records. Those two winning records are the only ones in the program's 17 seasons. This year, Mills might be looking at more rebuilding as the Bucs must find a new starter at quarterback and replace one of the top defenders in school history.

Neither Eli Byrd nor Sydney Bryant, who combined for 2,783 passing yards, are returning so two new quarterbacks began their competition for the job during spring practice. A. J. Toscano transferred from Cerritos College while Gabe Gilmour is a redshirt freshman. They want to guide a passing attack that led the Big South in 2007 with 246 yards a game. Helping the new quarterback will be a solid set of receivers, led by senior Dee Brown. Brown topped the conference with 69 receptions for 898 yards and nine touchdowns. He's joined by Markus Murray and Tim Jones, who each caught 27 passes a year ago. Gerard Stevenson should push for playing time as well.

Sophomore DeMarcus Moon led the Bucs with 382 rushing yards in 2007 while Alexius Ferguson added 285 yards. Redshirt freshman B. J. Hackworth figures into the mix at running back, too.

Up front, the Bucs will count on returning starters Alex Bragg, Donald Fondren and Jarrett Johns. J. W. Myers also started on the line part of last of season.

Defensively, the leading tackler in Big South football history – linebacker Jada Ross – is gone. Ross made a school-record 131 tackles in 2007. Replacing Ross's energy and effectiveness will be a tough order. The Bucs also have to replace key defenders such as safety C. J. Hirschman, defensive back Jon Carmon, linebacker Jonna Lee and defensive lineman Dennis Justiniani.

Defensive back Josh Warrior does return, however, and will be a team leader in 2008. He recorded 86 tackles and three interceptions last year. He'll be joined in the secondary by Okeba Rollinson (55 tackles) and Philip Ashley.

Charleston Southern has to improve its pressure on the quarterback after notching just 11 sacks in 2007. Defensive lineman Jacob Kileen, who made 4.5 of those sacks, is the top returning player on the front line. Seniors Alex Thomas and Justin Witzmann and junior Chris Parris have some experience on the defensive line. Fullback Ryan Ard made the switch to defensive line to provide depth up front.

The task of replacing Ross and Lee will fall to linebackers Josh Mitchell and David Jackson, a senior and sophomore, respectively.

On special teams, Nick Ellis, the longtime punter/placekicker, has completed his eligibility. Andy Brown and John Paglia are the kickers on the roster who will compete to replace Ellis. Stevenson averaged 23 yards per kickoff return in 2007.

The team needs to strengthen its running game and flip the turnover margin. Charleston Southern finished 104th in FBS in turnover margin, giving up the ball 13 more times than it took away. The schedule features two visits to Miami – one in Florida and one in Ohio. The two FBS opponents highlight a slate that also includes defending Southern Conference co-champ Wofford.

As the lone new head coach in the Big South this season, Sparky Woods has a huge task in seeking to lift **VMI** from the bottom of the league. The Keydets have lost 10 consecutive conference games, having last won a Big South game in October 2005. They won only twice last year, knocking off Lock Haven and Robert Morris.

Woods, who had success at Appalachian State (38-19-2 in 1984-1988) and later coached at the University of South Carolina, inherits a young team. Late last season, only four seniors could be found among the two-deep depth chart, so Woods has the opportunity to build from a deep base of players.

Among them is one of FCS's most exciting players in slotback Tim Maypray. The junior finished 8th nationally in all-purpose yardage (180 per game). He rolled up 889 yards on kickoff returns, taking two back for touchdowns. He added 31 receptions for 615 yards and seven scores and also ran for 391 yards and five touchdowns. He will play a key role in efforts to kick start this program.

VMI fielded the 4th-best rushing attack in FCS, averaging 282 yards a game on the ground. Fullback Howard Abegesah rushed for 1,121 yards (second in the Big South). Slotback Joey Robinson ran for 542 yards to go along with 198 passing yards and 128 receiving yards. Quarterback Kyle Hughes took his lumps, but he threw for 1,097 yards and rushed for 444 more. He tossed 11 touchdown passes to seven interceptions. Most everyone returns on the offensive line, giving the Keydets hope for even more production.

Speaking of taking their lumps, the VMI defense got smacked for 42 points and 433 yards per game. Only two starters are gone, though, so there are lots of players with competition on their resumes. Look for linebacker Patrick Covington, a junior, to be one of the team leaders. He topped VMI in tackles with 78. Defensive backs Keith Taylor, Bryant Youngblood and Levi Swindell combined for 189 tackles.

Up front, the Keydets have to replace All-Big South defensive end Tommy Lloyd who led the team in sacks and tackles for losses. Returning on the line are Damiso Alexander (28 tackles), Ben Brandt (39), Andy Viola (23) and Josh Wine (30).

The Keydets' defense needs to generate more takeaways after swiping a mere two interceptions in 2007 and getting to 11 fumbles. VMI also ran a high-risk offense, which led to 20 lost fumbles. Improving the turnover margin will help.

Sophomore placekicker Patrick Sweeney scored just 34 points, having few opportunities to kick for points. Hughes handled most of the punting. VMI is a dangerous team to kick to with Maypray handling most of the punt and kickoff returns.

VMI continues to take on the strong FCS schools within Virginia, hosting Richmond and visiting William & Mary. The team also will play at Ohio University. So the schedule offers few opportunities for a turnaround season.

Bobby Bentley left a successful high school program to guide his alma mater, **Presbyterian College**, into Division I football. The Blue Hose responded by going 6-5 in its first year of FCS football. Though the games didn't count in the league standings, Presbyterian defeated future Big South foes Coastal Carolina and VMI while stretching Charleston Southern, Western Carolina and Samford before losing.

PC unleashed a wide-open attack that collected points and yards in bunches. The team averaged almost 37 points a game, gaining 3,817 yards passing and 5,290 yards in total offense. Quarterback Tim Webb took over as starter in midseason. He threw for 1,797 yards and 15 touchdowns before an injury late in the season knocked him out of the lineup. He'll be backed this year by sophomore Brandon Miley.

S. J. Worrell returns after leading the team with 715 yards and seven touchdowns rushing. He also caught 53 passes. Running back Chetyuane Reeder backs up Worrell, but he can catch passes and play a little defense. At wide receiver, Terrance Butler leads the way. He caught 65 passes a year ago and eight touchdowns. Matt Quinn and Brandon Clark provide depth at receiver. Some repairs are needed in the offensive line where two starters return.

The defense surrendered 30 points a game, but several returnees offer hope for improvement. The Blue Hose should be strong at linebacker. Antwan Thomas (74 tackles, 13.5 tackles for loss, 4 sacks) and Chris Bowman (74 tackles) pace that unit. Also on hand are Ryan Anderson and J. R. Thomason.

Defensive tackles Adam McKinney and Bo Tribble will be counted on to bolster the front wall. The secondary will feature cornerbacks Jordan Jarosz and Anthony McKnight.

Both kickers return. Placekicker Cam Miller hit seven of nine field-goal attempts and 42 of 46 extra points. Bryson Summers averaged 38.6 per punt.

PC has built a tougher schedule in 2008, but this time some of its FCS brethren will visit Clinton. The Blue Hose start the season with four Southern Conference teams in the first five games, including Appalachian State, Elon and Wofford. They play all Big South teams except Stony Brook, but their games will not count in the league standings.

* * *

Big South Games of the Week

Gardner-Webb at Tennessee Tech – August 28

The Big South's 2008 theme needs to be wins versus other FCS conferences. The Runnin' Bulldogs can get that started in Cookeville against the Golden Eagles.

Colgate at Coastal Carolina – September 6

A week after playing its first game against a FBS team (at Penn State), the Chanticleers host a solid FCS team, marking another opportunity for a resume-building win for the conference.

Stony Brook at Maine – September 13

The newest football-playing member of the Big South travels north to face CAA member Maine. The Seawolves beat Maine at home last year in double overtime.

Towson at Coastal Carolina – September 20

Coastal welcomes the Tigers from CAA country. The Chanticleers are 1-1 against the CAA, both against James Madison.

Liberty at Youngstown State – September 27

The Flames are just 2-6 against perennial power Youngstown State. For a team with playoff aspirations, this will be an important contest.

Liberty at Coastal Carolina – October 4

These teams have won the past two Big South titles, and this game could decide the 2008 title.

Stony Brook at Liberty – October 11

The Seawolves' first-ever Big South Conference football game is on the road at the defending conference champs. Welcome to the Big South.

Lafayette at Liberty – October 18

Do you see a trend here? The Flames have another opportunity for a win against a solid FCS program.

Stony Brook at Coastal Carolina – October 25

Leave the clubs at home. The Seawolves' first football game in South Carolina takes place in the Grand Strand, golf haven of the south.

VMI at Charleston Southern – November 1

Entering the 2008 season, the Keydets last Big South win came against the Bucs in 2005, and they lost in Charleston by just five two years ago.

Coastal Carolina at Gardner-Webb – November 8

Coastal rallied late to upset the Bulldogs last year. Gardner-Webb would love a measure of revenge in this game that should have a bearing on the top spots in the conference.

Gardner-Webb at Liberty – November 15

Liberty dominated the Bulldogs in North Carolina last year to wrap up the conference title. The Flames will be hoping for a repeat performance in 2008.

Elon at Liberty – November 22

Yes, another signature game for Liberty and the conference as Elon is expected to vie for the Southern Conference title and a playoff bid in 2008. If Liberty repeats as Big South champ, a win here would help the Flames' argument for a postseason invite.

* * *

Charleston Southern Buccaneers

Location: Charleston, SC

Stadium: Buccaneer Field (3,000)

Head Coach: Jay Mills (27-28 at CSU, 30-40 overall)

Key Losses: QB Sidney Bryant, PK/P Nick Ellis, DB C. J. Hirschman, DE Dennis Justiniani, LB, Jonna Lee, LB Jada Ross

Key Returners: WR Dee Brown, QB Eli Byrd, DL Jacob Kileen, LB Josh Mitchell, RB DeMarcus Moon, WR Markus Murray, DL Marco Ramirez, DB Okeba Rollinson, DB Josh Warrior

Historical Note: In the program's first 13 seasons, Charleston Southern football won 35 and lost 105, a .250 winning percentage. In the past four seasons, the Bucs are 26-17, a .604 winning percentage.

Last Year: The Bucs had made steady progress since a 1-11 2003 season, having gone 5-5, 7-4, and 9-2 before slipping back to 5-6 in 2007. The key game may have been the October 27 loss at Gardner-Webb. The Bucs rallied for the lead, but lost the game 29-25 when the Bulldogs scored with 4:32 remaining.

This Season: Charleston Southern plays three teams it has not faced before, including two FBS teams with the same name (sort of) – Miami of Florida and Miami of Ohio.

Coastal Carolina Chanticleers

Location: Conway, SC

Stadium: Brooks Stadium (7,322)

Head Coach: David Bennett (39-17 at CCU, 102-34 overall)

Key Losses: DL Adrian Grady, LB Anthony Steele, WR Jerome Simpson, FB Mike Tolbert

Key Returners: S Brandon Autry, PK/P Justin Durham, RB Jamie Fordham, OL Britt Leggett, S Marrio Norman, RB Eric O'Neal, QB William Richardson

Historical Note: The Chanticleers had never suffered a losing season in the program's brief history – until 2007. They were 34-11 in the first four years before finishing 5-6 last year.

Last Year: A tough early schedule was too much to overcome. In its first five games, Coastal lost to playoff teams Delaware State and James Madison and to Southern Conference powers Georgia Southern and Furman. The team won four of its last six.

This Year: Coastal Carolina – which has contracted to play Clemson in 2009 – plays its first FBS-level team when it opens the season at Penn State.

Gardner-Webb Runnin' Bulldogs

Location: Boiling Springs, NC

Stadium: Spangler Stadium (8,000)

Head Coach: Steve Patton (72-48 at GWU, 102-71-1 overall)

Key Losses: WR Duvaughn Flagler, DE Brian Johnston
Key Returners: LB Mario E. Brown, OT Demario Deese, CB Cedric McGowan, RB David Montgomery, LB Jeffrey Williams
Historical Note: Are the Bulldogs stuck in neutral? After going 17-5 overall and 7-0 en route to winning the first two Big South football titles (2002 and 2003), Gardner-Webb is 21-23 (three 5-6's and one 6-5) overall and 8-8 in the conference.
Last Year: Gardner-Webb stood 5-4 and 2-0 with two games remaining when they lost a 14-3 lead at Coastal Carolina, falling 17-14. They then fell to red hot Liberty in the season finale to finish 5-6 overall.
This Year: The Runnin' Bulldogs face three teams they've not faced before: FBS team Georgia Tech, Sam Houston State of the Southland Conference, and new Big South foe Stony Brook. Also, they renew an old rivalry from South Atlantic Conference days when they host Presbyterian College (a future Big South foe).

Liberty Flames

Location: Lynchburg, VA
Stadium: Williams Stadium (12,000)
Head Coach: Danny Rocco (14-8 at Liberty and overall)
Key Losses: DL Steve Ackley, OL Marshal Ausberry, PK Noah Greenbaum, WR/PR Wynton Jackson, LB Stevie Ray Lloyd, OL Eddie Pinigis, LB Vince Redd, OL Stephen Sene
Key Returners: WR Dominic Bolden, DB Patrick Calvary, LB Nick Hursky, RB Rashad Jennings, QB Brock Smith, RB Zach Terrell
Historical Note: Liberty's eight wins in 2007 were the most for the football program since it won nine games in 1997. The Flames' four Big South wins doubled the number of conference victories the previous two seasons combined.
Last Year: Liberty won its last five games in 2007 by average score of 48 to 16. The Flames finished 8-3 and 4-0 in winning its first Big South Conference football title.
This Year: The Flames challenge a couple of traditional FCS schools, hosting Lafayette and visiting Youngstown State. They have a critical stretch of three road games in four weeks (at Western Carolina, at Youngstown State, and at Coastal Carolina).

Stony Brook Seawolves

Location: Stony Brook, NY
Stadium: Kenneth P. LaValle Stadium (8,136)
Head Coach: Chuck Priore (11-11 at Stony Brook, 50-20 overall)
Key Losses: DB Adam Cooper, QB Josh Dudash, LB Milo Otis, OL Matt Smeader
Key Returners: RB Conte Cuttino, WR Dwayne Eley, K Luke Gaddis, LB Andre Jean-Pierre, RB Brandon Mason, LB Tyler Santucci, DL Adam Soivilien, WR Lynell Suggs,
Historical Note: Stony Brook began playing football in 1984 and has produced a record of 116-121-2. None of those 239 games were against any of its new conference foes from the Big South.
Last Year: The Seawolves' five losses came against teams that finished with a combined 2007 record of 40-19 (a .667 winning percentage).

This Year: In its first year of Big South Conference play, Stony Brook gets Charleston Southern, Gardner-Webb, and VMI at home while traveling to Liberty and Coastal Carolina. Non-conference opponents include Colgate, Elon, and Hofstra – all at home.

VMI Keydets

Location: Lexington, VA

Stadium: Alumni Memorial Field at Foster Stadium (10,000)

Head Coach: Sparky Woods (First year at VMI, 62-47-5 overall)

Key Losses: CB Marcus Brown, DE Tommy Lloyd

Key Returners: FB Howard Abegesah, QB Kyle Hughes, WR/KR Tim Maypray, LB Patrick McKinney, Ath Joey Robinson

Historical Note: VMI finished 6-6 in 2002 and 2003 but has not had a winning record since 1981, finishing that year at 6-3-1.

Last Year: A very young set of Keydets ran smack up against a tough schedule, losing to the likes of William & Mary, James Madison, Lehigh, and The Citadel – as well as to all four conference foes.

This Year: The still-young Keydets face an extra Big South opponent (Stony Brook) and in-state non-conference foes William & Mary and Richmond. This time, new coach Sparky Woods – who found some 1-AA success at Appalachian State in the 1980s – will lead them onto the field.

Presbyterian College Blue Hose

Location: Clinton, SC

Stadium: Bailey Memorial Stadium (6,500)

Head Coach: Bobby Bentley (6-5 at PC and overall)

Key Losses: DT Sherman Burnett, DT Caleb Massengill, C Joey Orck

Key Returners: LB Chris Bowman, WR Terrance Butler, DT Adam McKinney, CB Anthony McKnight, QB Tim Webb, RB S. J. Worrell

Historical Note: The 2007 Blue Hose shattered the school single-season record for total offense yardage. Their 5,290 yards (481 per game) bested the old mark of 4,771.

Last Year: A mid-year four-game winning streak boosted the Blue Hose to a 6-5 record in their first year at the FCS level. Two of those victories came on the road against Big South foes VMI and Coastal Carolina.

This Year: PC takes another step forward with a tougher schedule and more – in both quantity and quality – home games. They play all of the Big South football squads except Stony Brook as well SoCon teams Wofford, Elon, Western Carolina, and Appalachian State.

Colonial Athletic Association 2008 Preview

by Bruce A. Dowd, CSN CAA Today Columnist, with special assistance from Doug Kirby, Peter Colby, Don Restiano, and Brad King.

Predicted Order of Finish:

North

1. Massachusetts
2. New Hampshire
3. Hofstra
4. Northeastern
5. Maine
6. Rhode Island

South

1. James Madison
2. Villanova
3. Richmond
4. Delaware
5. William & Mary
6. Towson

Players of the Year:

Offense: QB Rodney Landers, James Madison

Defense: DE Jovar Belcher, Maine

Biggest Shoes to Fill:

Tie: Joe Flacco and Rick Santos

I know I am supposed to pick just one, but I can't. How could you pick one over the other? Santos holds just about every CAA passing record and set a standard that might hold for a long, long time. He might be the best single competitor I have ever seen. I know I will miss watching him. He might not have the skills to play at the next level, but if the NFL could measure "heart," he would have been the No. 1 pick in the draft. While Flacco's CAA career was much shorter than Santos, his senior year was one of the more impressive single-season performances by a quarterback that I have seen recently, with the possible exception of some of Santos' previous years. Without Flacco, Delaware does not even get close to the championship game. One scout last year was quoted as saying that Flacco's performance against Navy was the best single-game performance by a quarterback last year at ANY level of college football. I was at that game, and he looked like a man among boys. He was the 18th pick overall in the NFL draft and the highest selected QB from the FCS since Steve McNair. If you want to consider the "Biggest Shoes to Fill" as a career selection, then

Santos is the hands-down winner, if it is for last season only, then Flacco edges out Santos. So, there you have it. Sorry, I just couldn't select one.

* * *

Introduction: After many years as the Yankee Conference and then the A-10, last year was the debut of CAA football and what an unprecedented debut it was. The season started with a bang with Delaware beating William & Mary in an outstanding game that saw Omar Cuff rush for a record seven touchdowns, and then finished with Delaware losing in the championship game while the CAA put a record five teams in the playoffs. The CAA has now put a team in the championship game in four of the last five years and would have had more championships if it had not been for that team down south, Appy something, its name escapes me at the moment.

Now we move on into the second year for the CAA and the competition seems to be even greater. New coaches bringing in new blood, young teams last year now maturing and the question of how do you replace players such as Santos, Flacco, Cuff, Hightower, LeZotte and too many more to try to even mention. Every year though, new players step up and take the place of our graduated heroes and this year 2008 is no exception with many candidates for the job.

This year some teams will play 12-game schedules, which should make for interesting playoff selection decisions at the end of the year. There are many outstanding teams in the CAA, but they will be hard-pressed to put five teams in again, especially with how difficult the South will be. While the CAA is arguably the best conference in the country, there can be no argument that the South is the strongest division in the entire FCS. It has three playoff teams from last year, Delaware, Richmond and JMU. JMU and Richmond return many key players and look strong. And don't forget about Villanova. It might have been the best team not in the playoffs and it did that without a quarterback and with several freshmen playing due to injuries. The Wildcats should be loaded this season. So then, who brings up the rear in this division? That would be Towson and William & Mary. Towson knocked on the playoff door a few years ago and has QB Sean Schaefer back for what seems like his eighth year in the league. William & Mary has been rebuilding and looking better as it wants to return to its former luster. Both teams could be ready, but they have four outstanding teams ahead of them so it will be a difficult battle.

The North still has UMass, which seems to just reload every year with talent. And, as Towson has with Schaefer, UMass returns Liam Coen for what seems like his eighth year as well, or at least it just seems like that. UMass is the clear choice here and might even win the overall CAA title as it looks as if the North will be weaker overall than the South. Hofstra had a fine year in coach Dave Cohen's second year and could compete again in 2008. UNH will miss Santos,

but it has returning talent and that coaching staff will not let it slide too far, so it could surprise as well.

Both the North and the South will be extremely competitive this year but in slightly different ways. The South has at least three outstanding teams with not only legitimate shots at the playoffs but even the national title. The North has several teams undergoing major rebuilding, and UMass might be the only team with a shot at the playoffs from the North. It will be interesting to see how matchups pitting teams from the North and the South turn out.

With CAA competition so strong and with injuries always playing a significant role in a team's success, predicting this conference is about as easy as whale hunting with a fork, but I will give it my best. There are key points I like to consider when predicting an order of finish. It starts with the quarterback. If you don't think it is that important, just consider the two quarterbacks in the championship game, Flacco and Amanti Edwards. Case closed on that issue. Then we have the schedules. In just an 11 or even 12-game season, a tough schedule and a few losses as a result can keep a team out of playoff contention. Next comes coaching. There is a saying that great players make great coaches, but the reverse also can be true. I am a firm believer in what great coaching can do, and this league has an abundance of outstanding coaches. And finally, the other key point rests with the remaining talent on a team and how senior-laden that talent is. Many coaches have been quoted as saying you win with seniors. So, with all that said, let's explore the predictions and summary of each team.

The SOUTH:

James Madison: Not sure where to start here. On paper, this might be the most powerful team I have seen in the CAA in many years, but they don't play the game on paper, do they? Last season, the youngest JMU team ever under coach Mickey Matthews lost to three of the final four playoff teams, Richmond, Delaware and Appalachian State by one, three, and one point respectively. JMU lost three key players from last year's team in Tony LeZotte, L.C. Baker and Jason Baranowsky. However, it is returning eight offensive starters and seven on defense; both squads were near the top statistically last year in the CAA. It also has added several interesting transfers and have a hot freshman prospect in WR Kerby Long, who will look to replace Baker. Its two key players returning are QB Rodney Landers and RB Eugene Holloman, who was not available most of last year due to an injury. The pair should put fear into any defensive coordinator. Now let's examine its schedule, which for a change from recent years is favorable. It's playing 11 games this year, not 12, and six are at home. JMU opens at FBS Duke, a game I believe it will win. After what should be an easy game at home against N. Carolina Central, it has a nice bye week to prepare for its next two games at home, which might well define its season. Those games are against Massachusetts and Appalachian State. It looks as if the cards are aligned just right for JMU this year. Even though he won't admit it, Matthews

must be drooling just thinking about the possibilities. As mentioned, injuries are always a key factor and a total unknown, but if Landers and Holloman can stay healthy, I don't see anybody stopping this team. In fact, it is not only my preseason pick to win the CAA South, but also my pick to win the national title. The only thing that can stop it, besides key injuries, is itself. JMU needs to hold onto the ball, stay focused every game and find ways to win the close ones at the end. I believe now that it is much more experienced and battle-tested it will improve in those areas.

Villanova: This team might be the team to watch and it might surprise many nationally on how good it could be. Arguably, it was the best team not to make the playoffs last year at 7-4. Going back two seasons, it has now won 11 of its last 15 games. Those four losses were all on the road to FBS Maryland, James Madison, Richmond and UMass. The UMass game went into overtime. It beat Delaware in its last game and Delaware went on to the championship game. Defensively, it stopped Delaware cold - something no one else in the playoffs could do. Its stud quarterback, Antwon Young, went down midseason for the year. It did the rest with Chris Whitney, a true freshman quarterback, and it had to go almost completely to the ground game as a result. It had a rash of injuries and at times 80 percent or more of the lineup were freshmen. Through adverse circumstances, this team performed off the charts with so much young and unproven talent. Young returns and it returns nine defensive starters. The schedule, 11 games, is somewhat favorable. While it opens at West Virginia, the next two games are against Lehigh and Penn, then the Wildcats finish with eight straight CAA contests. Two of the three games they have with the North are against Rhode Island and Northeastern, the other is New Hampshire and they have them at home. As far as coaching goes, Andy Talley is just a pure genius. Like UNH, his offensive scheme is complex and puts defensive coordinators on their toes. The South is tough, but this team has an excellent chance of finishing well up in the standings and going to the playoffs. It would surprise me if it didn't. All the pieces are there, it just needs to stay healthy.

Richmond: This is another team from the South that has an abundance of returning talent. It has 16 returning starters from a team that set many school records and advanced to the semifinals in the FCS Championship before losing to eventual champions App State. Its final national ranking was fourth, best in school history. As if returning 16 starters isn't enough, it also has two outstanding redshirt seniors returning who were out last year due to injuries, OL Tim Silver and DE Sherman Logan. Quarterback Eric Ward seemed to finally arrive as a top quarterback toward the end of the season. His maturity will only further aid the Spiders. The one big unknown is that it has a new head coach in Mike London. He is a Richmond alum and has spent most of the last seven years as a successful defensive coordinator for Virginia. He also spent a year as defensive line coach for the Houston Texans. Even though this is his first head coaching job, he is one solid coach and will do well long term at Richmond. He is inheriting a team loaded with talent. The only question mark is how many changes will he

make to the existing systems already in place and how long will it take the team to adjust to those changes. In an interesting twist, Richmond's second game is at Virginia. I'll bet Virginia is more than a little nervous about him coming into town with that powerhouse he has at Richmond and the knowledge he has of Virginia's system. Speaking of the schedule, there are a few concerns there as well. The Spiders have a 12-game schedule with seven games on the road. They have a tough opener on the road against Elon, and then follow that up with the visit to Virginia. If they drop both and start 0-2, they might have difficulty rebounding from that in the tough South Division. That first game against Elon, might well set the tone for their entire season as well as have significant playoff implications. Don't be surprised if this team gets out of the gate 2-0 instead of 0-2.

Delaware: Many people might be surprised at this pick, especially after going all the way to the championship game last year, but as mentioned in the introduction, quarterback is the key position and the Blue Hens are weak in that position right now. In the spring, there was a battle between Ohio State transfer Rob Schoenhof and true freshman Lou Ritacco. I was at their spring game and neither was impressive. Schoenhof has some serious mechanical issues and Ritacco is too young to depend on just yet. Delaware has added a third quarterback to the mix with transfer Sean Hakes, who at one point was at Akron. He won't join Delaware until the fall and there is not enough time for him to learn the system by then. Let me make this clear: None of these guys are the next coming of Flacco and never will be. This might be the weakest they have ever been at quarterback in many years. Delaware also has to replace Omar Cuff, but it does have talent in that area ready to step in. To further complicate the quarterback position, the Hens are rebuilding most of the offensive line. While their receiving corps is the best it's been in many years, there isn't anyone to get them the ball and not enough up front to protect whoever plays quarterback. The second most important key for me in predicting the finish is the schedule. This year's Delaware away schedule is probably the toughest in its history. It has three road games against FCS 2007 playoff teams (UMass, JMU, Richmond), and in the first three weeks when it will be breaking in a new quarterback, it has road games against FBS Maryland and Furman. The other road game is against a much-improved Hofstra squad that just missed the playoffs last year and finished at 7-4. The bright spot for Delaware is its defense, anchored by two of the best defensive ends in the FBS, Marcorelle and Talley. However, both have shown tendencies to be injury-prone and if the Hens have any shot at the playoffs these guys have to stay healthy all year. Based on the last few seasons, that might be a tall order. Despite a good coaching staff and a strong defense, the questions at quarterback, that brutal road schedule and the stiff competition in this division, I don't see the Hens finishing much above .500, and they probably will miss the playoffs.

William & Mary: Again, as if this division wasn't strong enough, the Tribe return nine offensive starters led by quarterback Jake Phillips. This is an offense that

averaged almost 400 yards and 30 points a game last season. While defense was a problem last year, William & Mary returns nine defensive starters, headed up by standout linebacker Josh Rutter. So then, how is the coaching? head coach Jimmie Laycock is entering his 29th year at William & Mary with an overall record of 182-134-2. Case closed on that issue. Now let's examine its schedule. An 11-game schedule with six games at home, including contests against VMI, Norfolk State, Rhode Island and Northeastern. Overall, compared with other schools in the CAA, its schedule is not too bad. The main concern is that four of its five road games are against North Carolina State, New Hampshire, Delaware and James Madison. That is a tough order to fill. With all this talent returning, an outstanding coach, excellent quarterback and a schedule that isn't too bad, why isn't William & Mary ranked higher in the South? There are four reasons: James Madison, Villanova, Richmond and Delaware. In just about any other conference, this team would challenge for a title and probably find its way into the playoffs. But not this year and not in this division.

Towson: Sean Schaefer returns at quarterback and it also has WR Marcus Lee back. I consider Towson's schedule to be one of the more favorable ones in the league. It has nonconference games against Morgan State, Coastal Carolina and Columbia. Two of its three games against the North are Rhode Island and Northeastern, both at home. Gordy Combs also is an excellent coach, so why you ask that because three of my top criteria are met would I pick the Tigers sixth in the South? The answer is that they are young and depth continues to be an issue. Towson had another good recruiting class this year so perhaps it is just a year or two away from competing at the top of the CAA. It just doesn't have the players presently to compete at the top in this tough division. Besides LB Brian Bradford, one of the top defensive players in the FCS all of last year, it also lost two other starting LBs in Maurice Wilkins and John Webb. Towson runs a 3-4 defense so losing your three top LBs is difficult to overcome. Towson eventually will contend in the CAA, but it is going to take a few more years for that to happen. With the talent in the rest of the division, I don't see how it can finish anywhere but at the bottom of the South.

The NORTH:

Massachusetts: UMass seems to acquire the most talent annually and this year is no exception. Not only does it recruit well, but it also seems to land a significant number of transfers each year. I haven't been as big a fan of Liam Coen as others have, but it is difficult to argue with his statistics. I do know that he needs his protection to be effective. There are many new starters on the UMass offensive line and they will need time to gel. They also lost key offensive skill people in Matt Lawrence, Rasheed Rancher, J.J. Moore and kicker Chris Koeplin. That is significant for a team to replace on offense. Add a difficult opening schedule, and I believe it's possible another team could win the division. The only problem is that this year, there might not be another team talented enough to do that. I was tempted to put UMass second, but most of this division

is rebuilding, so by default, I have it winning the North. It opens at home against Albany, which on the surface appears it could be an easy victory. But be careful, that is what Delaware thought two years ago and then lost at home. UMass then goes on the road for three straight games to Holy Cross, James Madison and then Texas Tech. Finally it returns home only to have to play Delaware. Its three South Division games are against Delaware, James Madison and Richmond, all three 2007 playoff teams. It also has UNH on the road. It should start to get stronger as the season progresses. The early season will be key for the Minutemen. As is the story with many CAA teams, the coaching staff does a fine job and Coen is a solid quarterback. My concerns here are offensive players lost from 2007 and the difficult early schedule. UMass is a wild card this year. It could win the entire CAA; it also could finish third or fourth in the North.

New Hampshire: The biggest story here is in replacing Ricky Santos. While there is no one who can match what he did, don't sell his replacement R J Toman short. When Santos was injured last year, Toman stepped in and performed surprisingly well. He will not be as elusive, but he has flat-out speed, and he can and will run. He appeared adequate in the passing game, but he has a tendency to loft the ball too much and as a result is prone to interceptions. I think this kid is a hidden gem and will surprise many people. The Wildcats have enough talent on the offensive side to compete against anyone. One of their stud returnees is TE Scott Sicko, who will probably become their go-to guy. He probably didn't get the attention he should have last year as a sophomore, but he might have been the best tight end in the league. The real question for the Wildcats centers on their defense, which lost several key players. As for the schedule. UNH is one of the teams with a favorable one. It plays 11 games and opens at Army, a contest it has a good shot at winning. Its next three are against Rhode Island, Albany and Dartmouth. Two of the three teams it plays out of the South are Towson and William & Mary, and they are both at home. The Wildcats do not have to play JMU, Richmond or Delaware. They have UMass at home, a game that usually decides the North. I have the highest respect for coach Sean McDonnell and his staff, and their offensive scheme scares every coach they play. I was tempted to pick them to win the North and if UMass struggles early, UNH might find a way to jump into the lead and then hold on. UNH and Maine struggle annually with recruiting. It is difficult to convince kids to go up North in the cold, but New Hampshire's recent playoff success and victories against big-time FBS schools has raised its profile. I have a feeling that there are many outstanding players in the wings ready to step in. So watch out for this team.

Hofstra: I missed the boat two years ago and thought Cohen would step right in and take Hofstra to a good season. In retrospect, that was unrealistic. Cohen's philosophy and style were the exact polar opposites of the previous regime, and it took a while for players to "get it." Last year, they "got it" and finished 7-4, which included a 6-0 start. Hofstra just missed the playoffs. Cohen now has some of his own recruits playing, but it still might take another year or two before this team is ready for prime time. On the positive side, Hofstra does return Brian Savage at

quarterback. He has a strong arm and has the ability to scramble as he finished last season with a QB rating of 127.25 with 302 rushing yards and 10 rushing TDs. Hofstra also has a fine coach in Cohen as I am sure he will prove through the years, however, it does have obstacles to overcome and perhaps the most significant is the schedule. It has seven road games, plays at FCS UConn (9-4) and also faces all five CAA playoff teams from last year, three of which are away. However, two of Hofstra's five home games are against Albany and Rhode Island, plus it has two road games against Stony Brook and Bucknell. So if it stays focused in those games, Hofstra could pad its record some. While it has seven returning offensive starters, it also could have trouble replacing a few key people, such as Kareem Huggins and Charles Sullivan, its two top skill position people. On defense it has lost eight starters, including its leader Gian Villante. Hofstra's kicking game has been strong the last few years, but it also lost its kicker and punter to graduation. However, if Cohen has a few surprises in store for us with his young talent, if Hofstra can beat the teams it's expected to beat, and if Savage can avoid turnovers, with UNH and UMass perhaps not as strong as in previous years, then it might just be able to sneak in there. It will be competitive, but I still believe that they are a year or two away.

Northeastern: When we talk about Northeastern, the conversation almost always seems to center around its scheduling. Last year's schedule was difficult and while the Huskies battled many teams to the wire, they could still manage only a 3-8 record. So here we are in a new year and the schedule is again a concern. They open with three straight road games, two, yes you read that right, two against FBS schools Ball State and Syracuse wrapped around a trip to Georgia Southern. It's possible that this might be one of coach Rocky Hager's better teams, but he will be hard-pressed to avoid anything other than an 0-3 start. That would be a difficult hole to dig out of. The school needs to adjust the scheduling or it will struggle continuously to make the playoffs. Offense might be Northeastern's strong suit this year with many returning starters, led by a strong offensive line, quarterback Anthony Orio and tight end Brian Mandeville. A replacement for the school's all-time rushing and touchdown leader, Maurice Murray, must be found. That will be no easy task. Northeastern probably will struggle some on defense, especially in the secondary where it might have to rely on several freshmen. But if some of this young talent fills in and performs, and if some of the teams rated above Northeastern slide, the Huskies could finish higher than fourth. Although, with that opening schedule, it's highly unlikely.

Maine: The Black Bears had a rather disappointing year in 2007 as hopes were high going in with the vaunted "Black Hole" defense. After a surprisingly close victory over Monmouth at home, Maine went on a six-game losing streak culminating in an embarrassing loss in overtime at Stony Brook. It salvaged some of the season by ripping off three straight CAA triumphs, including a 35-0 thumping of Rhode Island. As usual, it was the defense that was its strength, although it wasn't as strong as previous years. Maine's biggest problem was on offense, especially at quarterback. The Black Bears do return 22 players that had

starting experience last year and are expected to be strong on defense again, especially on the line. Their defense will be led by Second-Team All-American defensive end Jovar Belcher. The Black Bears also will enjoy the return of Third-Team All American return specialist Arel Gordon. The offense will benefit from the return of 1,000 yard rusher, Jhamal Fluellen. However, they are still unsure who their starting quarterback will be. They need to pick one and stay with him. I rank their schedule in the middle of difficulty compared with other CAA teams. While they open against FBS Iowa, the next two games are against Monmouth and Stony Brook. They also have a late-season game against Iona. But on the negative side, their three consecutive games against the CAA South are Richmond, JMU and Delaware, and two on the road. Without solid play at quarterback, Maine is destined to remain in the bottom of the division.

Rhode Island: The Rams have suffered through the years trying to stay competitive in the CAA. They have employed a system that just didn't quite fit the talent they could bring in. I also would like to see the school be more committed to football. At times its commitment is almost embarrassing. Now it has a new coach in young Darren Rizzi, who is trying to bring the Rams up to the top level in the CAA, who might have taken on one of the toughest jobs in the country. However, in a surprise, this year's recruiting class (20 strong) was ranked 10th nationally among FCS schools. They also added quality transfers. That gives Rizzi a positive start. Last year's team wasn't good, and there are only nine total starters returning on defense and offense combined, which doesn't give Rizzi much to work with. On the positive side, they do return six quality players on offense. Another positive sign is that their schedule is doable. They do travel to Boston College, but they also meet Monmouth, Fordham and Brown. Their draw from the South wasn't bad either, as they get Towson and William & Mary. Despite the positives, there is a long way to go for this team to be competitive in the CAA. This year's recruiting class was a strong first step, but the reality is that Rizzi is two to four years away from rebuilding this program and anything other than a last-place finish this year in the North would be a big surprise.

GAMES OF THE WEEK:

Towson at Navy, Aug. 30

These two schools are about an hour apart. This is the big time for Towson as it's playing for the first time against a FBS school in one of the more beautiful midsized stadiums in the country. This could be an interesting game as Navy starts life without their hugely successful coach, Paul Johnson.

Richmond at Virginia, Sept. 6

There are two games this year I really want to see and this is one of them. Richmond's new head coach, Mike London returns to the team he just left for this job. It could be a big advantage for him. We will see how loaded Richmond is with talent in this game. Eric Ward might just be mobile enough to avoid the Virginia defense. I smell a possible big-time upset here.

Northeastern at Georgia Southern, Sept. 13

You have to love CAA-SoCon matchups, no matter who the teams are. This is a key game for Northeastern as it is sandwiched between two FBS games. If it has any shot at a strong season, the Huskies must win this one.

Appalachian State at James Madison, Sept. 20

This isn't just the CAA game of the week, but it also has to be the FBS game of the year. This is the other game that I just can't wait to see. Last year's champ against the team I think will win it all this season. So many story lines, such as revenge from last year's last-second playoff loss at Boone, N.C. Finally, JMU gets App. State at home and the Duke fans are going to tear the place down. A battle of what might be the two best quarterbacks in the country.

Rhode Island at Boston College, Sept. 27

New head coach Darren Rizzi faces his toughest challenge to date taking a young, rebuilding team into battle against mighty Boston College. This is the first meeting between these two schools. Should be interesting to see how the Rams match up.

Delaware at Massachusetts, Oct. 4

Two powerhouse programs, previous national champions and playoff teams from last year, doing battle in Massachusetts. A great North-South matchup. At the end of the year, this game might be a deal breaker for the loser. If Delaware finds a quarterback by this point, this could be a classic.

James Madison at Richmond, Oct. 11

A classic South rivalry with huge title implications as James Madison looks to avenge a loss last year at home. This will be a great game to watch as there will be a wealth of talent on the field. Both teams could easily be top 10 teams at this stage of the season.

William & Mary at Delaware, Oct. 18

Other than last year, the games between these two usually are decided by less than a touchdown. If either team wants to make a run for the top of the division, this becomes a must-win contest. It will be interesting to see the matchup between Delaware's defense and the Phillips-led offense of the Tribe.

James Madison at Villanova, Oct. 25

If Villanova is as good as I think it will be then this game might well decide the winner of the South. It will be interesting to see if Nova's aggressive defense can do to JMU what it did to Delaware last year. It will be a great quarterback matchup, too, between Young and Landers.

Hofstra at New Hampshire, Nov. 1

Who knows what teams are going to shake up out of the North as the leaders this year, but I suspect this game might have a big impact on the final outcome of the North. More than likely a must-win contest for either team.

Maine at Massachusetts, Nov. 8

I suspect that at this point, Maine might have found its stride. UMass, after that tough opening schedule, might be in a position of needing to run the table. This has the makings of an outstanding CAA battle.

Massachusetts at New Hampshire, Nov. 15

If anyone believes this game won't matter in determining the North winner and possible playoff invitations, they haven't been paying attention to the CAA. UMass has had the better of these games recently, but this one is at New Hampshire and these teams don't like each other much.

Villanova at Delaware, Nov. 22

This is one of the better season-ending rivalries in the CAA. There is no love lost between these two schools either. I can't imagine that this won't have serious playoff implications for at least one of these schools. I suspect the roles might be reversed from last year, as Delaware tries to avenge a season-ending loss that at the least cost it one more home game in the playoffs.

Great West Football Conference 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN West Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish:

1. Cal Poly
2. North Dakota
3. UC Davis
4. Southern Utah
5. South Dakota

Offensive Player of the Year: Ramses Barden, WR, Cal Poly, Sr.

Defensive Player of the Year: Rory Manke, FS, North Dakota, Sr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Weston Dressler, WR, North Dakota

The DII Harlon Hill Finalist (Top Player Award) will surely be missed on the FCS newcomer Fightin' Sioux offense. Dressler finished his UND career as the holder of 19 different school records, including career receptions (243), career receiving yards (3,382), career touchdown receptions (38) and career all-purpose yards (7,072). Dressler was named to the All-North Central Conference first team at three different positions, the first player in league history to do so. It was also his fourth straight All-NCC first team honor.

* * *

Throughout the five year history of the Great West Football Conference, one thing has been a consistent and that has been change. Before the league even began play its seventh member of Saint Mary's of California dropped its program to bring the league down to six teams in 2003. After 2005, the league was down to five teams with the loss of Northern Colorado to the Big Sky Conference. And this year, the league losses two more members in North Dakota State and South Dakota State to the Gateway Football Conference.

While the most recent losses bring the number of original GWFC members to three, the league will have two new Dakota teams move in for 2008. Former North Dakota State and South Dakota State rivals of the University of North Dakota and University of South Dakota are transitioning from the Division II ranks to take their place.

A year ago, SDSU and NDSU finished first and second respectively so replacing those two Top 25 ranked schools will be a tall order for UND and USD but both the Dakota newcomers have had their runs at the DII ranks.

UND has a DII national title (2001) under its belt and another championship game (2003) appearance to go with 14 playoff seasons. USD has one DII

championship game appearance (1986) and four DII playoff seasons in its history.

The two Dakota newcomers will not play a full GWFC slate this year due to playoff implications for the other playoff eligible schools. UND and USD will count as a DII team for any DI team playing them so each is minus one GWFC game. UND will not play Cal Poly, while USD will not play UC Davis. These two teams, however, will both have Southern Utah on their schedules.

While there is change in the GWFC this year, one of the three original teams seems to be the one to beat in **Cal Poly**. The Mustangs were a win away from a playoff spot last year after narrowly losing each to Texas State, FBS Idaho, and NDSU to finish 7-4. The biggest concern for the Mustangs may be their schedule where they will play sandwich two FBS teams—opening at San Diego State and closing at Wisconsin. The Mustangs also face perennial playoff team Montana to open their home schedule on Sept. 6 and travels to former GWFC rival SDSU on Oct. 18 to make a playoff push a tougher task for 2008.

The Mustangs return 15 starters from last year's team with 10 of those from last year's national top total offensive squad (487.1 yards/game). Leading in the Mustang offense will be All-American senior wide receiver Ramses Barden, who enters his final season in San Luis Obispo with 139 career catches (fifth all-time at Cal Poly) for 2,947 yards (second) and 32 touchdowns (first). Fellow senior wide out Tre'dale Tolver (31 receptions, 537 yards, 5 TD) should take pressure off Barden from the opposing defensive secondaries. Barden and Tolver will have senior quarterback Jonathan Dally returning to throw the ball but Dally also excels running the Mustang option offense. He completed 104-of-192 passes for 2,238 yards and 29 touchdowns while rushing for 763 additional yards and 12 scores. Dally was second in the nation in passing efficiency and 14th in total offense in 2007.

Behind Dally, Coach Rich Ellerson has a plethora of tail backs led by seniors Ryan Mole (424 yards, 3 TD) and James Noble (464 yards, 3 TD). Full back Jon Hall is also back after muscling for 449 yards and one score a year ago. The offensive line will have four starters returning led by All-GWFC senior performer Stephen Field, who made the switch from the center position to a guard spot in spring ball. Last year's GWFC Freshman of the Year Jason Cox will take over the center position.

The Mustang defense, which historically has been its top performing side of the ball, must rebound from a squad that finished just 63rd in the nation in yardage (370.4 ypg) allowed after being sixth (248.3 ypg) in the same category in 2006. With five returning starters, the Mustangs hope to return to the days where they had the top defensive performer in the country (Buck Buchanan Award) from 2004 to 2006. A playoff birth for the Mustangs this year will likely depend on how the defense improves.

Leading 2007 tackler senior Mark Restelli (73 tackles, 3.5 for loss), along with sophomore Marty Mohamed (70 tackles, 3.5 for loss) and junior Ryan Shotwell (28 tackles, 9.0 for loss), should lead the charge from their linebacker positions. Sophomores nose guard James Chen (injured in game one last year) and end Gavin Cooper (16 tackles, 1.5 sacks) should help anchor the line up front with senior end senior Sean Lawyer (28 tackles, 7.5 for loss). The Mustang secondary will have three strong performers returning in senior Martin Mares (3 pass breakups) and junior Xavier Gardner (42 tackles, 9 pass breakups) as the cornerbacks and senior David Fullerton (34 tackles, 3 INT) at strong safety.

Newcomer **North Dakota** may be new to the FCS ranks this year but is not new to defeating FCS squads. Two years ago, the Fighting Sioux defeated typically tough Northern Iowa on the road and last year defeated future GWFC mate Southern Utah again on the road. This year, the Sioux will have just one FCS opponent (Southern Utah) in their friendly confines of the Alerus Center. UND will play five FCS opponents on the road including GWFC mates UC Davis and South Dakota.

The Sioux are coming off a 10-2 DII season that ended with a loss to Grand Valley (MI) State in the second round of their playoffs. UND, along with transitioning GWFC mate South Dakota, will now not be eligible for the postseason until 2012 due to the transition process from DII to DI. Changing divisions is not the only change this year for UND as they will also welcome a new head coach. Previous coach Dale Lennon moved to the Gateway's Southern Illinois and was replaced by offensive coordinator Chris Mussman to take the Sioux into their first FCS season.

The Fighting Sioux have typically been strong on defense and 2008 should be no different with seven starters returning on this side. UND gave up just 18.3 points per game in 2007. Senior free safety Rory Manke, who was named to several All-region and conference teams, should be the leader on the defense again this year. He led the team in total tackles (73) and solo tackles (49), while ranking second in pass breakups (five) and interceptions (two). He, along with senior cornerback Drake Otto, will need to be the team leader in the secondary after DII All-American and NFL hopeful Donovan Alexander graduated.

The Sioux also should see a key performance from linebacker senior Brett Holinka (52 tackles, 7.5 TFL)—an All-North Central Conference teams a year ago. All-NCC linebacker Bobby Stroup was dismissed from the football team this past May to leave a void. Stoup had a Sioux team high five sacks a year ago.

The UND offense also will see a number of returning members but they do lose their top member in wide receiver Weston Dressler, a Harlon Hill (DII best player award) finalist from a season ago. The Sioux, however, will have several back on the offensive side from a team that scored over 38 points per game. Those

performers will be and senior All-American DII center Mitch Braegelmann and All-NCC senior quarterback Danny Freund back after throwing for 2,860 yards and 24 touchdowns and just six interceptions. Running back Ryan Chappell (1,640 yards, 14 TD) was slated to be a key performer in his junior year after also being named to the DII All-American teams but was ruled academically ineligible this summer. Josh Murray, who played last season as a true freshman, likely will move into the top spot on the depth chart this fall. Murray rushed for 530 yards on 94 carries last season.

The Sioux will have a star kicker in DII All-American junior Brandon Hellevang, who converted 15-of-25 attempts and had a long of 56 yards in a game against now-conference rival Southern Utah. Hellevang will likely handle the punting duties this year as well.

UC Davis' run of consecutive winning seasons came to an end last year after 37 such seasons. The Aggies finished a win short of continuing the streak with a 5-6 mark as the team opened their new Aggie Stadium. The Aggies, however, did win three of their last four—an indication that the young team from a year ago will likely start another winning season streak this year.

This year's team will have eight returning starters back on Coach Bob Biggs historically top passing attack offense. One starter that will need to be replaced, however, is the signal caller. The top two quarterbacks from last year were seniors (Matt Engle & Tim Plough) and led the Aggies to an average of just short of 28 points per game. Sophomore Greg Denham came to Davis highly touted and did see some minor action a year ago (4-of-7 passing for 25 yards) behind the top two quarterbacks on the depth chart and will look to continue the Aggies' history of top signal callers.

Denham will have three top receivers to find down field, including senior Brandon Rice (59 receptions, 870 yards, 10 TD) and junior Bakari Grant (47 receptions, 621 yards, 5 TD), who were both members of the All-GWFC squad. Junior Chris Carter is the other member of the three-some. Carter was named the 2006 GWFC Freshman of the Year but was limited to just three games last year with a knee injury but still amounted five catches and a touchdown a year ago in just three games of action. The new quarterback will also have some other aid in a pair of sophomore running backs in Joe Trombetta (676 yards, 8 TD) and Brandon Tucker (385 yards, 4 TD). Both the passing and running games will have a pair of All-GWFC guards blocking for them in seniors Jonathan Compas and Mario Gonzalez and another in junior center Tommy Hernandez.

The Aggie defense will hope to improve on their statistical rank this year with leading tackler Mike Morales leading the team of five returning starters. The junior linebacker recorded 75 tackles with four of those for a loss and a pass breakup. He will be joined by fellow linebacker, senior Tyler Pringle, who had a team second high of 67 tackles, 4.5 TFL, and 2.0 sacks. These two linebackers

hope to lead an improved, although young defensive group that gave up over 31 points per game a year ago.

Southern Utah had one of the most stringent schedules a year ago and the Thunderbirds were unfortunate to lose all eleven games on their slate. The winless season cost Wes Meier his head coaching job and Ed Lamb has taken over the reigns in Cedar City. Lamb comes to SUU after previously being the special teams coordinator, recruiting coordinator, and defensive backs coach at the Pioneer League's San Diego. Lamb is knowledgeable to the state of Utah as he played linebacker and defensive end from 1992-96 on Brigham Young and also was an assistant for BYU in 2001 and has also served as a defensive coordinator in his career (Idaho, 2002-03).

Lamb should have a solid returning corps on the defensive side even though the group gave up over 409 yards per game last year. Leading the way will be junior All-GWFC linebacker Robert Takeno, who led the team in tackles for the second straight season. He finished the year with 82 stops, seven tackles-for loss, a pair of pass break-ups, and had three fumble recoveries with one for a touchdown and forced a fumble. He will have sophomore All-GWFC defensive back Collin Pretlow behind him. Pretlow had 34 tackles, 25 solo, with five TFL, a half sack, an interception, and three pass deflections.

The Thunderbird offense will have senior quarterback Cody Stone back after he took over the starting job mid-way through the season a year ago and had a team high 1262 passing yards and seven touchdowns but did throw 15 interceptions. He will need to reduce that number to improve on an offense last year that averaged just over 16 points per game. Stone will have second and third leading receivers; seniors Nick Miller (35 receptions, 433 yards, 1 TD) and Craig Gritton (33 receptions, 377 yards, 1 TD) to be his main returning targets through the air. The T-Birds lose All-GWFC running back Johnny Sanchez, and will look to sophomore Josh Fitisemanu to fill his shoes.

SUU will have two All-GWFC kickers back in senior place kicker Steve Pulver (7-of-12 with a 52 yard long) and junior punter Trevor Ward (39.1 ypp, 17 inside the 20 yard line). Both were named to as all-honorable mention GWFC performers last year.

The second new team in the Great West is **South Dakota**. The Coyotes finished their last Division II campaign at 6-5 and got a taste of FCS action with a loss at Southland champion McNeese State (31-7). USD, like North Dakota, will have just one FCS opponent at home in the DakotaDome at that will be against the Fighting Sioux. The Coyotes will, however, have five FCS road games including games against Gateway champion Northern Iowa and against GWFC mates Cal Poly and Southern Utah.

Coach Ed Meierkort's team was very prolific on offense a year ago—finished the regular season as the ninth ranked team in total offense (496.2 ypg), eighth in rushing (263.5 ypg) and 41st in scoring offense (31.4 ppg) in Division II. A big reason South Dakota was productive was the legs and arm of junior quarterback Noah Shepard. He finished the season ranked 11th in DII in total offense with 290.5 yards per game and his 2,547 passing yards were 29th in the nation. He finished with 21 touchdown passes, which was second in USD single season history. He also ran for 649 yards and five more touchdowns. Offensively, however, Shepard is the exception as the Coyotes lost six starters that were named to the All-North Central Conference (NCC) team a year ago. In total, seven starters were lost from last year's offense.

The Coyote defense is the more experienced side of the ball but will need to improve as they gave up 27.5 points per game a year ago. While eight starters return, USD lost three starters that were All-NCC performers. Of the eight returnees, three were also named to the All-NCC team headed by leading tackler Blake Hojer, who recorded 80 tackles in 2007. He will be joined by fellow seniors Isaiah Dixon and T.J. Simmons. Dixon tied for the team lead in interceptions (2) and led the team in pass deflections (7). Simmons tied for third on the team in tackles with 54, had four pass deflections, an interception and a fumble recovery.

The Coyotes also possess a strong punter in junior Tim Stanek, who had a 40.1 yard average which was second in the NCC. He had a long punt of 56 yards and placed 11 punts inside the opponents 20 yard line.

* * *

Great West Games of the Week

Cal Poly @ San Diego State, Aug. 30

The Mustangs hope to upset the FBS Aztecs for a second straight time. Cal Poly defeated SDSU 16-14 two years ago.

South Dakota @ Northern Iowa, Sept. 6

The Coyotes get their first post-transition test against a FCS opponent. Will they be able to stay competitive against the 2007 Gateway champion Panthers?

Cal Poly @ McNeese State, Sept. 13

This is the first of two straight Southland games for the Mustangs. Can Cal Poly pull off the upset in Lake Charles?

UC Davis @ Montana, Sept. 20

The Aggies last trip to the state of Montana resulted in a 45-0 victory over Montana State. Can the Aggies fly home with another victory from the Treasure State?

North Dakota @ Southeastern Louisiana, Sept. 27

The Fightin' Sioux make their first trip to a Southland foe. Will this trip to Hammond result in a pleasant journey back to Grand Forks?

South Dakota @ Cal Poly, Oct. 4

The Coyotes first GWFC contest and will be against the tough Mustangs in San Luis Obispo.

Southern Utah @ UC Davis, Oct. 11

The Thunderbirds last defeated the Aggies in 2004. Will the Aggies continue their dominance over SUU?

Cal Poly @ South Dakota State, Oct. 18

The Mustangs travel to the former GWFC mate Jackrabbits. SDSU has won the past two past two contests. Will traveling to Brookings a second straight year help or hurt Cal Poly?

North Dakota @ UC Davis, Oct. 25

UND travels to Davis for the first time ever. The two teams last met in the DII playoffs in Grand Forks in 2001—a 14-2 Sioux victory.

North Dakota @ Southern Illinois, Nov. 1

Coach Dale Lennon's Salukis hosts his former team in the Fightin' Sioux. How will the emotions play out in this contest?

Sacramento State @ UC Davis, Nov. 8

The Causeway Classic battle has been one sided with the Aggies defeating the Hornets eight straight times. Will this 2008 contest be number nine in a row?

UC Davis @ Cal Poly, Nov. 15

The Aggies get a second straight rivalry game in this Horseshow Classic matchup. Will last week's game against Sac State take too much out of them to steal a win on the road against the Mustangs?

North Dakota @ South Dakota, Nov. 22

These two teams used to play for the Chief Sitting Bull Trophy but have not had a traveling trophy recently. Even without a trophy, this will be a bragging rights game in the Dakotas.

* * *

Team Capsules

Cal Poly Mustangs

Location: San Luis Obispo, CA

Stadium: Alex G. Spanos Stadium (11,075 Capacity)

Head Coach: Rich Ellerson (48-31, CP & 52-38 overall) 8th Season @ CP
Who's Gone: OL Daniel Bradley, DE Adam Torosian, P Tim Chicoine, LB Jason Relyea,

Who's Back: RB James Noble, WR Ramses Barden, OG Stephen Field, QB Jonathan Dally, OC Jason Cox, , DE Ryan Shotwell, LB Mark Restelli, WR Tredale Tolver, FB Jon Hall, CB Xavier Gardner, SS David Fullerton, LB Marty Mohamed.

Historical Fact: The Mustangs won their first and last FCS playoff game in the opening round at Montana in 2005 before losing to Texas State in the quarterfinals.

Last Season: For the second straight year, Cal Poly finished one victory (7-4 overall) shy of a FCS playoff berth, losing a heartbreaker to North Dakota State on the second to last weekend of the regular season to get their fourth loss.

This Season: The Mustangs return 15 starters but will need to overcome two FBS opponents to start (San Diego State) and finish (Wisconsin) their season to get back to the postseason.

North Dakota Fighting Sioux

Location: Grand Forks, ND

Stadium: Alerus Center (12,283 Capacity)

Head Coach: Chris Mussman (0-0, UND & Overall) 1st Season @ UND

Who's Gone: CB Donovan Alexander, WR Weston Dressler, RB Ryan Chappell, DE Alex Cadwell, LB Bobby Stroup.

Who's Back: QB Danny Freund, FS Rory Manke, OC Mitch Braegelmann, OG Brian Troen, PK Brandon Hellevang, LB Brett Holinka, WR Ryan Dressler, DE Mike Ebanks, CB Drake Otto.

Historical Fact: UND made the DII playoffs 14 times and have one national title and another championship game appearance in their history.

Last Season: The Sioux are coming off a 10-2 DII season that ended with a loss to Grand Valley (MI) State in the second round of their playoffs in former Coach Dale Lennon's last year in Grand Forks.

This Season: This is the first of four transition seasons for the Sioux, which will start with new Coach Chris Mussman. UND will be FCS playoff eligible again in 2012.

South Dakota Coyotes

Location: Vermillion, SD

Stadium: DakotaDome (10,000 Capacity),

Head Coach: Ed Meierkort (33-13, USD & 88-68 Overall) 5th Season @ USD

Who's Gone: RB Amos Allen, WR Brooks Little, OC Christian Morton, OT Tim Schneider, LB Justiss Scales.

Who's Back: P Tim Stanek, CB Isaiah Dixon, LB Blake Hojer, QB Noah Shepard, CB T.J. Simmons, LB Eric Leon.

Historical Fact: The Coyotes have made the playoffs three times, including a championship game appearance in 1986 as a Division II member.

Last Season: USD finished 6-5 a year ago after competing in the DII playoffs in 2006.

This Season: The Coyotes hope to rebound from last year in their first Division I campaign.

Southern Utah Thunderbirds

Location: Cedar City, UT

Stadium: Eccles Coliseum (8,500 Capacity)

Head Coach: Ed Lamb (0-0, SUU & Overall) 1st Season @ SUU

Who's Gone: QB Wes Marshall, OL Matt Roan, RB Johnny Sanchez, S Jovan Jackson, S Chase Pendley, DE Jimmy Judd.

Who's Back: WR Mike Logan, WR Nick Miller, WR Craig Gritton, DT Austin Curtis, DT Aaron Fernandez, CB DeWayne Lewis, CB Collin Pretlow, S D.J. Senter, LB Robert Takeno, DE Chad Westwood.

Historical Fact: The Thunderbirds last had a winning season in 2004, going 6-5.

Last Season: SUU finished winless at 0-11 and it cost former coach Wes Meyer his job.

This Season: New Coach Ed Lamb comes to Cedar City after being the DC at San Diego and hopes to turn around the losing ways.

UC Davis Aggies

Location: Davis, CA

Stadium: Aggie Stadium (9,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Bob Biggs (119-54-1, UCD & Overall), 16th Season @ UCD

Who's Gone: DL John Amos, DB Adam Cook, LB Chris Buck,

Who's Back: WR Brandon Rice, OL Jon Compas, WR Bakari Grant, OL Mario Gonzales, RB Brandon Tucker, OC Tommy Hernandez, TE Luke McDonough.

Historical Fact: Coach Biggs had success as a UC Davis quarterback. His legend was sealed in 1971 when he was the quarterback for the Aggies' "Miracle Win" over Cal St. Hayward. In that game, he directed a comeback that featured 16 points in the final 20 seconds and resulted in a 30-29 victory. That win paved the way for the first of UC Davis' national-record 20 straight league titles.

Last Season: The Aggies opened their new stadium with their first losing season in 37 years—finishing 5-6.

This Season: UC Davis, embarking on its second full season of competition as a member of the NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision, hopes to start a new winning streak.

Ivy League 2008 Preview

By Charles Burton, CSN Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Harvard
2. Yale
3. Brown
4. Princeton
5. Cornell
6. Penn
7. Dartmouth
8. Columbia

Players of the Year

Offense: RB Mike McLeod, Yale, Sr.

Defense: DE Jim Develin, Brown, Jr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill:

CB Stephen Williams, Harvard

Harvard's incredible pass defense of last year was anchored by this dynamic senior who was a huge factor in the Crimson's undefeated record in the Ivy League. The Crimson pass defense unit was ranked first in FCS in pass efficiency defense (with an 89.42 rating), and the San Antonio, Tex., native was the linchpin of this daunting secondary. A unanimous all-Ivy League selection last year, his eight interceptions would be tied for 3rd in all of FCS – and with the Ivy League's 10-game schedule, his rate of .80/game would put him 4th in all of FCS. Williams also was a College Sporting News Player of the Week award winner last year, his two 4th-quarter interceptions in a big game against Brown sealed a 24-17 victory. His veteran presence will be sorely missed in the Crimson's defensive backfield.

* * *

Eight

In April, the long-awaited documentary "8: Ivy League Football and America" was released with much fanfare in New York City. Detailing the history of Ivy League football from the transition of rugby and soccer-style college football rules to the present days in FCS, the presence of such stars as Tony Award-nominated Brian Dennehy, standout NFL running back Calvin Hill, legendary Penn State head football coach Joe Paterno, ESPN analyst Chris Berman, General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt, and countless others show how the Ivy League has developed a wide and deep pool of people that are among the best in their field in the world.

It's odd, therefore, to think that all the teams of the Ivy League – whose schools had 10 alumni on NFL rosters last year – wouldn't wish their student-athletes to compete in the highest level of football championship sponsored by the NCAA: the Football Championship Subdivision playoffs. To many, it seems as though the Ivy League teams are being prevented from learning exactly how good they are.

The lack of a postseason meant that "The Game" between Harvard and Yale, the most storied and well-known Ivy League rivalry outside FCS, would be the final game of the year for the Crimson and Eli in 2007, just like it's been for the last 57 years. Going into the 124th meeting between these two teams, Yale had a 9-0 record. While Harvard had enjoyed perfect seasons in 2001 and 2004, Yale was trying to achieve its first undefeated and untied season since 1960.

Three times – in 1968, 1974 and 1979 – the Eli's attempts at a perfect season were thwarted by the Crimson. Harvard happily added 2007 to that list as the Crimson cruised to a surprisingly easy 37-6 victory over Yale before 57,248 in the Yale Bowl.

The key for the Crimson was striking early and often. Within the first minute, quarterback Chris Pizzotti connected with wideout Matt Luft on a 40-yard touchdown pass and by the end of the first quarter Pizzotti would connect with Luft on another 33-yard TD pass. Pizzotti, MVP of "The Game," would have his biggest game of his career on the biggest stage, completing 27 passes in 41 attempts for 316 yards, 4 TDs and no interceptions. And with Pizzotti back this fall, he'll look for an encore.

Many Ivy League watchers are wondering whether 2008, and the 125th version of "The Game," will again feature Harvard and Yale playing in their last games of their college football season for the national championship and – perhaps – another perfect record.

Those who thought that losing RB Clifton Dawson to graduation in 2006 would mean the **Harvard** Crimson would be rebuilding in 2007 were sorely mistaken. This year sees the Crimson with more standouts to replace – starting with DE Brad Bagdis and CB Stephen Williams – but with QB Chris Pizzotti returning, along with WR Matt Luft and LB Glenn Dorris, it feels as if the championship-winning Harvard team of last year might continue to get better. Harvard begins its season under the lights at Harvard Stadium against local Patriot League rival Holy Cross, while Cornell, Lehigh and Columbia make the trip to Cambridge before the 125th installment of "The Game."

So close, yet so far. The **Yale** Bulldogs have to be disappointed that they came so close to an outright Ivy League championship and just short of an undefeated season. The linchpins of the offense (senior RB Mike McLeod) and defense (senior LB Bobby Abare) return, but with QB Matt Polhemus gone and the "D"

line getting decimated by graduation, you wonder what effect that might have on the Bulldogs' defense. Will McLeod's running carry the Bulldogs to the title instead of Harvard? Outside the Ivy League, Georgetown and Holy Cross visit Yale Bowl early in the year, while Penn, Columbia and Princeton visit New Haven in key Ivy League battles. "The Game," will be played in Cambridge this season.

Somewhere, **Brown** Bear alumnus Chris Berman is smiling. After a brutal schedule to start last season, Brown finished 5-5, and it has many of the same key pieces (DE Jim Develin, QB Michael Dougherty and WR Bobby Sewall) back. Could Brown be the team that forces Harvard and Yale from the Ivy League championship picture? It will have to be in championship form quickly as Stony Brook kicks off Brown's home schedule, followed by a home tilt against Harvard in Week 2. Then it's off to Kingstown, R.I., to face Rhode Island of the CAA (in the 93rd installment of Rhode Island's "Governor's Cup"). Other interesting home games later in the year are against Cornell, Yale and Columbia.

What happened to the **Princeton** Tigers? After a co-Ivy League championship in 2006, last year saw the Tigers limp to 4-6 as they missed QB Jeff Terrell and CB J.J. Artis more than anyone might have expected. Still, with many players from the 2006 Ivy League co-championship team around (such as WR Adam Berry, DE Pete Buchignani and CB Cart Kelly), can a favorable home schedule put Princeton back in the Ivy League title mix? After an interesting test in Charleston, S.C., against The Citadel of the Southern Conference, the Tigers return for their home opener against Lehigh of the Patriot League. The Tigers also will face Brown, Harvard and Dartmouth at Princeton Stadium. They will play their 100th meeting against Penn under the lights on Friday, Nov. 7 in a game televised on ESPNU.

Cornell Big Red fans aren't just happy that they've beaten rival Colgate two straight years. They're thrilled because RB Luke Siwula returns for a 5th year, which means Cornell has a fighter's chance at an Ivy League title in 2008. With QB Nathan Ford and LB Graham Rihn also returning, Cornell has veteran leadership – but it needs to show improvement in its defense to have a shot at the title. The Big Red will be tested early, too, as Yale travels to Schoellkopf Field in Week 2 in an important early conference matchup. In October, the Big Red will be at home again hoping to make it three straight against Colgate for the first time since 1972-74. Other Ivy League matchups at home include Princeton, Dartmouth and Penn.

Absent from any talk about Ivy League title contenders are the **Penn** Quakers. With RB Joe Sandberg graduating along with 13 teammates, it appears to be a rebuilding year in Philadelphia. Coach Al Bagnoli will find out whether Sandberg's backup last year, RB Michael DiMaggio, will be able to work well with a new quarterbacks and new wideouts, while Penn's defense probably will be as solid as ever with CB Tyson Maugle on patrol. The Quakers get thrown into the fire Week 1 when they face "Big 5" rival Villanova at Franklin Field. They have

two more home games against perennial Patriot League power Lafayette and Ivy League rival Dartmouth. Later in the year, Columbia, Brown and Harvard round out the Ivy League home schedule for Penn.

The **Dartmouth** Big Green took a leap in the right direction last year despite its 3-7 record: All three victories came against Ivy League competition, and Dartmouth hopes to be even better this year with a core of young players (QB/WR Tim McManus, RB Milan Williams, and LB Joe Battaglia). It will not be easy, however, for the Big Green to rejoin the Ivy League elite. After visiting Colgate to face the perennial Patriot League title contender and hosting four-time FCS playoff participant New Hampshire out of the CAA, it's on the road to Penn, and then back to Memorial Stadium to meet Yale and local rival Holy Cross out of the Patriot League. Other home games include contests with Harvard and Brown in key games.

You can't fault **Columbia** Lions head football coach Norries Wilson for trying. After his 3-5-3 defense had so much success in 2006, he dared the Ivy League to beat them and beat them they did, making the Lions reel to a 1-9 mark last year. Still, this isn't 1986; brighter days are ahead for the Lions with WR Austin Knowlin, LB Drew Quinn and LB Alex Gross. The question, however, is where are the victories going to come from. Will one be against rival (and 2007 Patriot League champion) Fordham in the 7th installment of the Liberty Cup? Will it come at home at Wien Stadium against league mate Princeton, or powerful Lafayette out of the Patriot League? Or will they poach a home victory against Dartmouth or Cornell?

* * *

Ivy League Games To Watch in 2008

Sept. 19, Holy Cross at Harvard.

The opening kickoff of the Ivy League will be the second night game for the Crimson. This regional matchup – the 62nd meeting between these two – will be especially intense after the Crusaders' picked off a victory against the Crimson 31-28 in the final 30 seconds of play last year.

Sept. 20, Fordham at Columbia.

The defending Patriot League champs visit their cross-town rivals the Columbia Lions in the 7th annual Liberty Cup clash. Columbia will be eager to reclaim the cup after suffering a 27-10 defeat to the Rams last year.

Sept. 27, Harvard at Brown.

Just two weeks into the season, two of the Ivy League's heavyweights face off in a crucial early battle. The Bears haven't beaten the Crimson this century, last besting Harvard in 1999 by a 17-10 score. This will be the 108th meeting between these two.

Oct. 4, Holy Cross at Yale.

This matchup between Ivy League and Patriot League title contenders will be an interesting litmus test for both teams. Yale will look to avenge its loss to the Crusaders two years ago 22-19 in the Yale Bowl, while Holy Cross will look to get the Eli back for the 38-17 thumping Yale gave it last year at Fitton Field.

Oct. 11, Cornell at Harvard.

This is the 73rd meeting between these Ivy foes and will be a must-win for both in the Ivy League title race. The Crimson have won four of their last five in Harvard Stadium against the Big Red – the last time Cornell beat Harvard in Cambridge was in 2000, a 29-28 victory.

Oct. 18, Brown at Princeton.

In this 75th meeting between the Bears and Tigers, Brown hopes to finally be able to beat Princeton on the road. The Bears have lost nine of their last 10 games there, and have never beaten the Tigers in Princeton Stadium (going 0-5).

Oct. 25, Penn at Yale.

Always interesting, the 76th meeting between these two Ivy League heavyweights always seems to have title implications. The last two meetings – both won by Yale – were nail-biters of three points (a 17-14 finish in 2006) and six points (a 26-20 OT thriller in 2007).

Nov. 1, Harvard at Dartmouth.

In the 112th meeting between these two teams, Dartmouth head football coach Buddy Teevens will hope for a return to his dominance over the Crimson. In his first stint as Big Green head coach, he went 3-2-1 against Harvard from 1987-1992. Since then, Dartmouth has gone 4-12 against the Crimson and hasn't beaten Harvard at Hanover since 1993.

Nov. 7, Penn at Princeton.

If Princeton hopes to compete for the Ivy title, it has to beat the invading Quakers in the 100th meeting between these two schools on a special televised (on ESPNU) Friday night game under the lights. Penn's 7-0 victory last year was the lowest-scoring game in the rivalry since 1955.

Nov. 8, Yale at Brown.

This game, the 133rd meeting of these two Ivy teams, could loom large in the Ivy League title race. The last time out in Providence, the Bulldogs squeaked by the Bears 27-24.

Nov. 15, Princeton at Yale.

Historically, Yale has faced Princeton (129 times) more often than it has faced Harvard (124 times). Princeton is hoping this game will be similar to two years

ago where its come-from-behind 34-31 victory sealed a co-Ivy championship with Yale. The Tigers hope they'll be competing for the outright title this time.

Nov. 22, Yale at Harvard.

The 125th edition of "The Game," as always, will be a classic. Yale will be bound and determined to avenge last year's lost Ivy League title at the hands of Harvard, while the Crimson hope once again their title destinies will be in their own hands – but this time, playing in front of a friendly home crowd.

* * *

IVY LEAGUE CAPSULES

Brown Bears

Location: Providence, R.I.

Stadium: Brown Stadium (20,000)

Head Coach: Phil Estes (59-40-0, 59-40-0 overall)

Key Losses: RB Dereck Knight, FB Tyler Rowley, WR Paul Raymond, OL A.J.

Tracey, DT Kai Brown, LB Erik Brewer, SS Jose Yearwood, P/K Steve Morgan

Key Returners: QB Michael Dougherty, RB Jonathan Edwards, WR Buddy

Farnham, WR Bobby Sewall, TE Colin Cloherty, DE James Develin, LB Jon May,

LB Miles Craigwell, CB Darrell Harrison

Historical Note: Going into the 1910 season, Brown had never beaten Yale in its history. That would change with what The New York Times called the Eli's "worst beating in recent years" with a dominating 21-0 victory by the Bears.

Last Year: A brutal schedule to start the year -- facing Harvard, Rhode Island and Holy Cross on consecutive weekends -- meant the Bears limped to a 1-3 start.

Brown finished strong, however, ending at 5-5 with big victories against Penn, Dartmouth and Columbia.

This Year: Building off a strong end to 2007, and with many key players returning such as QB Michael Dougherty, DE James Develin and CB Darrell Harrison, the Bears have the best chance to knock Harvard and Yale out of the Ivy League penthouse.

Columbia Lions

Location: New York, N.Y.

Stadium: Lawrence A. Wien Stadium at Baker Field (17,000)

Head Coach: Norries Wilson (6-14, 6-14 overall)

Key Losses: QB Craig Hormann, TE Jamal Russell, C Mike Partain, LB Bayo

Aregbe, CB JoJo Smith, CB Eugene Edwards

Key Returners: RB Ray Rangel, WR Austin Knowlin, OL Ralph DeBernardo, DL

Phillip Mitchell, LB Drew Quinn, LB Alex Gross, SS Andy Shalbrack, K/P Jon

Rocholl

Historical Note: This year is the 75th anniversary of Lou Little's 1933 Columbia team that went 8-1-0 and "surprised" Stanford in the Rose Bowl with a shocking

7-0 victory in front of 40,000 rain-soaked fans. Halfback Al Barabas scored the only points using – of all things – the old “hidden ball” trick.

Last Year: The promise of 2006 ended with a thud in 2007, with the Lions tumbling to a 1-9 record and last place in the Ivy League pecking order.

This Year: Scrapping last year’s 3-5-3 defense, Wilson hopes to build on a talented core of underclassmen to return to success in 2008, including all-League WR Austin Knowlin and LBs Drew Quinn and Alex Gross. But who will replace QB Hormann?

Cornell Big Red

Location: Ithaca, N.Y.

Stadium: Schoellkopf Field (25,597)

Head Coach: Jim Knowles (20-20, 20-20 overall)

Key Losses: C Ted Sonnenberg, OL Brian McGuire, LB Ryan Blessing, LB Doug Lempa, FS Tim Bax, PK Peter Zell

Key Returners: QB Nathan Ford, RB Luke Siwula, WR Zac Canty, WR Bryan Walters, OL Steve Valenta, DE Luke McCarthy, LB Graham Rihn, CB Frank Morand, P Nick Maxwell

Historical Note: The last time Cornell beat Colgate in consecutive years was 1978 (RB Joe Holland ran for 164 yards in a 21-12 victory) and 1979 (an impressive 36-21 victory).

Last Year: Schoellkopf Field once again was a nightmare for the opposition to play in 2007, with Cornell going 4-1 at home (including a second-straight triumph against local rival Colgate). However, the Big Red’s road woes would continue (1-4); Cornell would finish at .500 for the second straight year.

This Year: 5th year RB Luke Siwula returns for his final year of eligibility, and with all the key skill players in place from last year, Cornell has the offense to make a run at the title – if the defense can improve after yielding more than 30 points a game in 2007. Are LB Graham Rihn and the defense up to the job?

Dartmouth Big Green

Location: Hanover, N.H.

Stadium: Memorial Stadium (15,000)

Head Coach: Buddy Teevens (33-45-2, 67-122-2 overall)

Key Losses: QB Tom Bennewitz, WR Brian Evans, OL Jared Dowdakin, OL Taylor Layman, DE Dan Cook, LB Justin Cottrell, FS John Pircon

Key Returners: QB/WR Tim McManus, RB Milan Williams, WR Phil Galligan, OL Alex Rapp, NT Max Copello, LB Andrew Dete, LB Joe Battaglia, SS Ian Wilson

Historical Note: On Nov. 12, 1913, head coach Frank W. Cavanaugh gave in to public demand and decided to allow his 7-0 Dartmouth team members to wear numbers on their jerseys before facing Carlisle Indian School (1912’s national champions). Uniform numbers wouldn’t become recommended by the NCAA until 1915.

Last Year: In Teevens’ second year of rebuilding, the Big Green showed modest improvement with a 3-7 record. All three victories came in Ivy League play against Columbia, Penn and Cornell.

This Year: Nobody said rebuilding was easy, but Dartmouth seems pointed in the right direction with RB Milan Williams and LB Joe Battaglia leading the charge. Whether that leads to better success this year, however, remains to be seen.

Harvard Crimson

Location: Cambridge, Mass.

Stadium: Harvard Stadium at Baker Field (30,898)

Head Coach: Tim Murphy (88-51-0, 120-96-1 overall)

Key Losses: FB Noah Van Niel, WR Corey Mazza, C David Paine, OL Andrew Brecher, DE Brad Bagdis, CB Stephen Williams, CB Doug Hewlett

Key Returners: QB Chris Pizzotti, RB Cheng Ho, WR Matt Luft, OL James Williams, DT Matt Curtis, LB Glenn Dorris, LB Eric Schultz, CB Andrew Berry, CB John Hopkins

Historical Note: The last time head coach Tim Murphy had a sub-.500 as head coach at Harvard was 10 years ago in 1998 (4-6). Since then, he has won three Ivy League titles (2001, 2004 and 2007) and fielded two undefeated teams (2001 and 2004).

Last Year: It doesn't get much better than smacking around your most hated rival on the biggest weekend of the year for the Ivy League Championship. Harvard's 37-6 shellacking of Yale in "The Game" capped off an 8-2 season and Murphy's fourth Ivy League title.

This Year: So many players return for the Crimson in 2008, QB Chris Pizzotti, LB Glenn Dorris, CB Andrew Berry, that they have to be considered the frontrunners in 2008. The only question is: Can they survive the graduation of two of the members of the best secondary in the Ivy League?

Penn Quakers

Location: Philadelphia, Pa.

Stadium: Franklin Field (52,958)

Head Coach: Al Bagnoli (107-50-0, 194-69-0 lifetime)

Key Losses: QB Bryan Walker, RB Joe Sandberg, FB Nick Cisler, WR Braden Lepisto, C Brian Brazinski, NT Naheem Harris, DT Tom Stone, LB Joe Anastasio, FS Pat Kimener

Key Returners: QB Robert Irvin, RB Michael DiMaggio, WR Marcus Lawrence, OL Chris Kovalcik, DT Joe Goniprow, LB Jay Colabella, S Jordan Manning, CB Tyson Maugle

Historical Note: A 100 years ago, the Quakers were the de facto college football champions with an 11-0-1 record, with a team featuring Penn HB John Manier and QB Albert Miller. The only tie came against powerful Carlisle Indian School (6-6) on a rainy afternoon at Franklin Field where the legendary Jim Thorpe would miss three kicks.

Last Year: RB Joe Sandberg's injuries meant the Quakers would have a rollercoaster ride of a season, ending 4-6. They'd score on average more than 38 points in their victories and score only an average 13 points a game in their losses.

This Year: Penn always seems to find answers in the trenches and the defense, but with eight offensive starters and six defensive starters to replace it looks like a tough year ahead for RB Michael DiMaggio, CB Tyson Maugle and company.

Princeton Tigers

Location: Princeton, N.J.

Stadium: Princeton Stadium (27,800)

Head Coach: Roger Hughes (39-40, 39-40 overall)

Key Losses: FB Rob Teresco, WR Brendan Circle, LB Doorri Song, LB Jon Stem, SS Joe Cerreta, FS Kevin Kelleher

Key Returners: QB Brian Anderson, RB R.C. Lagomarsino, WR Adam Berry, WR Wil Thanheiser, OL Mark Paski, NT Dan Koch, DE Pete Buchignani, LB John Callahan, CB Cart Kelly, P/ K Connor Louden

Historical Note: Princeton dominated the early years of the Princeton/Penn rivalry, winning all the meetings from 1876 to 1892. When they lost to the Quakers for the first time that year (losing 6 to 4) Princeton professor (and future U.S. President) Woodrow Wilson was "palpably distressed," according to his wife. She would say that had Democrat Grover Cleveland failed to capture the White House that year, she feared that Wilson might have "had some kind of collapse."

Last Year: A 2-1 start fanned high hopes for Princeton fans in 2007 until a loss at home against Hampton of the MEAC would reverse the season. The Tigers would limp to a 2-4 finish, showing flashes of the championship team of 2006 -- but more often falling flat.

This Year: A significant core of players who were part of the 2006 Ivy League championship team remain, including WR Adam Berry and CB Cart Kelly. Can Princeton find solutions at QB and LB, replace FB Rob Teresco and recapture the magic of 2006?

Yale Bulldogs

Location: New Haven, Conn.

Stadium: Yale Bowl (61,446)

Head Coach: Jack Siedlecki (64-45-0, 120-67-2 overall)

Key Losses: QB Matt Polhemus, FB Joe Fucillo, TE Langston Johnson, OL Jeff Monaco, DE Brady Hart, DL Brandt Hollander, DT Jared Hamilton, SS Nick Solakian, PK Alan Kimball

Key Returners: QB Ryan Fodor, RB Mike McLeod, WR Ashley Wright, OL Darius Dale, DT Kyle Hawari, LB Bobby Abare, FS Larry Abare, SS/KR Steve Santoro

Historical Note: One hundred years ago, a costly loss to Harvard (4-0) would not only cost the Eli an undefeated season, it would break a string of three de facto national championships and a 42-game streak without a loss.

Last Year: On the brink of its second consecutive Ivy League championship, Yale instead tripped on the broken toe of star RB Mike McLeod. The 37-6 humiliation in "The Game" against Harvard not only handed the hated Crimson the Ivy League title, it halted Yale's drive for the Eli's first undefeated season since 1968.

This Year: RB McLeod returns to make a run at Yale's record book, as do the Abare brothers on defense – but the Bulldogs might miss that defensive line decimated by graduation. If McLeod stays healthy and Fodor gets the offense cooking, however, they could well be nearly unstoppable again in 2008.

Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference 2008 Preview

By Marty O'Brien, Special to CSN

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Norfolk State
2. Delaware State
3. South Carolina State
4. Hampton
5. Morgan State
6. Florida A&M
7. Winston-Salem State
8. Bethune-Cookman
9. Howard
10. North Carolina A&T

* * *

The 2007 Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference football season featured a changing of the guard, and a significant addition of sentries at the castle gates.

Delaware State dethroned three-time champion Hampton. But to do so, the Hornets needed a fourth-quarter touchdown to break a tie with the Pirates, then had to rally from behind in the final 15 minutes to beat the other three teams which finished in the top five of the conference.

The Hornets won the title-decider by rallying from 18 points down in the fourth quarter en route to a 28-21 overtime victory over Norfolk State. Had the Spartans won that game, they, not the Hornets, would've earned the MEAC's Football Championship Subdivision playoff berth.

Yes, we're talking about the same Norfolk State that entered '07 without a winning season in its first decade on the FCS level. But former Bethune-Cookman defensive coordinator Pete Adrian moved the Spartans to the brink of a playoff berth in only his third year at the helm.

Two- or three-team title races used to be the norm in the conference. But five teams battled it out for MEAC supremacy last season: Delaware State (10-2 overall, 8-0 MEAC), Norfolk State (8-3, 6-2), South Carolina State (7-4, 6-2), Hampton (6-5, 5-3) and Morgan State (5-6, 4-4).

Every game played between those teams was decided by fewer than nine points. Delaware State won the conference because it went 4-0 in games against Norfolk State (3-1 vs. the top five), South Carolina State (2-2), Hampton (1-3) and Morgan State (0-4).

South Carolina State coach Buddy Pough expects a similarly airtight title race this year.

“It’s thicker at the top than it’s ever been,” he said. “I don’t know if it’s because we’re all pretty good or all pretty medium. It looks like we’re all pretty evenly matched.”

Look for the same five teams to battle it out once again for the MEAC title and the league’s automatic berth into the FCS playoffs. Pough is among those who think that Florida A&M could make it a six-team race because of Joe Taylor.

Taylor left Hampton in January to become the head coach at FAMU. He guided Hampton to five MEAC titles in the 12 seasons after the school became eligible for the conference crown – including those three from ’04-06.

So, who will win it? Coaches and sports information directors pick South Carolina State, but the guess here is that Norfolk State will rebound from its fourth-quarter collapse in Dover last November and win its first MEAC title.

The **Norfolk State** Spartans (8-3 overall, 6-2 MEAC) get the nod because they do the best job of replacing what little they lost. Unquestionably the graduation losses of QB Casey Hansen, RB Daryl Jones and MLB twins Marquez and Maguell Davis were significant.

But the Spartans return virtually everyone else on defense. Adrian says his team will be deep at middle linebacker, and almost as talented as when the Davis twins were on hand. Otherwise, the defense should thrive thanks to the return of All-American DB Terrell Whitehead (MEAC-high six interceptions), All-MEAC DL Dennis Marsh (47 tackles, 2.5 sacks) and All-MEAC DB Don Carey (48 tackles, three interceptions).

Connecticut transfer Dennis Brown might be an upgrade at QB. He started Big East games against West Virginia and Rutgers, can run the ball and can throw the long ball better than Hansen. He also possesses a good head for the game and gained valuable experience under center at NSU this spring.

He’ll be helped greatly by the return of the entire receiver corps and offensive line. Jones rushed for 1,134 yards and 15 TDs last season, but those numbers might have been slightly lower had DeAngelo Branche been academically eligible.

Branche – who ran for 371 yards and three TDs in 10 games in 2006 as a freshman – is eligible this season. A slasher with the speed to break big gainers, no one would be surprised if he matches Jones’ ’07 numbers.

The Spartans will be deeper everywhere this season, thanks to 15 freshmen who redshirted last year. No one-year wonder, the Spartans came within a whisker of winning the MEAC last year and are poised to clear that hurdle this season.

The **Delaware State** Hornets (10-2, 8-0) earned a first-ever NCAA playoff appearance in 2007, when they finished in the top 15 of the FCS poll and were selected as the American Sports Wire's Black College national champion. This year could be just as good, because the Hornets return plenty.

The cupboard is still pretty full on offense, where the Hornets return eight starters, led by QB Vashon Winton. Winton completed 59 percent of his passes and threw for 12 TDs a year ago. But as much as anything it was his savvy in handful of close games the Hornets won that was most responsible for the march to the MEAC title.

"He was everything when we came back against Norfolk State," Hornets' coach Al Lavan said. "He put the ball in the hands of the guys we needed to have the ball, and executed perfectly.

"He can pass and he can run, but the best thing he does is win. He's 20-3 in games he's started against MEAC teams."

Winton has plenty of weapons to work with. RB Kareem Jones ran for 705 yards last season, while Derrick McNeil caught 23 passes for 313 yards. Four starters return along the offensive line.

The defense lost five starters, but that should not be a huge problem because that unit is always the mainstay of the program. DL Ross Spinner is big (6-foot-3, 305 pounds) and was productive (47 tackles, 7.5 for loss) last season.

Josh Pope (57.5 tackles, seven for loss) leads a linebacker corps that must replace All-MEAC selection Russell Reeves (73 tackles, 10.5 for loss). The secondary lost all four starters off of the MEAC championship team.

The Hornets will undoubtedly contend for the title, but might have lost too many players to repeat.

Maybe the biggest problem for the **South Carolina State** Bulldogs (7-4, 6-2) is that they can't sneak up on anyone. They didn't win the MEAC title in 2006 or '07, but coaches and SIDs picked them as the preseason favorite for the second consecutive season.

There's a lot here to respect. All-MEAC RB Will Ford, a 5-10, 190-pound junior, ran for 1,389 yards last season, including 322 in one game. Auburn transfer Anthony Campbell flashed potential by rushing for 160 yards on 15 carries in the spring game.

All-MEAC center Raymond Harrison, 6-2, 275 pounds, leads an offensive line that features three starters who weigh in at more than 300 pounds. An experienced receiver corps includes TE Octavius Darby (12 receptions last season), WR Dustin Dubose (25 catches, 302 yards) and WR Tre Young (16 catches, 370 yards).

The defense is even more loaded, with nine starters back from a group that ranked second in the MEAC (287.1 ypg) a year ago. The big names are DE Cedric Lloyd (34 tackles, nine for loss), strong safety Markee Hamilton (63 tackles, five interceptions) and LB Tony White (69 tackles, 7.5 for loss).

But what about quarterback? The Bulldogs lost Cleveland McCoy, who ran for 1,241 yards and 12 TDs, while rushing for 823 and six TDs. Sophomore Malcolm Long, a former high school “Mr. Football” in South Carolina begins his first season as a starter with high expectations.

He passed for 3,077 yards and 32 TDs as a high school senior. And while he won't run the ball as well as McCoy, he gives the Bulldogs a downfield passing threat they didn't have before.

Should he meet those high expectations, the Bulldogs might finally get over the hump and into the FCS playoffs.

The **Hampton** Pirates (6-5, 5-3) are starting over. Only three starters – two offensive linemen and a linebacker – remain from the program's three consecutive MEAC titles (2004-06).

Gone, too, is legendary coach Joe Taylor, who left for Florida A&M after winning 139 games and eight conference titles (five MEAC and three CIAA) in 16 seasons at HU. Jerry Holmes, the Pirates defensive coordinator the past three seasons, replaces Taylor.

The transition should be seamless. Holmes will not wield the public presence that Taylor did, but he's a players' coach and his troops will run through a brick wall for him.

Despite the turnover from the championship years, Holmes will have some good talent to work with. Jeremy Gilchrist led the MEAC in receiving last year (with 69 catches for 1,043 yards) while earning All-American honors as the nation's leading punt returner (highs of 19.0 per return and three TDs).

Gilchrist, a Virginia Tech transfer, is one the numerous former Division I-A players key to the Pirates' MEAC title hopes. CB Jackie Bates (Oregon) and SS Sam Pope (South Carolina) return to anchor the defensive backfield after starting a year ago.

LB J'Courtney Williams (Virginia), DL Kendrick Ellis (South Carolina) and DL Bryant Miller (Auburn) join the fold this season. Each was ranked among the best nationally at their positions as high school seniors, and are expected to make huge and immediate contributions.

The most significant offensive transfer is RB LaMarcus Coker (Tennessee), who led SEC freshmen in rushing two years ago, but left Knoxville because of off-field problems. The explosive junior should thrive behind an offensive line that returns intact.

First team All-MEAC quarterback T.J. Mitchell (formerly of West Virginia) missed much of spring ball and summer conditioning with academic and off-field issues. He's a decent runner and passed for a MEAC-high 209.9 yards per game last season, but often struggled with poise and leadership.

Redshirt sophomore Herb Bynes took most of the snaps during the spring, and looked good enough to position himself as a contender for Mitchell's job. Regardless, the Pirates will need better play at QB to recapture the MEAC title.

The **Morgan State** Bears (5-6, 4-4) lost heartbreakers on the road last year at Hampton, Delaware State and South Carolina State. The 25-17 loss at eventual champion Delaware State loss hurt the worst.

The Bears led by a point in the fourth quarter and appeared to cross the plane of the goal on a touchdown run. Instead, the Hornets picked up a fumble and ran 100 yards for a touchdown: An officiating blunder so bad it prompted the conference commissioner to admit the play should've been called a touchdown.

But the Bears' improvement raised expectations in Baltimore and earned head coach Donald Hill-Eley a five-year contract extension. With 50 lettermen back, 27 with starting experience, the Bears should be in the title hunt again this season.

The entire receiver corps returns, led by Edwin Baptiste and Robert Surratt, who combined for 56 catches and 654 yards last season. QB Jeremy Glover, a pocket passer with an accurate arm, should be able to get the ball to them.

The Bears will miss MEAC Offensive Player of the Year Chad Simpson (1,402 yards rushing, 14 TDs) at tailback. But sophomore Devan James (88 yards rushing vs. Bethune-Cookman) is explosive. He'll run behind an experienced offensive line with four All-MEAC-caliber blockers.

The defense ranked first in the MEAC last season (267.0 yards allowed per game) and returns 10 players who started at least three games.

CB Darren McKhan (three interceptions, five pass breakups) leads a secondary that spearheaded the Bears' No. 1 ranking nationally last season against the

pass. LB Jarrell Guyton (15.5 tackles for loss) leads the front seven, which is also experienced.

The kicking and return games are good, too. Don't be surprised if the Bears are in contention for the MEAC crown from start to finish.

After six years in the football doldrums, the **Florida A&M** Rattlers (3-8, 2-6) took a serious step back toward respectability by luring Joe Taylor from Hampton University. In 16 seasons as head coach at Hampton, Taylor compiled a 136-49-1 record, guiding the Pirates to five MEAC and three CIAA titles.

He takes the reigns at the end of a horrid era for FAMU football. The program made an ill-conceived move in 2003 to Division I-A – aborted after one season – then suffered its share of penalties when the NCAA placed the entire athletic program on four years probation for lack of institutional control.

The football program was docked 14 scholarships over a four-year period. The result of the upheaval is that the Rattlers are 29-35 since winning the 2001 MEAC title.

Taylor's first act in taking over last January was to spearhead \$100,000 in weight room improvements. Then he set about changing attitudes among the alumni and within his new team.

The group he inherited is young, but not devoid of talent. QB Eddie Battle (47-of-80 passing last season, 537 yards and four TDs) has a strong arm and is a good decision-maker.

Sophomore TB Philip Sylvester, who ran for 858 yards and seven TDs en route to MEAC Rookie of the Year honors, is one of the most explosive players in the conference. Vernon Wilder (87 tackles and five sacks last season) is a good player to build a defense around.

And building is what this season is all about. A MEAC title is highly unlikely this season, but longtime MEAC observers would bet a week's pay that Taylor will have the Rattlers in the hunt within a couple of years.

Had **Winston-Salem State** (6-5, 5-4 versus MEAC teams) been eligible for conference play last year, we would've seen a six-team battle for the title instead of a five-team race. The Rams won five of nine games against MEAC competition last season.

Results included two close victories against contenders – 19-17 over Morgan State and 20-19 to Hampton – and a pair of 23-20 losses to Norfolk State and Delaware State. But the Rams, entering their fourth season on the FCS level, won't be eligible for conference play until next season.

That's probably just as well. The Rams will remain competitive against MEAC foes, but some key personnel losses make finishing above .500 in those nine games a huge challenge.

The offensive backfield took a huge hit with the graduation of QB Monte Purvis and RB Jed Bines. Purvis passed for 1,033 yards and eight touchdowns last season, while rushing for 733 and 10 scores. Bines netted 925 yards on the ground and ran for seven TDs.

Four players are competing for the starting QB job, including redshirt freshman Tienne Jefferson and Temple transfer Jarrett Dunston. Dunston, 0-for-5 with an interception last season, is the only one in the group to attempt a pass for the Rams.

But the offensive line is experienced and some good skill players return. Bryant Bayne caught 25 passes last season, for 320 yards and five TDs. RB Roderick Fluellen powered his way to 520 yards and three TDs.

The defense was harder hit, losing 10 players with starting experience. Two solid linebackers return: Cedrick Marshall (55 tackles) and Marcus Coates (48 tackles).

Another 6-5 record would be asking a lot for this group. But the Rams are young and have a taste of winning in the MEAC, so they should progress nicely and be ready to wreck havoc upon their debut a year from now.

The **Bethune-Cookman** Wildcats (5-6, 3-5) have fallen a notch since making consecutive I-AA playoff appearances earlier this decade, underscored by consecutive 5-6 seasons. The slide appears unlikely to slow this season.

B-CU lost six starters on both sides of the ball. The losses on offense include starting QB Jimmie Russell, a dual threat who accounted for 1,591 yards (816 rushing, 775 passing) and 15 TDs (13 rushing. DB Bobbie Williams and LB Ronnie McCullough, both first team All-MEAC selections, headlined the defensive losses.

Longtime coach Alvin Wyatt looks to engineer a return to glory with a lineup that boasts some talent, but little depth. Florida Atlantic transfer McKinson Souverain played in 10 games at QB last season, but completed just 47.6 percent of his passes for 402 yards. He'll throw to a mostly untested wide receiver corps.

The situation at running back is a little better. Elusive Corey Council will help the Wildcats running and catching the ball, as well as returning kicks.

Phillip Kirkland, who ran for almost 300 yards last season, is a nice combination of power and speed. He and Council can count on the help of a very experienced offensive line.

Dexter Jackson is the star on a defensive line that is otherwise a question mark. Brendan Odom (57 tackles) is capable at linebacker and Antwane Cox is a good cover corner. Punter Justin Keable blasted eight punts of more than 50 yards last season, including a 71-yarder.

This team has some good players, but the question is whether there are enough of them. On paper it doesn't appear there are enough to snap the five-year playoff drought.

More rebuilding is in store as Carey Bailey begins his second year as the **Howard** Bison head coach. The Bison (4-7, 2-6) ranked second offensively in the MEAC last season with 360.8 yards per game, but lost its biggest playmakers.

Brian Johnson was not only one of the MEAC's best passers (2,212 yards and 21 TD passes versus only eight interceptions) but he led the Bison with 432 yards rushing. His successor, Floyd Haigler, has thrown only 29 career passes, and his backups have thrown none.

The Bison also lost a pair of receivers who combined for 100 receptions for 1,192 yards and 17 touchdowns. Fortunately for Haigler, the offensive line – which includes an All-MEAC candidate at center (Sean Woolford) and an Auburn transfer (Oscar Gonzales) should be pretty good.

That group might be called on to do more run blocking this season, in large part because the tailbacks possess more experience than the receivers. Shifty TB Terry Perry rushed for 432 yards in just eight games, while powerful Karlos Whittaker added 412 yards and five TDs. Bailey expects Clemson transfer Ramon McElrathbey to contribute immediately.

The defense was porous last season, allowing league-worst average 30.2 points, but looks to be improved. LB Endor Cooper made 88 tackles last season (eight for loss) and was selected the league's preseason Defensive Player of the Year.

Robert Parker (55 tackles, 6.5 for loss) adds depth and quality to the linebacker corps. James Carter is the best of a good group on the defensive line, where 6-foot-6, 295-pound Aramide Adefemiwa – a junior college transfer – will help.

The secondary is young, but the kicking game is good. That's the way it is with the Bison: It has some very good pieces but the whole just isn't good enough yet to improve much on last year's mark.

The **North Carolina A&T** Aggies went 0-11 (0-8 MEAC) a year ago for the second consecutive season. But unlike in 2006, when they were not competitive in any game, in '07 the Aggies should've won three or four games and could easily have won five.

A&T blew fourth-quarter leads against North Carolina Central, Morgan State, Florida A&M, Howard and Bethune-Cookman. The Aggies gave up three touchdowns in the final four minutes of a 35-27 loss at Howard.

The good news is that only five seniors were lost from last year's team. RB Michael Ferguson returns after rushing for 1,169 yards last season, while battling through injuries.

QB Herb Miller has gained valuable experience through the tough times the past two seasons. He put up decent numbers last season, completing 48-of-91 passes for 588 yards and five TDs, while rushing for three TDs.

LB Andre Thornton and SS Brandon Colbert are the top returning defensive players. Thornton led the Aggies with 82 tackles, 8.5 for loss. Colbert added 63 stops, eight for loss, while breaking up three passes.

Both lines are question marks. The offensive line must prove that it can block against the pass – after allowing 24 sacks last season – while the defensive line must fill in some holes.

Look for improvement in both areas, because third-year coach Lee Fobbs' first two recruiting classes have gained experience under fire. And look for Fobbs to get his first win as A&T's coach after 22 consecutive losses.

The Aggies aren't ready to make a push in to the first division of the league just yet, but they are ready to win some games.

* * *

GAMES OF THE WEEK

Johnson C. Smith @ North Carolina A&T, Aug. 30

The Aggies haven't won a game since the 2005 season. This will certainly be their best shot in a long time: Against a Division II school which lost 10 starters from a 3-7 team.

Florida A&M @ Delaware State, Sept. 4

New FAMU coach Joe Taylor will get an early idea whether his rebuilding project is a short- or long-term thing. The Hornets are looking to make an early statement that they're ready to defend their title.

Howard @ Hampton, Sept. 13

They call this "The Battle for the Real HU" and when these teams play in Washington, D.C. it is inevitably a battle. For once, Howard would like to bring the fight south to Armstrong Stadium, where Hampton routinely wins this matchup by five or six touchdowns.

Norfolk State @ William and Mary, Sept. 20

MEAC teams rarely fare well against the CAA. In fact, the CAA has eliminated the MEAC from the playoffs four consecutive seasons. But surging Norfolk State has a shot to reverse the MEAC's fortunes with a win over a pretty good W&M team.

Norfolk State @ Bethune-Cookman, Sept. 27

This rivalry packs a lot of punch because of NSU coach Pete Adrian's connection to B-CU, where he spent 11 seasons at defensive coordinator before coming to Norfolk. There's no love lost between the two programs, and that seems to produce a classic every year.

Hampton @ Delaware State, Oct. 4

This matchup decided the MEAC title race two years ago. Del State quarterback Vashon Winton considered his team's 24-17 win last season at three-time defending champion Hampton to be the key to the Hornets' title run.

Norfolk State @ South Carolina State, Oct. 11

You can date Norfolk State's return to football prominence to the 20-13 overtime win last season against South Carolina State. The Spartans almost rode the momentum from that win to the MEAC title. The Bulldogs will need to hold serve at home to keep their title hopes alive.

Norfolk State @ Hampton, Oct. 18

Norfolk State's 20-19 win at home a year ago reversed the trend in what had become a one-sided rivalry in Hampton's favor. This might very well prove to be the pivotal game for two teams looking to position themselves for title runs.

Delaware State @ Morgan State, Oct. 25

Bears' fans, players and coaches are still incensed by the blown call in Dover a year ago. Morgan State led 17-16 late and appeared to cross the plane of the goal for a touchdown. The Hornets picked up a controversial fumble on the play and ran it back 100 yards for a TD en route to a 25-17 victory.

South Carolina State @ Delaware State, Nov. 1

Peter Gaertner's 38-yard field goal with 2.6 seconds left in the game gave Del State a 17-16 victory in this matchup last season. Had the Bulldogs held on to their 10-point fourth-quarter lead, they, not Del State, would've earned the MEAC's automatic berth in the FCS playoffs.

Morgan State @ Norfolk State, Nov. 8

Before last season, neither program was considered a serious MEAC championship threat. Now both are. In a title race that goes five teams deep, this matchup has as good a shot as any of ultimately deciding the crown.

Delaware State @ Norfolk State, Nov. 15

Expect every one of the 30,000 seats at NSU's Dick Price Stadium to be filled to the brim if this matchup again decides the MEAC title. Del State rallied from 21-3 down in the fourth quarter to beat NSU 28-21 in overtime last season, and earn the MEAC's FCS playoff berth.

Florida A&M vs. Bethune-Cookman, Nov. 22

Sure, Joe Taylor got a huge pay raise for moving from Hampton to FAMU. But few coaches appreciate history as much as Taylor. Being part of one of historically black college football's biggest showcases – with a draw of 70,000 fans annually – no doubt lured him as well.

* * *

MEAC Capsules

Bethune-Cookman Wildcats

Location: Daytona Beach, FL.

Stadium: Larry Kelly Field at Municipal Stadium (10,000).

Head Coach: Alvin B. Wyatt, Sr. (77-45 @ B-C & overall, 11th season @ B-C).

Who's Gone: LB Ronnie McCullough, DB Bobbie Williams, QB Jimmie Russell.

Who's Back: WR/RS Corey Council, WR Victor Johnson, OL Reubin Mordecai,

OL Deron Barnes, AB Phillip Kirkland, LB Brendan Odom, DB Antwane Cox, DL Chris Dirksz.

Historical Fact: Coach Wyatt was a standout for the Wildcats from 1966-69 by earning himself All-America honors as a defensive back and All-SIAC (Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference) accolades during his more than illustrious career.

Last Season: The Wildcats finished a second straight season at 5-6 overall and third losing season in a row but did finish well in winning three of their last four games, including a Florida Classic win over Florida A&M.

This Season: Coach Wyatt's team hopes to continue the end of the year success into the beginning of the 2008 season but will have a number of new players starting to have a winning season for the first time in three seasons.

Delaware State Hornets

Location: Dover, DE.

Stadium: Alumni Stadium (7,000).

Head Coach: Al Lavan (29-16 @ DSU, 31-17 overall, 5th season @ DSU)

Who's Gone: DB Akeem Green, P/K Peter Gaertner, WR Shaheer McBride, OL Jeremy Breath, DL Kelly Rouse.

Who's Back: OT Adrian Brown, DT Ronn Spinner, RB Kareem Jones, QB Vashon Winton, WR Derrick McNeil, LB Josh Pope, LB Kevin Conner, LB Jackie Watkins, OT Adrian Brown.

Historical Fact: Prior to winning the MEAC title last year, the Hornets last won the conference crown in 1991.

Last Season: After three years of positive steps towards reaching the top of the MEAC under Coach Lavan, DSU was the conference champions but were defeated by in-state Delaware in the opening round of the FCS playoffs. The Hornets finished the season 10-2 overall.

This Season: DSU finished last year 8-0 in the MEAC and hopes to make the playoffs for a second time in their history with 13 returning starters.

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical Rattlers

Location: Tallahassee, FL.

Stadium: Bragg Memorial (25,500)

Head Coach: Joe Taylor (0-0 @ FAMU, 197-78-4 overall), 1st season @ FAMU)

Who's Gone: OL Justin Delancy, DB Ernest Williams, P Wesley Taylor.

Who's Back: TE Taj Jenkines, LB Vernon Wilder, RB Phillip Sylvester, QB Eddie Battle.

Historical Fact: The Rattlers have made the FCS playoffs six times in their history, including winning the first ever FCS title in 1978 and a semi-final appearance in 1999 but their last playoff appearance was in 2001.

Last Season: FAMU finished the season just 3-8 and the poor season cost Rubin Carter his job after three years in Tallahassee.

This Season: New Coach Joe Taylor comes to the Rattlers from MEAC rival Hampton in the hopes of righting the once elite FCS program.

Hampton Pirates

Location: Hampton, VA.

Stadium: Armstrong Stadium (17,000).

Head Coach: Jerry Holmes (0-0 @ HU & Overall), 1st season @ HU)

Who's Gone: DL Kendall Langford, DL Marcus Dixon, LB Demarius Sapp, OC Justin Gary, RB Kevin Beverly.

Who's Back: QB TJ Mitchell, WR Jeremy Gilchrist, OG Dennis Conley, DB Sam Pope, P Jahmal Blanchard, WR/RS Jeremy Gilchrist, WR Kevin Teel, LB Charles Robinson.

Historical Fact: The Pirates have just one playoff victory in their history—a 1993 win over Albany State when HU was a DII member. HU also defeated Southern in the Heritage Bowl in 1999 for another post-season victory.

Last Season: The Pirates finished just 6-5 but four of the five losses were by a touchdown or less. The poor season came after three straight MEAC titles and that success resulted in Coach Joe Taylor to move to Florida A&M.

This Season: New Coach Holmes hopes to rekindle the playoff results of the teams from 2004 to 2006.

Howard Bison

Location: Washington, D.C.

Stadium: William H. Greene Stadium (7,086).

Head Coach: Carey Bailey (4-7 @ HU & overall, 2nd Season @ HU).

Who's Gone: WR Jarahn Williams, DL Rudolph Hardie, QB Brian Johnson, OL DiMarques Floyd, LB Robert Dowdy, DB Thomas Clairborn,

Who's Back: RB Terry Perry, RB Karlos Whitakker, TE Brian Blake, TE Xavier Fowler, OC Sean Woolford, WR Arlandus Hood, LB Endor Cooper, LB Robert Parker, P Patrick Wolff.

Historical Fact: The Bison last appeared in the FCS playoffs, falling to finalist Marshall in the opening round of 1993. The last postseason appearance for Howard was the 1996 Heritage Bowl.

Last Season: Howard finished 4-7 overall and 2-6 within the MEAC in Coach Bailey's first season in Washington, D.C.

This Season: The Bison return 14 starters in the hopes achieving their first winning season since 2004 (6-5).

Morgan State Bears

Location: Baltimore, MD.

Stadium: Hughes Stadium at Earl C. Banks Field (10,000).

Head Coach: Donald Hill-Eley (30-37 @ MSU & overall, 7th Season @ MSU)

Who's Gone: RB Chad Simpson, DL Bryan Wilson, OL James Key, DT Anthony Young, WR Rodrick Wolfe.

Who's Back: OL Dwayne Delaney, OC Nathan Soto, QB Mario Melton, LB Jerrell Guyton, WR Edwin Baptiste.

Historical Fact: The Bears last post-season appearance was in 1979 as a DII member, which was a loss to Alabama A&M.

Last Season: Running back Chad Simpson won the MEAC Offensive Player of the Year honors but the Bears finished just with a 5-6 record.

This Season: Coach Hill-Eley hopes to be better in close games this year as each of the six losses a year ago were by eight or less points.

Norfolk State Spartans

Location: Norfolk, VA.

Stadium: William "Dick" Price Stadium (30,000).

Head Coach: Pete Adrian (16-17 @ NSU, 52-54-1 overall, 4th Season @ NSU)

Who's Gone: OL Jason Kressen, LB Marquez Davis, RB Daryl Jones, TE Dexter Bailey, LB Maguell Davis,

Who's Back: DB Terrell Whitehead, WR Jamar Johnson, DL Dennis Marsh, DB Don Carey, P/K Justin Castellat,

Historical Fact: Dick Price, in the Spartans' stadium name, was the winningest football coach in NSU history. He compiled a 61-42-4 record over 10 seasons (1974-83), which included three of NSU's four DII CIAA championships.

Last Season: The Spartans finished the season at 8-3 overall but were overlooked for the FCS postseason. One loss was to FBS Rutgers and the other two were each seven point losses to MEAC champion Delaware State and Howard.

This Season: NSU hopes to continue the winning ways seen last year with the hopes of getting to the playoffs for the first time as a FCS member and second time overall.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State Aggies

Location: Greensboro, NC.

Stadium: Aggie Stadium (21,500).

Head Coach: Lee Fobbs, Jr. (0-22 @ NCAT & overall, 3rd season @ NCAT).

Who's Gone: WR Andre Garth, FB Ortiz Green, WR/RS Michael Caldwell, DE Antonio Johnson.

Who's Back: RB Michael Ferguson, RB/RS David Robinson, QB Shelton Morgan, QB Herbert Miller, WR Chaz Dawson, RB/RS Quinton Cosby, LB Andre Thornton, DB Ihsan Shaheed, DB Michael Pace, DB Brandon Colbert, DL Kelvin Jackson, PK Eric Houston.

Historical Fact: The Aggies are 72-57-1 all-time at Aggie Stadium. They have had seven undefeated seasons since the stadium opened with the last undefeated season coming in 2003.

Last Season: NCAT went winless for a second straight season but four of the losses were by under a touchdown.

This Season: In Coach Fobbs' third season, he hopes to turn things around to the winning ways the school saw as recently as 2003 when they lost to Wofford in the opening round of the FCS playoffs.

South Carolina State Bulldogs

Location: Orangeburg, SC.

Stadium: Bulldog Stadium (22,000).

Head Coach: Oliver "Buddy" Pough (47-21 @ SCSU & overall, 7th season @ SCSU).

Who's Gone: OL James Lee, QB Cleveland McCoy, LB Dana Graydon.

Who's Back: RB Will Ford, OC Raymond Harrison, DL Cedric Lloyd, DB Markee Hamlin, QB Malcolm Long, QB DeWain Clark, WR Phillip Morris, WR Semaj Moody, LB Antwann Gamble, LB Tony White P Aaron Haire.

Historical Fact: South Carolina State was where NFL Hall of Famers Harry Carson, Deacon Jones, and Marion Motley attended college.

Last Season: The Bulldogs finished 7-4 overall last season and 6-2 for a tie for second in the MEAC. It was the eighth season in a row that resulted in a winning season.

This Season: SCSU hopes to ride the winning ways to the playoff for the first time under Coach Pough despite not having a losing season under him.

Winston-Salem State Rams

Location: Winston-Salem, NC.

Stadium: Bowman-Gray Stadium (18,000).

Head Coach: Kermit W. Blount (87-69-3 @ WSSU & overall, 16th Season @ WSSU).

Who's Gone: DE William Hayes, QB Monte Purvis, RB Jed Bines, DB Nathaniel Biggs, LB Thadeus Griffin.

Who's Back: RB Roderick Fluellen, OL Bennie Barbour, OL Joseph Blanks, OL Michael Helton, WR Brent Thomas, WR Lorenzo Barr, TE Jeremy Reaves, DB David Irizarry, DB DeRon Middleton, LB Juan Corders, LB Chedrick Marshall, DB Marvin Bohannon, DB Alex Chandler, P Jamaine Mack.

Historical Fact: The Rams last post-season game was in 2000 in the DII Pioneer Bowl—a 12-9 loss to Tuskegee.

Last Season: WSSU played its second FCS schedule after transitioning from DII in 2006. The Rams played all the MEAC teams but did not count in the standings where they finished with a 6-5 overall record and 5-3 against MEAC teams.

This Season: The Rams must replace 13 starters lost and only 15 starters return and again will play a full MEAC schedule but will not be eligible for the conference title—something they will not be eligible for until their DII transition is complete in 2010.

Missouri Valley Football Conference 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN West Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Youngstown State
2. North Dakota State
3. Northern Iowa
4. Southern Illinois
5. South Dakota State
6. Western Illinois
7. Illinois State
8. Missouri State
9. Indiana State

Offensive Player of the Year: Herb Donaldson, RB, Western Illinois
Defensive Player of the Year: Jason Williams, LB, Western Illinois

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Eric Sanders, QB, Northern Iowa

Sanders passed for 2,842 yards and 17 touchdowns on 237-of-315 passing in 2007. He completed an astonishing 75.2 percent of his passes as a senior and finished his career as the FCS' all-time completion percentage leader at 69.64 percent. Sanders was a first-team all-Gateway selection and was named the league's Offensive Player of the Year. He won 35 games as a starter for the Panthers in his career. He was also given an NFL opportunity with a free agent contract with the Detroit Lions.

* * *

As the old saying goes, the rich get richer and that is certainly true of the newly named Missouri Valley Football Conference—formally the Gateway Football Conference. The league announced a year ago that two new teams in North Dakota State and South Dakota State would join the conference in 2008 to make the league nine members deep. Including the addition of NDSU and SDSU, the MVFC had five teams that finished in the 2007 Top 25 polls with Northern Iowa, Southern Illinois, and Youngstown State joining the two new members. And to start the 2008 season, those five teams are ranked in the top 25 AGS poll, including SIU, UNI, and NDSU in the Top 10.

The two new teams come to the Missouri Valley after spending their entire DI from DII transition in the Great West Football Conference. SDSU defeated NDSU in the two teams last ever GWFC contest to win that league's crown. NDSU won the title in 2006 and has finished the past two seasons with 10-1 records.

All is not rosy, however, for the Missouri Valley even with all the top rated teams. The league had two of the four 2007 FCS playoff seeds but both failed to make the national championship game. Northern Iowa was the top seed but was defeated in the quarterfinals by Delaware. That same Delaware team defeated fourth seeded Southern Illinois the next week in the semi-final round. Those two teams were the lone 2007 playoff teams from the league but with it now at nine members, getting three teams into the postseason will likely be a near given year after year—especially when the NCAA moves to 20 Division I playoff teams in 2010.

The race this year will expectedly have the two new Dakota teams involved but should also again have Youngstown State, Northern Iowa, and Southern Illinois near the top of the standings. Western Illinois, Illinois State and Missouri State could also potentially finish in the top half of the standings as these three squads look like they will field better teams this year than in the past.

Youngstown State finished 2007 with a 7-4 record but the Penguins lost three Missouri Valley games each by under a touchdown to Southern Illinois, Northern Iowa, and Illinois State. This year, Coach Jon Heacock's team will have 16 total returning starters, including special teams, to have an abundance of talent to hopefully get over the hump in close games to increase the win total. Plus, the Penguins get UNI and SIU at home this year, along with newcomer NDSU so their toughest opponents within the Missouri Valley will be at their home—the so called "Ice Castle" of Stambaugh Stadium.

YSU returns the most talent on offense where eight starters are back on a team that scored over 27 points per game. YSU, however, will need to find a new quarterback after the graduation of Tom Zetts. It appears junior Todd Rowan will take over the reins under center. He will have leading 2007 receiver senior Ferlando Williams (42 receptions, 499 yards, 2 TD) back to find down field. He will have another All-American candidate in tight end Derrick Bush (30 receptions, 320 yards, 1 TD) as well for a receiving target. Upfront, the new quarterback will have four offensive linemen to protect him—headed by All-Missouri Valley performers; seniors, guard Brad Samsa and tackle Tyler Booth.

The running game, which has been the bread and butter of the team recently, will return seniors; tailback Kevin Smith and blocking fullback Ben Lane. Smith led the Penguins in rushing a year ago with 610 yards and touchdowns with 10. He also added 80 yards receiving with another touchdown. Lane added five receptions for 36 yards and a touchdown but mainly opened holes for the tail backs.

The YSU defense returns just five starters but welcomes back All-American senior defensive tackle Mychal Savage to head the line after recording 43 total tackles and 4.5 sacks. He will have fellow All-MVFC tackle sophomore Torrance Nicholson (42 tackles) joining him on the line. The linebacker group will be

headed by junior Roshon Simons (55 tackles). The secondary will have cornerbacks senior DeAngelo Wilson (39 tackles, 2 INT) and senior Jarvis Richards (53 tackles, 1 INT) to lead that group.

The Penguins also have two dependable kickers in senior place kicker Brian Palmer and junior punter Ben Nowicki. Palmer made 14-of-15 of his field goal attempts, while Nowicki averaged 37.1 yards per kick with 19 kicks inside the opponent's 20-yard line.

Missouri Valley newcomer **North Dakota State** hopes to do some initial damage within their new league and potentially on a national basis. The Bison are coming off two straight 10-1 seasons while playing in their former home of the Great West Football Conference. The Bison garnered FCS attention in their transition with three FBS wins over Ball State, Central Michigan, and Minnesota in the past two years. Coach Craig Bohl's team will return 15 starters in the hopes making a playoff run in their first eligible season.

The biggest question on the Bison offense will be the quarterback position. Gone is four-year starter and two-time GWFC Offensive Player of the Year Steve Walker. His replacement is set to be junior Nick Mertens, who saw limited action a year ago as Walker's backup but did manage to throw for a touchdown in 14 pass attempts. Fortunately for NDSU, Mertens will have a number of key, returning components around him. The running game will be headed by senior running back Tyler Roehl, who rushed for 1,431 yards and 21 touchdowns a year ago. Roehl will have capable backup junior Pat Paschall (530 yards, 5 TD) to give NDSU a good change of pace rusher.

Mertens will also enjoy the top six receivers statistically back to further aid his disposal. Heading the group is senior wide out Kole Heckendorf (48 receptions, 766 yards, 6 TD) and senior tight end Jerimiah Wurzbacher (23 receptions, 321 yards, 5 TD). The offensive line will lose three starters but the newcomers will be directed by senior center Zach Harrington and junior All-GWFC tackle Keith Buckman.

The NDSU defense also loses a Great West Player of the Year and NFL draft pick in linebacker Joe Mays but even with this loss, the linebacker group should be the strength of the group that gave up just 329 yards per game. The linebacker group will rely on two All-GWFC performers in seniors Ramone Humber (team second high 72 tackles) and Mike Maresh (53 tackles) to head the group. The Bison line will be led by All-GWFC senior defensive end Joe Lardinois (team high 7 sacks). The secondary also has its share of performers to lead that group in safeties; senior Nick Schommer (team high 4 INT, 64 tackles) and junior Kyle Belmont (61 tackles).

The Bison special teams lose a big weapon in NFL hopeful punter Mike Dragosavich (replacement to be sophomore John Prelvitz) but returns junior

place kicker Shawn Bibeau, who made 14-of-19 field goal attempts. The Bison are also hopeful of the return of kick returner Shamen Washington, who injured his knee in spring ball. Washington returned a kickoff for a touchdown a year ago.

Last year's MVFC champion **Northern Iowa** were the first undefeated team in the league's history for a regular season. The Panthers, as mentioned above, lost in the second round of the playoffs, however, to finalist Delaware. Coach Mark Farley will hope to stop the run of not making the playoffs the year after they participated, which started 2001—odd calendar years the Panthers have played and even years they have stayed home. In fact, the odd years UNI has won or shared the Missouri Valley title since that same 2001 season. Putting an even bigger damper to this trend, UNI will have tough six road games against SIU and YSU and will also need to overcome playing at Top 25 FBS Brigham Young to open the season.

The Panthers offense returns six starters but loses Missouri Valley Player of the Year Eric Sanders at the quarterback position. Sanders finished second in the Walter Payton Award balloting—the national award for the top offensive performer. Replacing Sanders appears to be junior Pat Grace, who has seen little action in his two prior seasons in Cedar Falls but did manage to throw a touchdown on seven attempts and rushed for three more in 2007. Grace will have leading wide receiver senior Johnny Gray back after he caught 70 balls for 910 yards and five touchdowns in 2007. The new signal caller will also have a dependable second wide out in fellow senior Victor Williams (40 receptions, 510 yards, 5 TD).

UNI should also have a solid ground game with the return of All-MVFC running back Corey Lewis for his senior season. He rushed for 1,513 yards and 16 touchdowns and should also aid the new quarterback as he caught 54 passes last year for another 642 yards. Sophomore fullback Ryan Mahaffey showed little statistically but was an All-MVFC honorable mention performer for his blocking. The offensive line will miss four starters including two NFL draft picks in Chad Rinehart and Brandon Keith and will look to lone returning starter senior guard Bob Swift to the leader upfront for the young group.

The Panther defense was another team strength in 2007 after giving up under 17 points per game. The defensive squad should again be strong with seven of last year's performers back. Like the offense, however, the Panthers will need to replace a Missouri Valley Player of the Year on this side of the ball in linebacker Brannon Carter. Senior De'Veon Harris will look to take over the linebacker leadership role after recording 87 tackles with seven for a loss a year ago. Junior defensive end James Ruffin will head the line after being named to the All-MVFC squad for his 52 tackles and eight for a loss performance. The secondary will be have three seniors returning to the lineup, including All-MVFC second team corner back Darrell Lloyd (52 tackles, 3 INT).

Last year's Missouri Valley runner up was **Southern Illinois** and competed in the playoffs for the FCS current second best fifth (Montana is only school longer) straight season. This recent Saluki success, however, cost them their head coach after former coach Jerry Kill accepted the same position at FBS Northern Illinois. His replacement is former North Dakota Coach Dale Lennon. Lennon led the Sioux, who are now in their first year transitioning to FCS from DII, to a 90-24 record including a Division II national championship in 2001 and another championship game appearance in 2003. Fans and SIU leaders hope that Lennon can get that far for the first time since SIU won the FCS title in 1983. This year's team will have just 12 starters back from a team that was one of the final four playing so Lennon will need some younger players to step up to keep the playoff streak ongoing.

Like the first three Missouri Valley title contenders, SIU will need to find a new quarterback after Nick Hill exhausted his eligibility. Last year's backup in sophomore Joe Allaria looked to be the heir apparent and saw considerable action in a backup role a year ago in the Missouri Valley's highest scoring team (37.9 ppg)—throwing for 106 yards and rushing for 188 yards and a touchdown. He has been pressed, however, by fellow sophomore Chris Dieker in spring ball and both are basically even on the depth chart going into fall camp. Senior Larry Warner will likely be the top running back behind the new quarterback. Warner was the backup behind graduated John Randle but still rushed for 525 yards and five touchdowns. Junior Rick Burgess will aid the running game as well from his full back position. He was named to the All-MVFC second squad after scoring four touchdowns (3 receiving, 1 rushing).

The new quarterback will have a dependable tight end to find down field in junior Ryan Kernes, who was named to the second team All-MVFC after 268 receiving yards and five touchdowns a year ago. The men upfront will see three of the four returning starters back that achieved All-MVFC status in junior tackle Darren Marquez, senior guard Aaron Lockwood, and junior guard Shawn Smith.

The Saluki defense will be the more experienced side of the ball with eight returning starters. The group will be headed by two All-MVFC second team junior linebackers in Chauncey Mixon and Brandin Jordan. Mixon was the leading Saluki tackler last year with 118 tackles, while Jordan was third on the team with 97. Other returning defensive All-MVFC performers that should help lead the team that allowed just over 17 points per game include senior defensive end James Cloud, who tied for the team lead with Mixon for tackles for a loss with 14.5 and senior free safety Clayton Johnson, who tied for the team lead in interceptions with Jordan.

The defense should also be aided by the special teams with All-MVFC junior Scott Ravanese punting. He led the Missouri Valley in punting with a 45.8 yard per punt average.

South Dakota State is the other new Missouri Valley team this year after winning the Great West Football Conference title a year ago. It was the Jackrabbits first conference title since winning the Division II North Central Conference title in 1963. SDSU finished 7-4 overall and won seven of their last eight games after losing their first three. In fact, SDSU has started 0-3 for two years in a row and then finished their season at 7-4. This year, SDSU faces FBS Iowa State on the road and Youngstown State and Western Illinois at home as their first three games and hopes to get at least one win in that group. Coach John Stiegelmeier's team returns 12 starters from a year ago in the hopes to try to win their new conference's title.

The Jackrabbit offense was very prolific last year in scoring over 34 points per game. Unlike the top contenders, SDSU returns their quarterback in senior Ryan Berry, who threw for 2,132 yards and 19 touchdowns a year ago. He will have All-Great West second team senior receiver JaRon Harris as his main target downfield. Harris led the team with 40 receptions for 664 yards and seven touchdowns despite being slowed late in the season by injury. Berry will be protected by three new offensive linemen but those new players will be guided by two All-GWFC performers in seniors; center Kevin Robling and guard Nick Flesner. Sophomore Kyle Minett will be the main running back after the graduation of All-GWFC Cory Koenig. Minett rushed for 476 yards and five touchdowns in his backup role a year ago.

The SDSU defense is where Coach Stiegelmeier hopes to have an improvement after his team gave up over 378 yards per game in 2007. Heading this year's group is a trio of returning junior All-GWFC performers. Defensive end Danny Batten tallied 12 tackles for loss and 4.5 sacks among his 67 tackles. Linebacker Jimmy Rogers led the Great West with 110 tackles and also forced two fumbles and intercepted two passes as he made a successful transition from safety during the 2007 campaign. Fellow linebacker Chris Johnson finished second on both the team and in the GWFC with 106 tackles.

SDSU will also have some senior leadership in the defense with defensive tackle Eric Schroeder. He was a second-team All-GWFC selection despite leading the league with 13.5 tackles for loss and ranking third with a team-high 6 1/2 sacks. Schroeder also ranked in a tie for fourth place on the team with 68 tackles. Senior free safety Brock Campbell (68 tackles, 1 INT) is the lone returning starter in the secondary so he will need to provide leadership for this young group.

Western Illinois should be a team on the rise and has a number of key components back this year after finishing 6-5 in 2007. The Leathernecks return nine starters on each side of the ball, along with both kickers so there should be no lack of experience in Macomb. In fact, four different Leathernecks earned all-America awards a year ago and all four return this year. Ten All-Missouri Valley Conference performers return in total.

WIU's offense will be headed by senior running back Herb Donaldson, who finished the season as the nation's fifth-leading rusher, averaging 149.1 yards per game. He very well could be the Leathernecks all-time leading rusher should he rush for over 1,228 yards this year—something he has done the past two years. Senior fullback Javid Milton led block for Donaldson on many of his runs and was named to the All-MVFC squad for his efforts even though he had little statistically. Western Illinois is not only a rushing team, although they led the league in this statistic last year. Sophomore quarterback Matt Barr was the first Leatherneck freshman to start at quarterback since 1990 and earned a 5-5 record as a starter, matching the school record for most wins as a freshman in the process. Barr's leading down field target from last year is also back in senior All-MVFC Honorable Mention Carl Sims (45 receptions, 546 yards, 2 TD).

The Leatherneck defense will have even more All-Americans returning in linebacker Jason Williams and cornerback Patrick Stoudamire. Williams will be back for his senior season after he led the Missouri Valley in three defensive categories—sacks (8), tackles for loss (16.5) and forced fumbles (5) and he also ranked third in tackles (107). Stoudamire will be a junior this year after totaling 41 tackles and ranking fifth in the league with 9 passes defended. Overall WIU's defensive team ranked 22nd nationally in scoring defense and 20th in total defense. The defense also will have a good presence up front with All-MVFC senior defensive end Josh Galloway, who ranked third in the Missouri Valley amongst linemen with 4.3 tackles per game.

The Leatherneck scoring is almost automatic should the offense fail to score a touchdown within scoring range. All-American senior place kicker Taylor Rowan scored 85 points a year ago, which was the best scoring for any Missouri Valley kicker and was good enough for eighth place nationally. He is also is just six extra point successful tries from a FCS record.

Any other year **Illinois State** would be predicted much higher in the standings then seventh but as will likely be the case every year that a good team will finish low in the standings every year with the depth that the Missouri Valley possesses. The Redbirds finished 2007 4-7 overall but owned a 4-4 mark heading into week nine. ISU dropped their last three games, which were all against top-25 teams. This year's team returns 13 starters and hopes to increase from the four win total from a year ago.

The Redbirds will have to replace their quarterback on their offense. Senior Kevin Brockway enters this fall as the heir apparent to Luke Drone, who had been a three-time All-MVFC selection. Brockway has backed up Drone for the last three seasons, and his time on the job is minimal. Brockway completed his only pass attempt in 2007 and enters the 2008 season with five pass attempts in his career. The new signal caller will have returning running back junior Geno Blow, who was ISU's leading rusher in 2007, before his season ended

prematurely with a fractured left hand. He finished as the Redbirds second leading running back with 776 yards and eight touchdowns. Upfront, seniors; guard Joe Niklasch and center Jonathan St-Pierre will head this group.

On the other side of the ball, the strongest area is the secondary with three of four starters returning, including two-time all-Missouri Valley selection and ISU's top returning tackler, Tom Nelson (86 tackles). The linebacker group must replace 2007 the MVFC's top tackler, Kye Stewart. To do that, former defensive end Brandon Wilson moves to a linebacker position. Wilson used the spring to adjust to the new position, after leading all ISU defensive linemen with 50 tackles in 2007.

Like Illinois State, **Missouri State** should be an improved team but falls into the eighth place prediction with so many top squads ahead of them but could very well finish higher. MSU made its biggest gain in a season win total in 19 years in 2007 as the Bears finished 6-5 after a 2-9 mark the previous campaign and hopes to make greater strides in 2008. The Bears return 16 starters from a team under now third year and Missouri Valley veteran Coach Terry Allen.

Missouri State's defense returns nine starters including All-MVFC Honorable Mention Roger Wright, who recorded 64 tackles and 4 pass breakups. The defense also will have two All-MVFC Newcomers back in sophomore safety Derek Miller (82 tackles, 1 INT) and senior defensive end Clayton Dickehut (39 tackles, 5 TFL). The linebacker group will be headed by MSU leading tackler Jeremy Dawson, who recorded 99 tackles and five tackles for a loss.

The Bear offense returns six starters with quarterback Cody Kirby leading the team after being named the MVFC Freshman of the Year in 2007. He played as a true freshman a year ago and started the last eight games of season to set Missouri State records for freshman passing attempts (246), completions (149), yards (1,742) and TDs (11). He also rushed for 218 yards and eight TDs, the most touchdowns by a Missouri State quarterback since the 1990 season. He will have All-MVFC tight end Clay Harbor as a main target after he recorded a team high 45 receptions for 645 yards and three touchdowns a year ago. The Bears also have two 2007 All-MVFC Newcomer linemen upfront in sophomore guard David Arkin and senior tackle Kev Vaughn Brown.

Indiana State hopes to finish out of the MVFC cellar for the first time since 2002. If the Sycamores hope to complete that task they will be doing it under new Coach Trent Miles, who coached previously at BCS Washington as a wide receivers coach for three years. He is not new to Terre Haute, however, as he was a member of the Indiana State in the early 1980s including the 1984 team that spent most of the season ranked as the top FCS team in the country. To turn the recent woes of his new team, which finished 2007 winless, he will have 13 starters returning to work with.

The Sycamore defense will be highlighted by All-MVFC Newcomer sophomore Darrius Middlebrooks at his safety position. He ranked 27th nationally and 3rd in the Missouri Valley Conference with an average of 10.22 tackles per game. Joining him in the secondary is junior Donye McCleskey, who recorded 58 tackles and had a team high three pass breakups.

The Sycamore offense will be anchored by All-MVFC Honorable Mention guard Jack Byrne on an offense that ranked 26th in the country a year ago. The Indiana State quarterback will likely be sophomore Charles Dowdell, who tallied four touchdowns and ten interceptions to go along with 623 passing yards. He also rushed for 363 yards and another touchdown and is the Sycamores leading passer and ground gainer returning.

* * *

Missouri Valley Games of the Week

Austin Peay @ North Dakota State, Aug. 28

This is the only FCS vs. FCS game on opening Thursday as the Missouri Valley newcomer Bison hope to defeat the OVC Governors.

Youngstown State @ South Dakota State, Sept. 6

The Jackrabbits host their first ever MVFC game. A year ago, SDSU lost a non-conference matchup at the Penguins. Will the setting make a difference this year?

Western Illinois @ South Dakota State, Sept. 13

SDSU for the second straight week gets a rematch of a team that they lost to a year ago. Will this game go any better than the overtime loss at Macomb?

North Dakota State @ Youngstown State, Sept. 20

The Bison get their first Missouri Valley test at the tough Penguins.

Northern Iowa @ Southern Illinois, Sept. 27

Last year's Missouri Valley game of the year with the top two teams in the standings. Will this year be another classic in Carbondale?

Southern Illinois @ North Dakota State, Oct. 4

New Saluki Coach Lennon gets a home coming to his home state. Will he and his Salukis go home happy?

Youngstown State @ Missouri State, Oct. 11

This early season game for the Bears against the Penguins will likely determine if they are contenders.

North Dakota State @ Northern Iowa, Oct. 18

Much of last year these were the top two teams in the polls between the Bison and Panthers. This game just may decide who goes to the postseason

Northern Iowa @ Youngstown State, Oct. 25

YSU gave the Panthers their toughest regular season game last year and it was in Cedar Falls. Will their home of the Ice Castle help put the Penguins in the win column this year?

Northern Iowa @ Western Illinois, Nov. 1

UNI defeated the Leathernecks handedly last year in Macomb. WIU gets another home chance against the Panthers in this one.

Western Illinois @ Southern Illinois, Nov. 8

This directional battle of Illinois will likely determine who is still in the Missouri Valley race at the end of the season.

Illinois State @ Western Illinois, Nov. 15

The Redbirds hope to spoil WIU's party on this late date. Can the Leathernecks use their home field advantage to pull out their second matchup with an intrastate rival?

South Dakota State @ North Dakota State, Nov. 22

The past two Dakota Marker contests have had the winner win the Great West title. Will this year's winner win their new conference's title?

* * *

Team Capsules

Illinois State Redbirds

Location: Normal, IL

Stadium: Hancock Stadium (15,000)

Head Coach: Denver Johnson (45-46 @ ISU, 66-58 overall), 10th Season @ ISU

Who's Gone: QB Luke Drone, RB Rafael Rice, OT Brandon Joyce, LB Kye

Stewart, S Jesse Caesar.

Who's Back: OC Jonathan St-Pierre, DE Adam Blankenship, S Tom Nelson, TE

Kedric Meredith, LB/DE Brandon Wilson, DB Kelvyn Hemphill, WR Eyad Salem.

Historical Fact: ISU has produced at least one all-American player in 22 of its last 25 seasons. Over the last eight seasons, 30 players from 12 different positions have been honored. Kye Stewart was an all-America selection in 2007.

Last Season: For the sixth-straight season, Illinois State produced the Missouri Valley Football Conference's top tackler after Kye Stewart posted a league-best 131 tackles but the team finished just 4-7 overall.

This Season: The team hopes to improve from last year's down season after the participated in the postseason in 2005.

Indiana State Sycamores

Location: Terre Haute, IN

Stadium: Memorial Stadium (15,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Trent Miles (0-0 @ ISU & Overall), 1st Season @ ISU

Who's Gone: LB Shonda Faulkner, TB Bryan McCulley, OT Jacob Carpenter, DB Ryan Patrick.

Who's Back: QB Reilly Murphy, DB Darius Middlebrooks, OG Jack Byrne, DB Donye McCleskey.

Historical Fact: Indiana State started off the 2006 campaign with a valiant effort at Purdue. Although the Sycamores fell to the Big Ten Boilers by a count of 60-35, Indiana State trailed just 26-21 at the half, and were within five points (33-28) late in the third quarter.

Last Season: The Sycamores won a game for the first time in two years and 24 games when ISU defeated Missouri State last November. Unfortunately for ISU, that was their lone win.

This Season: With 12 starters returning on offense and defense, the Sycamores and Coach West hope to win more this season.

Missouri State Bears

Location: Springfield, MO

Stadium: Plaster Field (16,300 capacity)

Head Coach: Terry Allen, (2-9 @ MSU, 97-68 Overall) 2nd Season @ MSU

Who's Gone: RB Gerald Davis, WR Jeremy Nicholson, OC David Tillman, LB Jeron Poole, P Nathan Stokes.

Who's Back: TE Clay Harbor, OG David Arkin, QB Cody Kirby, OT Kevaughn Brown, TB Kingjack Washington, DE Clayton Dickehut, CB Derek Miller.

Historical Fact: Quarterback Cody Kirby was the Missouri Valley's Freshman of the Year in 2007—the first Bear to ever win the award.

Last Season: Missouri State finished 6-5 in its second season under Allen and the Bears tied for fifth place in the Missouri Valley after finishing just 2-9 in Allen's first season.

This Season: Allen hopes to continue to improve on the six win total from a season ago in his third season as the head coach.

North Dakota State Bison

Location: Fargo, ND

Stadium: Fargodome (18,700 Capacity)

Head Coach: Craig Bohl (43-11, NDSU & Overall) 6th Season @ NDSU

Who's Gone: QB Steve Walker, OT Nate Safe, LB Joe Mays, P Mike Dragosavich.

Who's Back: RB Tyler Rohel, LB Ramon Humber, WR Kole Heckendorf, TE Jerimiah Wurzbacher, LB Mike Maresh, S Nick Schommer, OC Zach Harrington.

Historical Fact: NDSU has won eight national titles in their history - the last being at the DII level in 1990.

Last Season: The Bison finished their second straight 10-1 season and included two FBS wins over Minnesota and Central Michigan but lost their last game to SDSU to lose the GWFC crown.

This Season: NDSU is now playoff eligible and hopes to return to the postseason for the first time since a DII appearance in 2000.

Northern Iowa Panthers

Location: Cedar Falls, IA

Stadium: UNI-Dome (16,324 capacity)

Head Coach: Mark Farley (63-25 @ UNI & Overall), 8th Season @ UNI

Who's Gone: QB Eric Sanders, OT Chad Rinehart, OT Brandon Keith, LB

Brannon Carter, RB Darian Williams.

Who's Back: WR/RS Johnny Gray, RB Corey Lewis, WR Victor Williams, DT

Mark Huygens, NG Chuck Kinney, DE James Ruffin, PK Billy Hallgren.

Historical Fact: UNI reached the NCAA I-AA national championship game for the first time in school history in 2005. The Panthers have reached the I-AA semifinals on now six occasions.

Last Season: The Panthers had a great regular season in finishing undefeated but as the #1 playoff seed, UNI lost in the quarterfinals to finish somewhat disappointing.

This Season: Coach Farley's team hopes to reverse the even numbered year curse of not making the playoffs and make it back to the postseason in 2008.

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

Location: Brookings, SD

Stadium: Coughlin-Alumni Stadium (15,000 Capacity),

Head Coach: John Stiegelmeier (61-47, SDSU & Overall), 11th Season @ SDSU

Who's Gone: OL Mitch Erickson, TE Chris Wagner, RB Cory Koenig, LB Cory Koenig, PK Parker Douglass.

Who's Back: LB Jimmy Rogers, DE Danny Batten, WR JaRon Harris, QB Ryan

Berry, OC Kevin Robling, DL Eric Schroeder, LB Chris Johnson, OL Nick

Flesner, RB Kyle Minett.

Historical Fact: Before 2007, SDSU last won a conference title in 1963—a DII North Central Conference title.

Last Season: After starting the season with three losses, SDSU won seven of their last eight to finish 7-4 and won the Great West Football Conference with a 4-0 record in their last season as a GWFC member.

This Season: The Jacks hope to win their new conference of the Missouri Valley to make it two conference titles in a row.

Southern Illinois Salukis

Location: Carbondale, IL

Stadium: McAndrew Stadium (17,324 capacity)

Head Coach: Dale Lennon (0-0 @ SIU, 90-24 Overall) 1st Season @ SIU

Who's Gone: QB Nick Hill, OT Darren Marquez, RS Craig Turner, RB John Randle, WR Justin Allen.

Who's Back: DE James Cloud, S Clayton Johnson, P Scott Ravanese, FB Rick Burgess, OG Aaron Lockwood, LB Brandin Jordan, LB Chauncey Mixon, TE Ryan Kernes.

Historical Fact: The Salukis have made the postseason six times in their football history with a 7-5 overall record.

Last Season: SIU was the fourth seed in the national playoff but lost to unseeded Delaware in the semi-final round but the success cost them their former Coach Jerry Kill to FBS Northern Illinois.

This Season: New Coach Lennon hopes to continue the Saluki playoff streak, which stands at six straight seasons of play currently, but will have to do so with 11 starters lost.

Western Illinois Leathernecks

Location: Macomb, IL

Stadium: Hanson Field (15,000 capacity)

Head Coach: Don Patterson (61-42 @ WIU & career), 10th year @ WIU

Who's Gone: OG Drew Sweeney, LB Jerome Bennett,

Who's Back: RB Herb Donaldson, WR Carl Sims, LB Jason Williams, DE Josh Galloway, FB Javid Milton, PK Taylor Rowan, CB Patrick Stoudamire, CB Robert Hodges, DE Victor Visoky, LB Travis Cherry.

Historical Fact: Coach Patterson will enter the 2008 season four wins shy of becoming Western Illinois' all-time winningest coach.

Last Season: Herb Donaldson rushed for 1,491 yards in 2007 to help lead the Leathernecks to a 6-5 record.

This Season: WIU returns nine starters on each side of the ball in the hopes of getting back to the playoffs for the first time since 2003.

Youngstown State Penguins

Location: Youngstown, OH

Stadium: Arnold D. Stambaugh Stadium (20,630 capacity)

Head Coach: Jon Heacock (50-31 YSU & Overall) 8th Season @ YSU

Who's Gone: QB Tom Zetts, FS Dorian Chenault, LB James Terry, LB Jeremiah Wright.

Who's Back: OG Brad Samsa, OT Tyler Booth, TE Derrick Bush, WR Ferlando Williams, DT Mychal Savage, DT Torrance Nicholson, PK Brian Palmer, P Ben Nowicki.

Historical Fact: YSU has won four national titles and finished second twice in their FCS history.

Last Season: The Penguins missed the playoffs after making the postseason in 2006. The Penguins just missed the playoffs by going 7-4 overall and had several close losses.

This Season: YSU hopes to get back to the postseason this year and may have a good chance after losing just nine total starters this year.

Northeast Conference 2008 Preview

By Charles Burton, CSN Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Albany
2. Monmouth
3. Central Connecticut State
4. Wagner
5. Duquesne
6. Robert Morris
7. St. Francis
8. Sacred Heart

Players of the Year

Offense: RB David McCarty, Albany, Jr.

Defense: DE Robert Brown, Wagner, Sr.

Biggest Shoes To Fill:

Wagner's Special Teams Unit: Al Phillips, KR/CB, Jason Butler, PR/RB, Piotr Czech, K/P, Tyler Linehan, LS

Some coaches prefer to rest their standout players during punts, kickoffs and field goals, but Wagner head coach Walt Hameline didn't subscribe to that philosophy in 2007. Three standouts (and one unsung hero) made media folks think about calling the Seahawks' special teams what they really were – extraordinary teams. Tyler Linehan's long snapping had a lot to do with Piotr Czech's success punting (averaging more than 40 yards per punt) and kicking (an amazing 16/19 on field goals, and the only three misses coming beyond 40 yards). And the incredible talent of RB Jason Butler on offense (1,713 yards rushing, 12 TDs) and CB Al Phillips on defense (37 tackles, 7 interceptions, 11 pass breakups) translated into a strong return game as well: together, the duo would amass 870 return yards and score a touchdown. It's not just one of these players that will be missed on special teams – Seahawk fans will sorely miss all four athletes, two of whom will be on NFL rosters this summer.

* * *

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Albany's first NEC championship since 2003, and its first appearance in the "Gridiron Classic" were great achievements for head coach Bob Ford's Great Danes, but their 49-14 domination of Central Connecticut State on the last weekend of the year hasn't been the talk of the off-season.

Duquesne's move in 2008 to the NEC (from the now-defunct MAAC), solidifying the conference by expanding the league to eight teams and adding a program

that has been a nonscholarship football powerhouse, also has been pushed to the background.

Even the announcement that Bryant is joining the NEC, and will compete for a NEC football championship in 2011 has been dwarfed by the news on April 26th, a day when NEC coaches and athletics directors might just have been whistling that famous 1967 tune 'R-E-S-P-E-C-T' by Aretha Franklin.

In a league that has felt more like Rodney Dangerfield in its quest for respect; the NEC received what it had been asking for: an expansion of the FCS playoffs and an autobid starting in 2010.

It was a change that appeared inevitable once the NEC voted to become a limited-scholarship football league (as opposed to a limited need-based aid league) starting in the 2006 season. With a commitment to increasing the number of scholarships to 45 starting in 2009, it looked more like a playoff-eligible conference such as the OVC instead of nonscholarship schools like the Pioneer Football League.

Albany head coach Bob Ford told the Albany Times-Union that he was extremely "excited for the kids who play at this level." For the first time, his Great Danes (and the other teams of the NEC) have a clear path to an automatic bid to the highly prized place in the FCS playoffs, even in 2008 and 2009. (The NEC champion also could automatically qualify for the playoffs as an at-large team this year if they meet the difficult criteria: eight victories, at least two triumphs against autobid conferences, and be ranked 16th or higher. Given these restrictions, only Albany, Central Connecticut State and Monmouth have a chance to make the playoffs automatically from the NEC this year – however, the NEC winner also could qualify as an at-large team independent of these automatic requirements.

Monmouth coach Kevin Callahan, president of the FCS Coaches executive committee, agreed as well to the Asbury Park (N.J.) Press. "This playoff expansion and access to the playoffs has been our No. 1 agenda for the past five years," he said. "I can stand in front of our team on Monday and say we have a shot to get to the playoffs. What we do with that chance is up to us."

What will the **Albany Great Danes** do with their chance? The defending NEC champions, they certainly have a chance to beat two teams from an autobid conference – they play UMass, Delaware, Hofstra, and New Hampshire of the CAA, all on the road – but with the games being in effect playoff games in September, how will Albany stand up? Despite their brutal out-of-conference stretch, the Great Danes still feel like the team to beat in the NEC portion of their schedule with the league's leading rusher returning (RB David McCarty) and the core of one of the NEC's best defenses (led by LB Justin Brancaccio) and a starting secondary that returns intact in 2008. They boast outstanding home

games later in the year, with CCSU, St. Francis, Monmouth and Wagner making the trip up north to University Field for key NEC games.

The **Monmouth Hawks** are another team that can automatically qualify for the FCS post-season – but they have to beat the two CAA teams on their schedule. One game is on the road at Rhode Island, and the other takes place at home at friendly Kessler Field in West Long Branch, N.J. (against Maine). Despite their 4-6 record last year, the Hawks lose only four starters to graduation so they look poised to make a serious run at the NEC title and – if the stars align perfectly – a possible automatic playoff bid. RB David Sinisi, the third-best rusher in the NEC last year, and experienced CB Ayo Falae will headline a team that will be difficult to beat. At home, the Hawks will play pivotal NEC games against St. Francis, CCSU and Sacred Heart.

The other team that potentially could qualify for an automatic postseason playoff bid is **Central Connecticut State**. Similar to Monmouth, it would have to be perfect on the road against Delaware State (out of the MEAC) and North Dakota State (in the newly christened Missouri Valley Conference). Losing all-league C Ryne Nutt from its 6-5 squad from last year will be a difficult hurdle to overcome, but junior college transfer QB Hunter Wanket hopes to pick up where QB Ryan Holmes left off and DE Ernie Greywacz should continue his ascent as one of the top defensive players in the NEC. September will be a big month for the Blue Devils at home, where they face off against future NEC foe Bryant and will play in the first “Harmony Classic” against FCS independent North Carolina Central. Later in the year, CCSU hosts Wagner, Duquesne and St. Francis in key NEC battles.

The **Wagner Seahawks** won't be a surprise as they were in 2007. Coming off a winless run in NEC play, the Seahawks completed a remarkable turnaround to finish 7-4 and came close to winning the NEC title last year. Though CB Al Phillips and P/K Piotr Czech will be on NFL rosters in August, master disruptor DE Robert Brown does return from the NEC's top-rated defense and QB Matt Abbey returns with another year of experience. Local independent rival Iona and future NEC foe Bryant visit picturesque Wagner Stadium this fall, while Monmouth, Robert Morris and Duquesne also make the trip to New York City to take on the Seahawks.

Welcome to the NEC, **Duquesne Dukes**. Coming off a mind-boggling 10 MAAC championships in 12 years, you would think it will be near-impossible for the Dukes to repeat that feat in the NEC during the next 12 years. Still, don't believe that Duquesne will be out of the NEC title race just because they were a nonscholarship team for so many years: Historically, they have winning records against Sacred Heart (2-1), St. Francis (29-5), and Robert Morris (5-4), and only two of those losses occurred since 2000. With Michigan State transfer QB Connor Dixon competing for the starting spot with QB Kevin Romach, and LB Nathan Totino anchoring the defense, Dukes fans finally will be able to see

where they stand in the NEC echelon. Duquesne opens up the NEC schedule at home against St. Francis at Rooney Field in Pittsburgh, while an interesting game against Dayton of the Pioneer Football League, the team that beat Albany in last year's postseason "Gridiron Classic," looms the following week. Other big NEC home games include contests against Albany, Sacred Heart and Monmouth.

Pegged as a preseason darkhorse in 2007, the **Robert Morris Colonials** instead slumped to a 4-6 record as their offense struggled mightily in the second half of the season. Defensively, the Colonials are solid with players such as DE Mark Szymanski returning (who was second in the NEC in tackles for loss last year with 13) , but QB Eric Cwalinski will have to restore the magic offensive touch if they hope to compete for a NEC title. Morehead State of the Pioneer Football League and Bucknell of the Patriot League make the trip to Joe Walton Stadium in Moon Township in intriguing out-of-conference games, while NEC games against Monmouth, Duquesne, CCSU and Albany will prove stern tests, too.

The **St Francis Red Flash** look to build on winning three of their last four in 2007, and they hope that young players such as QB George Little (1,928 passing yards, 16 passing TDs) and NEC Defensive freshman of the Year LB Scott Lewis (126 tackles) continue to develop into NEC world-beaters. It won't be easy to break into the upper echelon of the NEC, however, but Red Flash coach Dave Opfar is expecting improvement in 2008. The Red Flash welcome independent Marist and future NEC member Bryant to DeGol Field in Loretto, and face off against Sacred Heart, Wagner and Robert Morris in interesting NEC league games.

As is St. Francis, the **Sacred Heart Pioneers** hope to build on youth, including last year's NEC Offensive Freshman Player of the Year QB Dale Fink (1,730 passing yards, 23 passing TDs). The Pioneers offense will put points on the board and be fun to watch, but can the Sacred Heart defense, led by SS Steve Young, keep enough points off the scoreboard to earn more victories? Two D-II schools in Assumption and Bentley headline the out-of-conference home schedule, while the Pioneers will be able to prove their mettle in the NEC on Campus Field in Fairfield against Robert Morris, Albany, Wagner and CCSU.

* * *

NEC Games To watch in 2008

Aug. 30, Albany at UMass.

Every year the Great Danes embark on an out-of-conference schedule that challenges them, and it doesn't get much bigger than facing last year's CAA co-champion the UMass Minutemen. This is the first of four extremely challenging CAA road games for Albany – New Hampshire, Hofstra, and Delaware are the

others. Three of those teams appeared in the FCS playoffs last year and the Blue Hens made it to the FCS Championship game.

Sept. 6, Central Connecticut State at North Dakota State.

An intriguing first-time matchup with the Blue Devils and Bison. NDSU will be playoff-eligible for the first time and competing in the powerful Missouri Valley Conference. It will be the first time CCSU has played in a domed stadium.

Sept. 13, Coastal Carolina at Monmouth.

This game features a matchup between two schools that will be in playoff-eligible conferences in 2010: Monmouth of the NEC and Coastal Carolina of the Big South. The Chanticleers will only be the second team from outside the Northeast to visit West Long Branch, N.J. during the regular season: Dayton of the Pioneer Football League was the first (in 1997 and 1998).

Sept. 20, North Carolina Central at Central Connecticut State.

The first "Harmony Classic" will take place, and is the first "Classic" game ever played involving a NEC school. This inaugural meeting between CCSU and independent NCC will take place at Willow Brook Park in New Britain, Conn. and will feature two incredible band performances. It should be a spectacular day.

Sept. 27, Monmouth at Robert Morris.

The Hawks will look for revenge for last year's narrow 20-17 loss at the hands of the Colonials, and both teams will be looking to start their NEC schedules strong. This will be the 14th meeting between the schools: Joe Walton's troops hold a narrow 7-6 series edge.

Oct. 4, Albany at Duquesne.

The Dukes will learn exactly where they stand as they face last year's NEC champions for the first time at Rooney Field. Duquesne and Albany have faced each other only once, and the Dukes are still waiting to score their first points against the Great Danes: in 2002, they fell 24-0 to Albany in the ECAC Bowl.

Oct. 11, Monmouth at Wagner.

Aside from the obvious league implications, this matchup could be especially interesting due to Wagner's rushing defense (No. 1 in the NEC in 2007) and Hawk RB David Sinisi (1,184 yards rushing and 17 TDs in 2007).

Oct.18, Albany at Sacred Heart.

The Great Danes can afford no slipups at University Field on this Saturday. It will be Albany's sixth road game on the year. Historically, the Great Danes have dominated the Pioneers: They lead the all-time series 8-2.

Oct. 25, Central Connecticut State at Monmouth.

Another game that looms large in the NEC race, the Blue Devils will look to avenge last year's 51-36 drubbing at the hands of the Hawks. CCSU will have to

do a better job containing Hawk RB David Sinisi: He scored 6 TDs in last year's meeting.

Nov. 1, Monmouth at Albany.

Only Albany's fourth home game on the year, the Great Danes will face a stern test with Monmouth. Last year, Albany's defense reigned supreme in a 21-3 domination. Albany RB David McCarty had an outstanding day with 167 yards and 1 TD.

Nov. 8, Duquesne at Wagner.

An intriguing late-season matchup at Staten Island that could have all sorts of implications for the NEC title race. Wagner is 2-1 in the overall series and undefeated at home against the Dukes: They've played once, with the Seahawks coming out on top 31-6 in a 1992 clash.

Nov. 15, Wagner at Albany.

The NEC regular season ends with another potential dandy with Wagner making the trip up to University Field. If Wagner hopes to win the NEC, it'll have to get a Great Dane monkey off its backs: Historically, Wagner is 1-10 against Albany.

Nov. 22, Bryant at St. Francis.

The Red Flash can test one of their future NEC members, the Bryant Bulldogs, who can learn how they hope to fare when they can compete for their first NEC football championship in 2011. It's the first meeting between these two schools.

* * *

NEC Team Capsules

Albany Great Danes

Location: Albany, N.Y.

Stadium: University Field (10,000)

Head Coach: Bob Ford (216-140-0, 216-140-0 overall)

Key Losses: FB Dan Beigel, WR Irani DeAraujo, OL Sam Pagano, DE Mark Sheehan, DT Michael Dungey, LB Colin Disch

Key Returners: QB Vinny Esposito, RB David McCarty, WR Mike Wall, WR/KR Daniel Bocanegra, OL Raphael Niguti, DT Tom Pandolf, LB Justin Brancaccio, LB Mark Peretore, LB/S Emerson Kinsey, FS Dave Casale, P Chris Lynch

Historical Note: Albany head football coach Bob Ford directed his 1997 team to a school-record 11-1 mark. For his efforts, he was named the Football Gazette Division II nonscholarship national Coach of the Year, and voted the top Region I coach by AFCA.

Last Year: Aggressive scheduling paid off for the Great Danes – after a 1-3 stretch against four FCS playoff autobid teams, Albany bulldozed through its NEC schedule and finished at 8-3, earning the NEC's bid to the Gridiron Classic.

This Year: Disch won't be easy to replace, but with RB David McCarty, LB Justin Brancaccio and an intact secondary returning, the Great Danes still appear as the Greatest in the NEC.

Central Connecticut State Blue Devils

Location: New Britain, Conn.

Stadium: Arute Field (3,500)

Head Coach: Jeff McInerney (14-8, 14-8 overall)

Key Losses: QB Ryan Holmes, FB Adrian Hull, C Ryne Nutt, DE Stephen Green, LB Chris Stimmel, LB Mike Satterwhite

Key Returners: QB Hunter Wanket, QB Aubrey Norris, RB Josh Vargas, RB JoJo Freeman, WR Nick Colagiovanni, DE Ernie Greywacz, LB Mike Cooke, SS Michael Bailey

Historical Note: Defensive back Dave Campo played on head coach William Loika's CCSU team in 1970. After graduation, he would start as a graduate assistant in New Britain and embark on a coaching career that would land him a place as head football coach of the NFL's Dallas Cowboys in 2000. Presently he has returned to the Cowboys as secondary coach after serving as an assistant around the NFL.

Last Year: Going into the final game of the year against Albany, the Blue Devils had the chance to earn a co-championship and be the NEC's representative in the Gridiron Classic. After its 49-14 spanking, however, CCSU would have to settle for second place and a 6-5 record.

This Year: Two big names from CCSU's triple-option offense are gone in QB Ryan Holmes and C Ryne Nutt, but a truckload of Blue Devils return such as RB JoJo Freeman and DE Ernie Greywacz. They should be in the thick of the NEC title race yet again.

Duquesne Dukes

Location: Pittsburgh, Pa.

Stadium: Arthur J. Rooney Field (4,500)

Head Coach: Jerry Schmitt (20-10, 20-10 overall)

Key Losses: WR Bruce Hocker, TE Calvin Gitter, C Matt Stansfield, DL Travis Decker, LB John Simmons, LB Derron Thomas, P David Kovalcik

Key Returners: QB Kevin Rombach, QB Connor Dixon, RB Greg Hough, FB Joe D'Orsie, WR Alex Robeson, OL J.T Stefanik, DL Mykol Gardiner, LB Greg Hough, LB Nathan Totino, DB Aaron Strader, K Mark Troyan

Historical Note: Duquesne's entrance to scholarship football in the NEC coincides with the 75th anniversary of the 10-1 Duquesne team of 1933 that beat Miami 33-7 in the "Palm Festival Game" (that ended up being the precursor to the modern-day Orange Bowl). That team was coached by Elmer F. Layden, one of the famous "Four Horsemen" of Notre Dame.

Last Year: The Dukes completed their victory lap in the MAAC with another co-championship and a 6-4 record. The only blemish on their final MAAC schedule was a 28-23 loss to Iona.

This Year: In their first year in the limited-scholarship NEC, Jerry Schmitt's troops should prove to be surprisingly competitive with a squad featuring RB Greg Hough and LB Nathan Totino. The biggest X-factor could be the presence of Dixon, who transferred from Michigan State to compete for the starting QB spot.

Monmouth Hawks

Location: West Long Branch, N.J.

Stadium: Kessler Field (4,600)

Head Coach: Kevin Callahan (89-62, 89-62 overall)

Key Losses: WR Adam San Miguel, OL Jonathan Dunn, DE Chris Reed, DE Vinnie Fonte

Key Returners: QB Brett Burke, RB David Sinisi, FB Marion Easley, WR Steve Dowens, TE John Nalbone, OL Nick LoCastro, DL Kevin Walsh, LB T.J. Cerezo, CB Ayo Falae, PK Fred Weingart

Historical Note: Monmouth head football coach Kevin Callahan guided his Hawks to winning records in three of his first four years as head coach: 1994 (7-2), 1995 (7-3), and 1996 (7-3, NEC Champions).

Last Year: A tough 0-4 start took Monmouth out of NEC title contention early, but the Hawks improved greatly by the end of the year going 4-2 during their last six games.

This Year: These Hawks appear more than ready to swoop to the NEC elite once again with so much talent returning in 2008. Will QB Brett Burke, RB David Sinisi, and CB Ayo Falae and the Hawks have what it takes to challenge the top dogs of the NEC?

Robert Morris Colonials

Location: Moon Township, Pa.

Stadium: Joe Walton Stadium (3,000)

Head Coach: Joe Walton (86-55-1, 86-55-1 overall)

Key Losses: WR Alvin Hill, WR/KR Mario Hines, OL Edgar Hunt, C John Steilner, DT Kelvern Grant, LB Jordan Howard, LB Chad Wengert, S James Kazil, CB Mike Niklos, PK Michael Walser

Key Returners: QB Eric Cwalinski, RB Myles Russ, WR Sherrod Evers, OL Joe Setticase, DE Mark Szymanski, LB Elias Navarro, FS John Wilson, P/K Nick Schirtzinger

Historical Note: Robert Morris assistant coach Dan Radakovich was head coach Joe Walton's first hire in 1993. This year, Radakovich announced his retirement and will have a legacy as one of the architects of the football program at Robert Morris.

Last Year: A 3-1 start and high hopes for their chances at the NEC championship quickly turned sour. The Colonials finished the year losing five of their last six as the offense sputtered.

This Year: The Colonials will be mourning the death of a former player, reserve DB Josh O'Bannon, who died while training for the Ohio National Guard. Joe Walton's crew remains an intriguing X-factor in the NEC race if QB Eric Cwalinski can regain the offensive touch. But with a standout LB unit lost to graduation, it

seems like a tall order to win the NEC championship unless players such as DE Mark Szymanski lift the defense.

Sacred Heart Pioneers

Location: Fairfield, Conn.

Stadium: Campus Field (4,000)

Head Coach: Paul Gorham (15-26, 15-26 overall)

Key Losses: RB Jason Payne, WR Corey Bundy, OL Justin Playdon, C Randy Steyert, DE Jason Richardson, DE/LB Richard Occhiuzzi, FS Jon Wilson

Key Returners: QB Dale Fink, RB/KR Evin Jones, WR Steve Tedesco, OL Ryan Arroyo, DE Bill O'Brien, LB Rich Marrone, SS Steve Young, FS Craig Lawson

Historical Note: Head coach Paul Gorham knows a little something about the

FCS Playoffs: in 2003, he was wide receivers coach and recruiting coordinator for a UMass Minuteman team that went to the playoffs in 2003 after a 10-2 regular-season record.

Last Year: An inconsistent young squad had a rough 3-8 season and a last-place finish in the NEC, but QB Dale Fink's NEC Offensive Freshman of the Year award from the NEC was a bright spot. In its four final games, the offense came alive by averaging more than 33 points a game.

This Year: Hoping to build on its good finish, Gorham is counting on QB Dale Fink to keep the offensive fireworks popping while he hopes the defense, led by SS Steve Young, can keep up. One thing's for sure: the Pioneer offense will be fun to watch.

St. Francis Red Flash

Location: Loretto, Pa.

Stadium: DeGol Field (3,500)

Head Coach: Dave Opfar (15-48, 15-48 overall)

Key Losses: RB Anthony Richards, TE Brandon Bishop, OL Jim Becker, DE Fehi Sevelo, LB Louis Beninato, LB Christian Shannon, FS Antawn Coleman

Key Returners: QB George Little, RB Calvin Williams, WR Antoine Rivera, DT Russel Fisher, LB Scott Lewis, LB Matthew Parker, CB Rickey Williamson, DB Siafa Lavala

Historical Note: Former head coach Art Martynuska, who was the first football coach the Red Flash hired when they reinstated club football in 1969, passed away in December 2007. He oversaw the growth of St. Francis football from a club sport to a Division III football school.

Last Year: In almost a mirror image of 2006, a winless Red Flash team rallied to win three of their last four to finish at 3-7. Victories against Sacred Heart and an impressive 23-20 triumph over Wagner were highlights.

This Year: The Red Flash look to enhance their 2007 record and fans hope the momentum of winning the last three out of four will carry into 2008. They boast two highly regarded young players of the NEC in QB George Little and LB Scott Lewis.

Wagner Seahawks

Location: Staten Island, N.Y.

Stadium: Wagner College Stadium (3,300)

Head Coach: Walt Hameline (186-97-2, 186-97-2 overall)

Key Losses: RB Jason Butler, TE Joe Kinard, LB Bryan Brand, LB Thomas Larsen, DB Al Phillips, K/P Piotr Czech, LS Tyler Linehan

Key Returners: QB Matt Abbey, RB Shane Smith, WR Lon Woods, OL Matthew Martin, DE Robert Brown, DL Adrian Adderly, LB Jason Haskins, S Tavares Lee

Historical Note: Incredibly, head coach Walt Hameline has endured only two losing seasons in his 26 years at the helm of the Seahawks: once in 2001 and again in 2006. In 1987, his Seahawks were Division III National Champions.

Last Year: The ABCs - CB Al Phillips, RB Jason Butler, and P/K Piotr Czech – schooled those who picked them to finish in the lower-echelon of the NEC.

Wagener went 7-4 and made a spirited run at Albany for the NEC title.

This Year: The Seahawks will see standout players on offense, defense and special teams graduate, but with QB Matt Abbey and DE Robert Brown returning, don't be surprised to see Walt Hameline's troops make another NEC title run in 2008.

Ohio Valley Conference 2008 Preview

By James D. Horne, CSN Inside the OVC Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish:

1. Jacksonville State
2. Eastern Illinois
3. Eastern Kentucky
4. Tennessee State
5. Austin Peay
6. Tennessee-Martin
7. Tennessee Tech
8. Southeast Missouri
9. Murray State

2008 Ohio Valley Conference Players of the Year

Offense: QB Ryan Perrilloux, Jacksonville State, Sr.

Defense: DE Pierre Walters, Eastern Illinois, Sr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill

Chris Fletcher, RB, Austin Peay

Fletcher was the Govs' offense last season and ended his career as the university's all-time leading rusher with 4,688 yards. Fletcher earned All-OVC First Team honors in Austin Peay's first year back in the OVC, after a 10-year absence, and gained a conference-leading 1,343 yards (122.1 ypg) and scored 14 touchdowns. The Clarksville, Tenn., native tallied 2,744 yards in his two seasons playing scholarship football. APSU returned to scholarship football in 2006 and rejoined the OVC in 2007.

* * *

The Ohio Valley Conference is still searching for an identity nationally.

For the second straight year the OVC sent two teams to the FCS playoffs, but it's been since 2000, when former member and now FBS resident Western Kentucky, that the league has won a playoff game.

Eastern Kentucky, which won championships in 1979 and 1982, has been in the playoffs the most out of any of the present league members making it every year from 1979-1995, again in 1997 and made its return last year after winning its 19th OVC championship. This year the Colonels welcome new coach Dean Hood into the fold to continue the tradition.

Eastern Illinois has seen its star rise this decade and earned an at-large playoff berth last season. The Panthers have won or shared four OVC titles since 2001,

their first outright championship. EIU shared it with Murray State in 2002, sat alone on top again in 2005 and shared it with Tennessee-Martin in 2006. But EIU is 1-6 all-time in the playoffs and hasn't won a playoff game since joining the league in 1996 (EIU topped Murray State in 1986, before falling to ECU in the quarterfinals).

All that should set the table for ECU and EIU being the class of the OVC again. But one name is expected to shake the league's foundations and lead a team that's never won a playoff game, though it won the league in 2003 and 2004, to the top of the chart.

The transfer of former LSU standout quarterback Ryan Perrilloux to **Jacksonville State** puts the Gamecocks in the driver's seat and should vault the Alabama team to its third conference crown. Jack Crowe's JSU squad went 6-5 overall and 5-3 in the OVC last year, which was good for a tie for third. JSU fell to ECU and EIU and was upset by Southeast Missouri in the season's last game.

One person usually a team doesn't make, but Perrilloux, a junior, has played on the game's biggest stage after being named the SEC Championship game MVP last year and helping LSU win the BCS National Championship. Perrilloux leads an offense that returns six starters, including leading rusher senior Daniel Jackson (130 att., 509 yds., 0 TDs), who also was the team's leading returning receiver (21 rec., 244 yds., 0 TDs). Junior wideout James Wilkerson (14 rec., 190 yds., 0 TDs) is expected to become one of Perrilloux's top targets. Sophomore fullback Alphonso Freeney and junior tight end Deonte Carter are the only other returning skill players. The rest are senior guard Al Jefferson senior tackle Keith Gergel and sophomore guard Tyler Ogletree.

If the offense is ever stagnant, senior All-OVC and third-team All-American kicker Gavin Hallford is there to put points on the board. Hallford led the FCS in field goals a game (2.0) and tied the OVC record for field goals made with 22. He needs 11 to set the all-time OVC career mark of 79 field goals.

Defensively, senior preseason All-OVC linebacker Marquise Elston (42 tackles, 3.0 sacks) leads a unit that also returns six starters. But the rest of the front seven is new, except for defensive tackles, senior Duane Tolbert and sophomore Brett Gloyd. Senior safety Kenny Walker and junior Carnell Clark, who both grabbed two interceptions, will provide leadership for JSU's young secondary.

Bob Spoo, the longest-tenured OVC coach, enters his 21st season as **Eastern Illinois** head man and is two years removed from not coaching in 2006 due to medical problems. He's looking for the team's third league title in the last four years. The second-place Panthers lone OVC loss in 2007 came against champion ECU, a 28-21 loss at home, and they went 8-4 overall before getting knocked out of the playoffs by Southern Illinois in the first round 30-11.

EIU returns seven on offense that averaged 29.4 points a game and will be led by junior quarterback Bodie Reeder (170-260, 65.4 pct., 1726 yds., 10 TDs, 5 INT). Senior runningback Travous Best is the Panthers' leading returning rusher, but he will be pushed by senior Norris Smith and sophomore Chevon Walker.

No matter who carries the ball, they'll be happy to run behind All-OVC guard Chaz Millard (6-foot-3, 305). He bolsters a line that welcomes back only one starter, 6-6, 318-pound guard Kevin Mahoney. It's a group that averaged 191.1 rushing yards a game in 2007.

Senior wideout Alicus Nozinor is the only receiver with major experience and was the second-leading receiver last season with 37 receptions for 367 yards with no touchdowns.

If the offense has trouble scoring, the Panthers' defense and their seven returning starters should help keep things close, especially because they bring back three All-OVC performers led by 2008 Preseason Player of the Year Pierre Walters, a 6-5, 261-pound senior lineman. Walters made 47 tackles and had six for loss, including three sacks.

Senior defensive tackle Jeff Sobol is the only other returning starter on the line. EIU's linebacking corps is all new and is expected to be led by senior James Larson.

Should the LBs get in trouble, they'll be backed up by an experienced secondary that features the team's top three returning tacklers, including All-OVC corner Rashad Haynes and rover Ke'Andre Sams. Haynes recorded 67 tackles and grabbed a team-high five interceptions in 2007. Sams collected 67 tackles and picked off two passes. Senior Adrian Arrington returns as the Panthers' top tackler with 72, but he'll be pushed by sophomore C.J. James. Junior free safety Seymour Lofton started there last year.

Sophomore punter Kevin Cook ranked fourth nationally averaging 44.5 yards a kick and was an honorable mention All-American.

Eastern Kentucky, the defending champion with an 8-0 OVC record and a 9-3 overall standing, made the biggest change when Dean Hood, a former EKV assistant, was hired to replace Danny Hope, who left for Purdue. Hood spent the last seven seasons at Wake Forest, after two seasons at Ohio University and being an assistant for the Colonels from 1994-98. Hood also coached at Fairmont (W.Va.) State College (1987-88), Colgate (1989) and helped Glenville (W.Va) State win the 1993 NAIA Championship in his third season.

Hood's transition should be easier thanks to the return of OVC preseason and reigning Player of the Year, senior quarterback Allan Holland, who led an offense that scored 31.8 points a game. Holland didn't start in the first game of 2007 but went on to throw for 1,990 yards on 178-for-296 passing with 14 scores and four

picks. But the Colonels' lost their two top rushers and three leading receivers so Holland will have to make up for a slightly inexperienced group that has five returning starters. Junior runningback C.J. Walker is the team's leading returning rusher having gained 271 yards on 40 carries with a TD. Holland is the second top runner returning with 212 yards on 75 attempts with four touchdowns.

Senior receiver Evan Cromer is the top pass catcher coming back, with 25 receptions for 233 yards and a score. The offensive line is led by junior center Michael Howard (6-1, 274).

EKU took a hit defensively and returns just four starters. The most important is junior All-OVC safety and leading returning tackler Brandon Gathof. Gathof was second on the team with 91 tackles and had five interceptions. He's joined in the backfield by another All-OVC performer and fellow senior safety Zach Denton (5 INTs).

The defensive line will be paced by All-OVC defensive end Chris Coy, the leading sacker with 8.5 and also had a conference-topping 18.5 tackles for a loss. Senior defensive tackle Chris Harris (6-2, 288) is the only other starter back for the unit.

Senior kicker Taylor Long made 44-of-46 extra points and was 13-of-14 in field goals.

Tennessee State should make some noise and is loaded with nine starters back on offense and eight on defense for a squad that went 5-6 overall and finished fourth in the league with a 4-3 mark.

But James Webster's Tigers will go as far as senior quarterback Antonio Heffner, All-OVC in 2006, can take them. Heffner played in just seven games last season but still threw for 1,486 yards with 10 touchdowns and rushed for another 337 yards and three scores. Sophomore backup Calvin McNair played well in Heffner's stead.

Both of TSU's top ground gainers return and preseason All-OVC and senior Javarris Williams is the best of them. Williams rushed for 1,187 yards and scored 12 times and was the Tigers' third-leading receiver. Junior Terrence Wright added 506 yards on 128 carries with six touchdowns.

Preseason All-OVC wideout Chris Johnson caught 41 passes for 740 yards and crossed the goal line four times. Senior Brandon Belvin amassed 329 yards on 20 receptions with two scores and senior Ronald Evans added 12 receptions for 178 yards with a TD.

Senior 6-5, 310-pound tackle Cornelius Lewis was named preseason All-OVC and leads a group that had four who started at some point.

Remond Willis, a senior preseason All-OVC linebacker, teams with junior Calvin Baker. Baker could be pushed by redshirt freshman Rico Council. Willis led last year with 84 tackles, nine for loss, Baker was second with 79 tackles (2.5 TFL). Senior safety Larry Wood was the team's second-leading tackler with 54 and grabbed two picks. He and junior Anthony Levine are the only returning starters in the secondary.

Junior defensive Kellen Woodard was fourth with 49 tackles but led with 13 for a loss. He'll lead a defensive line with one senior, three sophomores and a freshman.

Senior Eric Benson returns to kick and sophomore Taylor Cisneros returns to punt.

Austin Peay surprised the league with its 7-4 overall and 5-3 mark, which tied for third, in coach Rick Christophel's first year and its first year back in the league. Austin Peay returns six on offense and 10 on defense.

But the Gobs are a young group with an ambitious schedule that has to find a way to replace all-time leading rusher Chris Fletcher. That task will be filled by five runningbacks, including junior Theo Townsend, sophomore Terrence Holt, junior Otis Spivey, junior Jeff Lyle and redshirt freshman Ryan White. But Spivey is the only one of the backs who had significant carries, gaining 291 yards on 76 attempts.

Junior Gary Orr came out of spring as the starter. But he'll be pushed by Arkansas State transfer, sophomore T.C. Jennings and sophomore Trent Caffee. Orr and Caffee split time due to the injury-plagued season of the departed Mark Cunningham. Christophel will play at least two, if not all three, quarterbacks this season and also likes redshirt freshman Scott Thomas. Last season the appointed backup played at least a series in each half.

Senior wideout Lanis Frederick saw a major drop in production in 2007 with just 33 catches for 550 yards and four scores. Fredrick caught 77 passes for 1,107 yards as a junior. Austin Peay was slowed some by the use of two talented freshman wide receivers, Adrian Mines (30-428-3) and Darryl Miller (15-160-1). But the experience gained last year should be invaluable.

The offensive line will be led by senior All-OVC second teamer Cage Major and senior center Travis Dumke. The return from injury of junior Justin Cunningham also will help.

The defense welcomes back all its starters, except for graduated linebacker Josh Hackett.

The battle for that position will be waged between juniors Daniel Swenson and Spencer Gulmire, who played on offense in 2007.

The rest of the linebacking corps are the heart and soul of the team, led by juniors Daniel Becker and Kit Hartsfield, the team's top tackler with 88. Becker, who injured his knee five games into the season, could be named All-OVC at the end of the season. Junior Chris Haynes played well in Becker's absence.

The defensive line is on the small side, but all four starters return. Junior end Chris Newell could be a standout and tackle Rocky Dee Peeler mans the nose. Junior end Nick Clark and sophomore tackle Antonio Faulkner comprise the rest of the line along with backup senior tackle P.R. Morris.

The secondary also is smallish, but all four, junior corners Kevis Buckley and LaDarius Davis, senior strong safeties Jason Vanatta and junior free safety Tremayne Townsend, started last season and bring much experience. All have played since their freshman years.

Holt, who returned his first and last kicks as a freshman for touchdowns, is an X-factor in the return game. Sophomore kicker Isaac Ziolkowski, a walk-on in 2007, improved as the season wore on and will be counted on.

After claiming a share of the 2006 OVC crown with a 6-1 mark and 9-3 overall record, Tennessee-Martin fell on hard times and went 4-4 in the league last season, good for fifth place, and dropped to 4-7 overall in Jason Sampson's second season.

UT-Martin fell victim to the close game, as the Skyhawks lost their four OVC contests by a combined 15 points, before ripping off a three-game winning streak to end the season. It doesn't seem as things can get much better with the loss of All-OVC second teamer Don Chapman, who gained 1,125 yards on 229 attempts and had 11 touchdowns. But senior Trace McDermott is expected to take over Chapman's role. McDermott rushed for 289 yards on just 42 carries with two scores. Junior Bradyn Young (17-232-3) will be the backup.

But the real reason the Skyhawks could rise back to their 2006 championship level is because they return two junior quarterbacks who combined for more than 2,000 passing yards and three receivers who combined for 400 yards and eight starters on offense. In 10 games, returning starter Cade Thompson passed for 1,034 yards on 81-of-124 passing with eight touchdowns and three interceptions, while Dexter Anoka added 1,369 yards on 107-of-184 passing with eight scores and seven picks in nine games.

Whoever steps under center, they'll have the pleasure of throwing to junior preseason All-OVC wideout Roren Thomas who had 39 receptions for 553 yards

with six touchdowns. Seniors E.J. Daniel (35-434-2) and Jamaal Akbar (351-484-2) bring a wealth of experience.

The offensive line will be bolstered by preseason All-OVC guard and 2007 All-OVC second teamer Kevin Bannon.

UT-Martin's defense also welcomes back eight starters led by 6-1, 240-pound preseason and 2007 second team All-OVC defensive tackle Ray Williams, who led with 3.5 sacks and had 40 tackles. In fact, the entire front four returns with seniors: end Craig Worthen, tackle Jerrod Grace and end Nate Wilson.

Junior linebacker Adrian Pruitt is the top tackler coming back with 62. The secondary returns three of its four starters in senior free safety Dante Harold, and juniors, cornerback Dorsett Pendleton and rover Dontrell Miller.

Watson Brown returned home to Cookeville, Tenn., and **Tennessee Tech** and led the Golden Eagles to a 4-7 overall record and a 2-6 league mark that tied for seventh place.

Tech was devastated by injury to the quarterback position, but junior Lee Sweeny proved his worth by throwing for 1,453 yards on 126-of-208 passing with 10 touchdowns and nine picks in eight games. Redshirt junior Josh Lowery saw action in five games and is a capable backup.

Replacing Derek White's 1,187 yards would be a concern in most years, but sophomore Henry Sales is expected to step into the role nicely. Also watch for Arkansas State transfer and junior Cedric Wilkerson to be productive.

The main concern is finding someone to catch passes as the departed and All-OVC wide receiver Larry Shipp (53-900-10) did. Senior Matt Solima is the leading returning receiver, but he caught only 15 passes for 192 yards. The rest of the receiving corps are all sophomores and Cass Barnes, who also played some quarterback is the one to look for.

Senior All-OVC strong safety Maurice Smith leads a unit that allowed 32 points a game. It has six starters returning, senior free safety Xavier Purdy, and juniors, end Brendon Fisher, tackle Bradley Thompson, linebacker Jake Kiser and corner Taron Ryce.

Southeast Missouri endured a 3-8 overall and 1-7 mark in the OVC in Tony Samuel's second season. The Redhawks won two of their first three and then lost their next seven, all OVC games, before upsetting Jacksonville State in the finale 32-25.

Having senior Tim Holloman in the backfield will be an added benefit when he returns five games into the season. Holloman rushed for 655 yards on 114

carries in five games before he was declared academically ineligible. Sophomore Mike Jones (59-291-2) will figure in during Holloman's absence.

Senior quarterback Houston Lillard (100-of-173, 1,350 yds., 10 TDs, 6 INTs) is athletic and will throw to sophomore and leading returning receiver Miles Edwards (34-480-7). Redshirt junior Brad Stewart added 181 yards on 16 catches with a score.

One of the top players on the team just might be junior kicker/punter Doug Spada, a College Sporting News All-American and All-OVC punter. Spada averaged 42.5 yards a punt and made 21-of-23 extra points and 14-of-22 field goals, including a long of 50.

The defense allowed 35.2 points a game and returns nine starters to that unit led by senior 6-1, 275-pound tackle Nick Ketelsleger. Junior linebacker and preseason All-OVC Jared Goodson is the top returning tackler with 98 and junior corner back Eddie Calvin stole a team-high tying two interceptions.

Murray State struggled to a 2-9 overall and 1-7 league finish last season in Matt Griffin's second year. But the Racers found a standout in Freshman of the Year and All-OVC second teamer Jeff Ehrhardt, who led the OVC in passing averaging 233.4 yards a game on 60.1 percent passing with 21 touchdowns and 12 interceptions. He was one of five FCS-level players to throw for 300 yards and rush for 100 yards in the same game. In that game against Tennessee State, Ehrhardt passed for 330 yards, rushed for 104 and scored three times.

Ehrhardt's second, third- and fourth-leading receivers also return. They are junior runningback Derrick Townsel, junior tight end and preseason All-OVC DeAngelo Nelson and returning leading rusher and junior Charlie Jordan.

The defense returns 14 who started at some point and are led by senior linebacker Nathan Williams, who recorded a team-high 101 tackles despite missing two games.

* * *

2008 Ohio Valley Conference Games of the Year

Eastern Kentucky at Tennessee State, Sept. 20

Tennessee State has defeated Eastern Kentucky only twice in 21 tries. If the Tigers want to prove they will be a serious contender they must beat a Colonels team that has won 19 OVC titles, including 2007.

Jacksonville State at Eastern Illinois, Sept. 27

If JSU's Ryan Perrilloux is going to make a difference, this is the game he must shine. The Panthers shared the championship in 2006 and won it outright in 2005. JSU took the 2003 and 2004 crowns. EIU leads the all-time series 3-2.

Tennessee State at Tennessee-Martin, Oct. 4

Tennessee State won nine in a row before losing to the Skyhawks the last two seasons. Martin is trying to recapture the form that led it to a share of the of the 2006 championship. This game will tell who's where, especially if the Tigers have beaten EKU.

Jacksonville State at Eastern Kentucky, Oct. 11

Eastern Kentucky won last year's meeting en route to the OVC championship, but the Gamecocks lead all-time 3-2. If JSU makes it 4-2, its road to the 2008 title will be easier to traverse.

Austin Peay at Tennessee State, Oct. 18

The Gobs found they belonged in the OVC after their 33-32 overtime loss to the Tigers last year. A victory here, and Austin Peay shows it can be a player in the league.

Eastern Illinois at Eastern Kentucky, Oct. 25

Simple: These two teams have combined to win, or share, three of the last four championships.

Austin Peay at Jacksonville State, Nov. 1

The Gamecocks ripped the Gobs 42-9 on ESPNU last year. JSU hopes it's in the OVC driver's seat by now. Austin Peay hopes it's in the hunt and a victory here puts it there.

Eastern Illinois at Tennessee State, Nov. 8

Eastern Illinois has won the last four over the Tigers. Both teams plan on being near the top by the time this game occurs. The winner gets the decided edge in the race.

Tennessee State at Jacksonville State, Nov. 15

The teams didn't meet last year, but TSU won the last meeting in 2006, its first in four tries. It's Jacksonville State's last game of the season and the OVC title could be on the line.

Eastern Kentucky at Tennessee-Martin, Nov. 22

EKU is expected to still be near, if not at the top of the league. If things go as planned at Martin, it will be, too, and the crown could be EKU's.

* * *

TEAM CAPSULES

AUSTIN PEAY

Nickname: Governors.

Location: Clarksville, Tenn.

Enrollment: 9,207.

Colors: Red and White.

Stadium: Governors Stadium (10,000).

Head coach: Rick Christophel (7-4, second season).

2007 results: (7-4, 5-3, tied-third).

Offense: Pro Spread.

Defense: 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 56/11.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (263-442-16; 87-150-2).

OVC Championships: 1 (1977).

Quick Hits: In their second season back in the OVC, the Gobs return depth and experience across the field, but must replace Chris Fletcher, the school's all-time rushing leader. Settling on one quarterback also will be a priority during preseason. The Gobs return 10 of 11 defensive starters, including linebacker Daniel Becker, who is at full strength after a knee injury last season.

Difference Maker: Sophomore Terrence Holt is one of the elite kickoff and punt return specialists in the conference. Last season, Holt returned two kickoffs and one punt for a touchdown. Averaged 24.5 yards per kickoff return and 12.2 yards per punt return.

EASTERN ILLINOIS

Nickname: Panthers.

Location: Charleston, Ill.

Enrollment: 12,179.

Colors: Blue, Grey and White.

Stadium: O'Brien Stadium (10,000).

Head coach: Bob Spoo (127-102-1, 21st season).

2007 results: (8-4, 7-1 second). Lost in opening round of FCS playoffs.

Offense: Multiple Pro-Set.

Defense: 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 39/15.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (455-465-43; 63-25).

OVC Championships: 4 (Most recent title in 2006).

Quick Hits: Eastern Illinois' strength will rest with its defense where three players were named to the OVC Preseason All-Conference team. Eastern Illinois made the FCS playoffs for a third straight season where it lost to Southern Illinois in the opening round. Offensively, Chaz Millard is the team's most dominant lineman.

Eastern Illinois was sixth in the nation in fewest sacks allowed, and Millard, from his guard spot, anchored the line to earn All-OVC honors.

Difference Maker: Defensive end Pierre Walters was named the OVC Preseason Defensive Player of the Year. At 6-foot-5 and 261 pounds, the senior was a third-team All-American pick last season. He finished with 47 tackles and 6.5 tackles for loss, to go along with four sacks and two pass breakups. Walters has 10 sacks in two seasons.

EASTERN KENTUCKY

Nickname: Colonels.

Location: Richmond, Ky.

Enrollment: 15,000.

Colors: Maroon and White.

Stadium: Roy Kid Stadium (20,000).

Head coach: Dean Hood (first season at EKU).

2007 results: (9-3, 8-0, first). Lost in opening round of FCS playoffs.

Offense: Spread.

Defense: 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 45/21.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (533-331-38; 283-110-7).

OVC Championships: 19 (Most recent title in 2007).

Quick Hits: Eastern Kentucky opens its first season under new coach Dean Hood, who is only the third coach to lead the Colonels in the last 44 seasons. Hood spent the last seven seasons as defensive coordinator at Wake Forest.

The Colonels lost 13 starters, but had four players named preseason all-conference. The Colonels will need to replace runningbacks Bobby Washington and Mark Dunn, who combined to rush for 1,700 yards and 21 touchdowns.

Kicker Taylor Long returns after hitting 13 of 14 field-goal attempts.

Difference Maker: Senior quarterback Allan Holland was named the conference's preseason Player of the Year, a title he owned at the end of the 2007 season. In one stretch last season, Holland threw 201 passes without an interception. He completed 60.1 percent of his passes while throwing for 1,990 yards.

JACKSONVILLE STATE

Nickname: Gamecocks.

Location: Jacksonville, Ala.

Enrollment: 9,061.

Colors: Red and White.

Stadium: Paul Snow Memorial (15,000).

Head coach: Jack Crowe (63-69 career, 49-39 at Jacksonville State, 14th season overall).

2007 results: (6-5, 5-3, third-place tie).

Offense: Multiple

Defense: 5-2.

Lettermen returning/lost: 44/22.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (472-344-4; 30-10).

OVC Championships: 2 (Most recent title in 2004).

Quick Hits: The Gamecocks were picked as the preseason favorites to win the OVC, squeaking past Eastern Kentucky and Eastern Illinois. The Gamecocks return six players on offense and defense, including preseason all-conference linebacker Marquise Elston. Kicker Gavin Halliford was a preseason all-conference pick, coming off a season where he hit 22 of 29 field-goal attempts.

Difference Maker: Former LSU quarterback and SEC Championship game MVP Ryan Perrilloux transferred to Jacksonville State and will start this season for the

Gamecocks. Perrilloux, who was dismissed from LSU's team in the spring, has the skills and athletic ability to make Jacksonville State the team to beat. He's the most explosive player in the conference and could carry Jacksonville State on his back deep into the playoffs. Considering Jacksonville State didn't have a true quarterback coming off spring football practice, it could be the most fortunate team in the FCS.

MURRAY STATE

Nickname: Racers.

Location: Murray, Ky.

Enrollment: 10,150.

Colors: Navy and Gold.

Stadium: Roy Stewart Stadium (16,800).

Head coach: Matt Griffin (13-43 career record, 3-19 at Murray State, fifth overall).

2007 results: (2-9, 1-7, 10th place).

Offense: Spread.

Defense: 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 39/12.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (433-365-36; 192-199-9).

OVC Championships: 8 (Most recent title in 2002).

Quick Hits: Tight end DeAngelo Nelson was named to the preseason all-conference team, along with defensive lineman Austen Lane. The Racers return sophomore quarterback Jeff Ehrhardt, who threw for 2,567 yards and 21 touchdowns last season. The Racers return the bulk of their running game, led by tailbacks Charlie Jordan (601 yards) and Paul McKinnis (371 yards). The Racers return eight starters on offense, and 14 players on defense that started at least one game. The Racers lost receiver Rod Harper to graduation, but return Derrick Townsel and Nelson, who caught 37 and 34 catches, respectively.

Difference Maker: Senior linebacker Nathan Williams was granted a sixth year of eligibility by the NCAA. Williams, a preseason all-conference pick in '07, injured a knee in a season-opening loss to Louisville and missed the rest of the year. In 2006, Williams led the OVC and was seventh in the nation averaging 11.1 tackles a game.

SOUTHEAST MISSOURI

Nickname: Redhawks.

Location: Cape Girardeau, Mo.

Enrollment: 10,655.

Colors: Red and Black.

Stadium: Houck Stadium (10,000).

Head coach: Tony Samuel (41-72 overall, 7-25 at Southeast Missouri, 10th season overall).

2007 results: (3-8, 1-7, tied for seventh).

Offense: Multiple.

Defense: 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 48/8.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (412-455-36; 44-83).

OVC Championships: None.

Quick Hits: Southeast Missouri returns eight players on offense and nine on defense with linebacker Jared Goodson being named to the preseason all-conference team. Goodson had 98 total tackles last season, including 5.5 for loss. The Redhawks return all three quarterbacks they used last season, led by Houston Lillard, who threw for 1,350 yards and 10 touchdowns. Southeast Missouri avoided a losing season in the OVC last season when it beat Jacksonville State 32-25 in the season finale.

Difference Maker: Punter Doug Spada was named All-American by The Sports Network and was a first-team all-conference selection averaging 42.5 yards a punt. Twelve of his punts went more than 50 yards and 27 of 59 punts landed inside the 20-yard line. Senior defensive tackle Nick Ketelsleger had four sacks and 6.5 tackles for loss.

TENNESSEE STATE

Nickname: Tigers.

Location: Nashville.

Enrollment: 9,024.

Colors: Royal, Blue and White.

Stadium: LP Field (67,500).

Head coach: James Webster Jr. (13-20, fourth season).

2007 results: (5-6, 4-3, tied for third).

Offense: Pro Style.

Defense: 4-3 Multiple.

Lettermen returning/lost: 64/21.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (564-253-26; 67-74).

OVC Championships: 2 (Most recent title in 1999).

Quick Hits: The Tigers return nine starters on offense and eight on defense off a team that averaged 29.8 points, but allowed 33.4. The Tigers return their top four runningbacks, led by Javarris Williams, who ran for 1,187 yards and 12 touchdowns a year ago. Their top four receivers also return, led by Chris Johnson, who had 41 catches for 740 yards and four touchdowns. The Tigers must replace cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, a NFL Draft selection.

Difference Maker: Quarterback Antonio Heffner threw for 1,486 yards and 10 touchdowns and ran for 337 yards and three touchdowns in a season where he missed four games because of an injury. Heffner was an All-OVC pick in 2006, and the senior quarterback could be the difference in TSU finishing in the top four, or competing in the middle of the pack.

TENNESSEE TECH

Nickname: Golden Eagles.

Location: Cookeville, Tenn.

Enrollment: 10,321.

Colors: Purple and Gold.

Stadium: Tucker Stadium (16,500).

Head coach: Watson Brown (98-158-1 overall, 4-7 at Tennessee Tech, 24th season).

2007 results: (4-7, 2-6, seventh-place tie).

Offense: Multiple.

Defense: Multiple 4-3.

Lettermen returning/lost: 36/25.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (456-528-31; 175-193-3).

OVC Championships: 9 (Most recent title in 1975).

Quick Hits: Tennessee Tech will be one of the youngest teams in the FCS, with 70 players on its roster either freshmen or sophomores. The Golden Eagles return six starters on offense and defense, but the biggest issue is having a healthy quarterback. Tennessee Tech went through a stretch last season where it lost three quarterbacks in four games. Junior Lee Sweeney earned All-OVC second-team honors and was the conference's Freshman of the Year in 2006. He was limited last season because of an injury, throwing for 1,453 yards and 10 touchdowns in eight games. Tennessee Tech didn't have a player selected to the preseason all-conference teams.

Difference Maker: Former Northwest All-State tailback Cedric Wilkerson is available after transferring from Arkansas State. Wilkerson was a powerful and elusive back while in high school, but he was lost on the depth chart at Arkansas State. Tech coach Watson Brown has already been impressed with Wilkerson's leadership and ability to learn Tech's offensive system. With such a young team, Wilkerson could find himself the central figure on offense.

TENNESSEE-MARTIN

Nickname: Skyhawks.

Location: Martin, Tenn.

Enrollment: 7,000.

Colors: Navy, Blue and Orange.

Stadium: Hardy M. Graham Stadium (7,500).

Head coach: Jason Simpson (13-10, third season).

2007 results: (4-7, 4-4, tied for sixth place).

Offense: Pro Street.

Defense: 4-4.

Lettermen returning/lost: 44/13.

All-Time Record/OVC Record: (300-428-18; 30-89).

OVC Championships: 1 (2006).

Quick Hits: Tennessee-Martin opened the 2007 season losing one close game after another but finished strong winning four of its last five, including a 55-20 triumph over Southeast Missouri and a 76-34 victory over Murray State. The Skyhawks return eight starters on offense and defense, respectively, including All-OVC selections Roren Thomas (wide receiver) and Kevin Bannon (offensive guard). Former Northeast standout Nate Wilson returns at defensive end where he had 49 tackles and 2.5 sacks. Outside of OVC action, Martin will visit South Florida and Auburn.

Difference Maker: Senior wide receiver Jamaal Akbar is part of a deep Skyhawks receiving corps. He had 31 catches for 484 yards and two touchdowns. Ray Williams, a preseason all-conference selection on the defensive line, had 40 tackles and 3.5 sacks. He played most of last season with a cast on his arm. Quarterbacks Dexter Anoka and Cade Thompson each threw for 1,000 yards last season and combined for 16 touchdowns. Both will be used extensively again in the Skyhawks' potent offense.

Patriot League 2008 Preview

By Charles Burton, CSN Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Fordham
2. Holy Cross
3. Colgate
4. Lafayette
5. Lehigh
6. Bucknell
7. Georgetown

Players of the Year:

Offense: QB Dominic Randolph, Sr., Holy Cross

Defense: LB Andy Romans, Sr., Lafayette

Biggest Shoes To Fill:

LB Mike Gallihugh, Colgate

Gallihugh, one of the strongest members of the Raider football team, wasn't simply a monster in the weight room. With an amazing 123 tackles on the year, 3 ½ sacks, and 10 tackles for loss, he was the unquestioned center of gravity for Colgate's defense in 2007. A finalist for the prestigious Buck Buchanan award, he led a defense that was #1 in the Patriot League in red-zone defense (allowing opponents to convert only 70.7% of the time). Six times he amassed double-digit tackles in a game, including 17 against Georgetown. It will not be easy to replace this member of the Raider defense that was such a big part of Colgate's defensive prowess in 2007.

* * *

Doing Things the Right Way

At Patriot League media day, the table featuring Fordham head coach Tom Masella didn't have all that many guests. This was probably due to the announcement that they were picked sixth out of seven teams in the Patriot League in 2007 after coming off coach Masella's inaugural 3-8 record as head coach of a Ram team with a lot of youth at key positions. The fact that their leading rusher from last year wasn't returning to the team didn't help matters either.

The goals set by coach Masella for the season were modest – to have a winning record, to do better than last year, and to “keep battling, play each snap and play hard, and good things are going to happen for us.” While a fine narrative for a

team trying to get better, it wasn't exactly a preseason narrative that most sportswriters found compelling.

But sportswriters' narratives don't win championships. Masella's modest goals and humble team-oriented style – he hardly ever uses the word “I” in postgame press conferences - ended up being exactly what Fordham needed to restore the Rams to winning Patriot League championships.

After an eye-opening win against Rhode Island of the CAA 27-23 and a decisive 27-10 win over crosstown rival Columbia, Fordham's win total of 2006 was equaled when the Rams came from behind by 11 points at halftime to beat Colgate in Hamilton, NY 34-31. A week later, they exceeded their win total from 2006 by holding on to beat Lehigh at home at Jack Coffey Field 28-18.

Fordham kept amassing league win after league win. In the first week in November, Fordham found themselves playing Holy Cross at home in the Bronx in the Patriot League game of the year: a date that few media folks had circled on their calendar in August. With the clock winding down deep in the 4th quarter, Fordham LB James Crockett's interception of QB Dominic Randolph sealed the 24-21 victory that gave Fordham their first Patriot League championship since 2002 and earning them a trip to Amherst, MA against the UMass Minutemen in the FCS playoffs.

Even in the playoffs, Fordham's young pups played admirably: in a game where they were picked to be blown out, they traded offensive punches with the CAA co-champions for most of the game before finally falling 49-35 to the Minutemen.

How did they do it? They didn't rely on one star player: they had a multitude of different players that gelled together perfectly as a unit to make plays and forge out wins. “I'm so proud of our team,” said coach Masella in a characteristically soft-spoken manner after their win over Lehigh. “They just kept battling, and battling, they've worked extremely hard. We had a lot of different kids make a lot of different plays across the board. “

When asked about the fact that the Rams had beaten two of the Patriot League's powerhouses in consecutive weeks, Masella replied “We want to be like Colgate, Lehigh, and Lafayette. That's what we aspire to be.”

By the end of 2007, they were what they aspired to be.

Certainly this year the **Fordham** Rams will be in a place they weren't last year: as Patriot League frontrunner going into the 2008 season. While they lose some very talented players on defense such as LB Earl Hudnell, the spread offense featuring junior QB John Skelton (2,650 yards passing, 22 passing TDs) returns with neatly every piece still intact from last year's team. On defense, junior emerging star LB James Crockett (70 tackles, 2 ½ sacks) also returns to

continue to frustrate offensive coordinators around the Patriot League. The Rams will kick off the year with a test against Rhode Island of the CAA before facing off in two intriguing road games: first against the Pioneer Football League Champion Dayton Flyers in Dayton, OH, and across town against rival Columbia in the 7th annual meeting of the "Liberty Cup". Then it's right into to home schedule at Jack Coffey Field in the Bronx, this year featuring home games against Colgate, Yale, Lafayette and Georgetown.

Two years in a row, the **Holy Cross** Crusaders have gone into late October with their destiny in their own hands for the Patriot League title; and two years in a row they have suffered late-season swoons to doom their league title and postseason hopes. Offensively, with senior QB Dominic Randolph coming back in 2008 (3,604 passing yards, 30 passing TDs, 61% completion percentage), the Crusaders' high-powered offense will definitely put up points. The question is how Holy Cross will adjust to life without CB Casey Gough in the defensive backfield – folks like CB Kyle Mushaweh (4 interceptions) will have to pick things up if they hope to win coach Gilmore's first-ever Patriot League title. Holy Cross will need to be on top of their game on opening day as they take on UMass, the co-champions of the CAA, on opening day at Fitton Field in Worcester. The Crusaders then embark on a brutal road stretch of three straight games, including a visit to Cambridge to take on Harvard, last years' Ivy League champs. Holy Cross then plays four of their next five games at home, including big games versus Brown, Lehigh, Bucknell and Fordham.

Fans of the **Colgate** Raiders heaved a huge sigh of relief when they discovered in their spring game that their star player, senior RB Jordan Scott (135.5 rushing yards per game, 20 rushing TDs), would not be kicked off the team for an off-the-field incident last winter. Scott, the #1 rusher in all of FCS last year, returns for his senior campaign as well as most of the offensive line that forged all of those yards. Defensively the Raiders will really miss LB Mike Gallihugh - although players like LB Greg Hadley (62 tackles) hope to follow in his footsteps in 2008. Colgate plays the first game of the year on August 30th when they travel to independent Stony Brook, and return home to face perennial SoCon power Furman in the first-ever meeting between the two schools. Other exciting home games include tilts against Dartmouth, Princeton, Lafayette and Holy Cross.

The **Lafayette** Leopards were in unfamiliar waters in 2007: namely, they weren't a part of the Patriot League title chase like they were in 2004, 2005 and 2006. Breaking in their new QB Rob Curley had something to do with that (1,174 yards passing, 7 TDs), along with a huge injury list at tailback. With a healthy RB in Maurice White returning, as well as the #1 defense in the Patriot League led by LB Andy Romans (113 tackles, 3 sacks), the Leopards certainly have the talent to be in the winner's circle by year's end. The Leopards host three big home games at the new "palace of football" in the Patriot League at Fisher Field, as they kick off the Patriot League schedule with Georgetown and follow it up with games against perennial Ivy League power Penn and last year's Ivy League

Champions Harvard. Then it's a five game road trip before finishing up against Holy Cross and then Lehigh in the 144th installment of "The Rivalry", college football's most-played series. The Leopards will be hoping to beat Lehigh for the fifth straight time – the last time Lafayette was able to achieve this feat was 1949.

Injuries hobbled the **Lehigh** Mountain Hawks on offense all year in 2007, as they slipped to a 5-6 record, their worst since 1997. As always they have the talent to compete for the Patriot League title, starting on defense with DL Brian Jackson (63 tackles, 5 ½ sacks) and LB Tim Diamond (107 tackles, 2 ½ sacks). The question is which of the underclassman QBs will be handing off the ball the RBs Matt McGowan and Jaren Walker. If the offense can pull things together, watch out. Lehigh opens their home schedule at picturesque Murray Goodman Stadium with an interesting game versus Drake of the Pioneer Football League and Cornell of the Ivy League before getting a stern test with preseason favorite Fordham in Patriot League play. After a three-game road trip, they then return to Bethlehem with huge games against Colgate and Bucknell before traveling to nearby Easton to play Lafayette in the 144th installment of "The Rivalry". Coach Andy Coen would like nothing better than to beat the Leopards for the first time since he became Lehigh's head football coach in 2006.

The **Bucknell** Bison return the core of a young team that is eager to improve on their 3-8 season a year ago. Gone is RB Josh DeStefano, but coach Tim Landis' triple-option offense featuring the "Trigg"-erman, QB Marcelo Trigg (1,130 passing yards, 8 TDs) and defense featuring LB Todd Manjuck (76 tackles) hope to build on their shock win over league champion Fordham, 38-24, to close out 2007. It will be interesting to see if Bucknell can get above .500 once again and challenge the power elite of the league. The Bison will be at home at Christy Matthewson Stadium for some intriguing out-of-conference games against Duquesne of the NEC, Cornell of the Ivy League and Hofstra of the CAA before entering headfirst into league games at home versus Colgate, Lafayette, and Fordham.

Coach Kevin Kelly of the **Georgetown** Hoyas looks to get the Hoyas on track after a rough 1-10 campaign in 2007. With the need to replace starting QB Matt Bassuener, Kelly will look to a pair of juniors in RB Charlie Houghton (458 yards rushing, 4 TDs) and LB Chris Rau (76 tackles, 1 sack) to lead these young Hoyas to better days. Can Georgetown finally break into the Patriot League title chase? Starting with an intriguing game on the road against Howard of the MEAC (in their first-ever meeting between the Washington, DC-based schools), the Hoyas then return home to Multi-Sport field to face off against Holy Cross in an interesting matchup between two Jesuit schools. The Hoya's other home games are against Penn of the Ivy League, Bucknell, Lehigh, and FCS independent Marist.

* * *

Patriot League Games To watch in 2008

Aug. 30, Colgate at Stony Brook

The first meeting between these two New York schools, Stony Brook provides an early test to see how Patriot League schools will match up against a team from "scholarship conferences" like the Big South, which will have a playoff autobid in 2010. Last year the Seawolves went 2-0 against the Patriot League, scoring 83 points in two games versus Georgetown and Bucknell.

Sept. 6, UMass at Holy Cross

The last two years, UMass has eliminated the Patriot League champion in the playoffs (35-14 over Lafayette in 2006, and 49-25 over Fordham in 2007) – all at the Minutemen's home at McGuirk stadium. During the regular season last year – also at McGuirk stadium - UMass jumped up on the Crusaders early at home and managed to barely hold on to win in a 40-30 shootout. This year, Holy Cross plans to enact some revenge for that loss in the return game at Fitton Field in this budding regional rivalry. The all-time series is deadlocked at 21-21-5, making this the 48th meeting between the two teams.

Sept. 13, Fordham at Dayton

The Rams have never beaten the Flyers in their history, with their latest defeat coming last year in the Bronx, 31-24. This year's rematch features the defending Patriot League and Pioneer Football League champions, and bragging rights will very much be on the line between the two conferences this time.

Sept. 20, Cornell at Bucknell

It will be the 48th meeting of this Ivy/Patriot League clash between regional rivals. The Big Red hold a 36-11-0 edge, but the series is knotted at 9 games apiece since 1980. The Bison also haven't lost to the Big Red at home since 1994.

Sept 27, Colgate at Fordham

The Raiders and Rams will be gearing up in the Bronx for a big early-season battle between serious title challengers. Colgate will be very eager to erase the bad taste from last year's 34-31 defeat, while Fordham will need to find a way to stop the #1 rusher in all of FCS last year in RB Jordan Scott.

Oct 4, Harvard at Lafayette

Winless against the Crimson since 1996, the Leopards host the defending Ivy League champs trying to reverse their losing ways against this perennial Ivy League title contender. In their 12 games against Harvard, the Lafayette defense gave up on average more than 30 points per game, while the most points they've scored on the Crimson in a game was 31 in a victory in 1992.

Oct. 11, Fordham at Lehigh

This is poised to be a key game for both the Rams and Mountain Hawks this year in the Patriot League title race. Lehigh will be aiming to avenge last year's close 28-18 loss in their Patriot League season opener, while Fordham hopes to come out of Bethlehem with a 2-0 league record with tough games against Colgate and Lehigh behind them. Fordham has never beaten Lehigh at Murray Goodman stadium.

Oct 18, Bucknell at Georgetown

The Hoyas hope to make it two in a row against the Bison, who won last year in a last second 20-17 victory. It was Georgetown head football coach Kevin Kelly's first Patriot League win; he hopes to make it a yearly habit for Georgetown, while Bucknell will be looking to open their Patriot League schedule with a very important "W".

Oct 25, Lehigh at Holy Cross

Last year's 59-10 drubbing by Holy Cross was Lehigh's worst showing in a Patriot League game since two-way star Gordie Lockbaum led his Crusaders to dominate the Engineers in 1987 by a 63-6 score. Lehigh should be eager to avenge the loss; the Crusaders will hope the rematch will go the same way as last year's game.

Nov. 1, Lafayette at Colgate

This game, the 52nd in the series, looms once again as a huge game shaping the Patriot League title race. The last time Lafayette traveled up to Hamilton, they broke a 10-game losing streak to the Raiders on their way to the Patriot League title. It could also feature the unstoppable force (Raider RB Jordan Scott, the FCS' leading rusher) versus the immovable object (Lafayette's stingy run "D", 4th best in all of FCS last year).

Nov. 8, Fordham at Holy Cross

They first played in 1902. They've faced off in Worcester, the Bronx, Ireland, and Bermuda. Last year, they played an unlikely Patriot League championship game in the Bronx where LB James Crockett picked off QB Dominic Randolph's pass in the final minute to seal a 24-21 victory for Fordham. This year's game, the 46th in the series, hopes to once again be for all the marbles in a growing historic rivalry between these Jesuit schools.

Nov. 15, Holy Cross at Lafayette

The Leopards, famous for finishing the year strong, hope to keep that going against a team that has struggled down the stretch the past couple of years. In the month of November, Holy Cross hasn't beaten Lafayette sine 1991 – a trend that the Leopards will be eager to try to continue.

Nov 22, Lehigh at Lafayette

It will be the 144th meeting in "The Rivalry", the most-played rivalry in all of college football. There's only one thing Lehigh and Lafayette fans can agree on:

that they both hope that this game will have implications for the FCS playoffs. Last year found Lafayette and Lehigh ending the year with "The Rivalry" for the first time since 2003: in '04, '05, and '06, one or both made the FCS playoffs.

* * *

Team Capsules

Bucknell Bison

Location: Lewisburg, PA

Stadium: Christy Mathewson-Memorial Stadium (13,100)

Head Coach: Tim Landis (23-33, 76-85-1 overall)

Key Losses: RB Josh DeStefano, WR Andrew Guadagno, TE Andrew Mozal, OL Chad Glasser, OL Jonathan Grainger, DL Ryan Walsh, DL Josh Eden (on 2-year Mormon mission), LB Ryan Slater, LB/DB Stephen Collage

Key Returners: QB Marcello Trigg, RB A.J. Kizekai, RB Rashod Bumpers, WR Cale Cadman, OL Ian Fullmer, DL Marques Morgan, LB Todd Manjuck, LB Sam Nana-Sinkam, DB Brigham Farrand, K Will Carney

Historical Note: The 1933 Bison, featuring ends Joe Reznichak and Joe Rhuebright, bulldozed to a 6-2-0 record and for the first time ever beat the four "major opponents" on their schedule: Temple (20-7), Villanova (19-17), Lafayette (21-0) and Washington & Jefferson (38-6).

Last Year: A promising 2007 season ended with a disappointing sub-.500 record, but the sting was offset with a shocking 38-24 upset of Patriot League champion Fordham in the last game of the year. The Bison's win over the 18th-ranked team in the nation was their first against a nationally-ranked opponent since 2004 (when they beat 22nd-ranked Colgate 42-7).

This Year: With a light early-season schedule and a slew of young returning starters like junior QB Marcelo Trigg and senior LB Todd Manjuck, Bucknell fans will hope that the Bison can build off of last years' season-ending win and get a nice head of steam on the way to making some noise in the Patriot League title race.

Colgate Red Raiders

Location: Hamilton, NY

Stadium: Andy Kerr Stadium (10,200)

Head Coach: Dick Biddle (95-46-0, 95-46-0 overall)

Key Losses: WR Erik Burke, C Matt Sullivan, DE Ryan Keller, DT Pat Nolan, LB Mike Gallihugh, DB Cody Williams, PK Mike Buck

Key Returners: QB Alex Relph, RB Jordan Scott, FB Eric Tupta, OL Steve Jonas, DT Paul Mancuso, LB Greg Hadley, LB Ted Marshall, CB Wayne Moten, P Jacob Stein

Historical Note: Colgate didn't field a football team with their "moleskin men" in 1918, as most of its team was fighting overseas in World War I. The 1919 squad, however, went 5-1-1 and was one of the top teams in the East with big wins over Brown, Cornell, and Princeton. Colgate's 7-7 tie with Dartmouth was

“one of the cleanest and hardest battles of the year” according to the New York Times.

Last Year: The Raiders bounced back to a 7-4 record and reclaimed its place among the Patriot League elite, but had to be wondering what could have been after tight losses to Fordham (34-31), Holy Cross (27-20), and hated rival Cornell (17-14).

This Year: With most of his supporting cast intact from last year, RB Jordan Scott, the leading rusher in FCS last year with 170.45 yards per game, will try to once again bulldoze through the Patriot League. If the defense can hold up its end of the bargain, with LB Ted Marshall leading the charge, Colgate will be a strong contender for the Patriot League title.

Fordham Rams

Location: Bronx, NY

Stadium: Jack Coffey Field (7,000)

Head Coach: Tom Masella (11-12, 28-38 overall)

Key Losses: RB Jonte Coven, WR Sylvester Clarke, OL Michael Nardone, OL Michael Breznicky, LB Earl Hudnell, LB Dominique Owens, CB Sam Orah, P Benjamin Dato

Key Returners: QB John Skelton, RB Xavier Martin, WR Rich Rayborn, WR Asa Lucas, OL Justin Sarabez, DT Greg DeMarco, LB James Crockett, FS Matt Loucks, SS Isiejah Allen

Historical Note: One of Fordham’s most famous “football” alumni never played on the football team: the NFL Giants’ Wellington Mara. While at Fordham, he reportedly traveled to the George Washington University campus to visit RB “Tuffy” Leemans, who would eventually sign with the Giants and post a hall-of-fame career there.

Last Year: Picked in the preseason to finish sixth in the seven-team Patriot League, Masella’s Rams stunned the FCS world by playing solid team football, finishing 8-3 and securing Fordham’s first postseason playoff appearance since 2002.

This Year: 15 starters return from the championship team of 2007 – including juniors QB John Skelton and LB James Crockett – making Fordham the odds-on favorite to repeat as Patriot League champions. The only question is whether they can do it in the unfamiliar role of league favorites.

Georgetown Hoyas

Location: Washington, DC

Stadium: Multi-Sport Field (3,500)

Head Coach: Kevin Kelly (3-19, 3-19 overall)

Key Losses: QB Matt Bassuener, RB Brent Craft, WR Kyle Van Fleet, DT Nnamdi Obiako, LB Mike Greene, LB John Lancaster, CB Kevin Cherepski, PK Eric Bjonerud, P Christopher MacGriff

Key Returners: RB Charlie Houghton, RB Robert Lane, WR Sidney Baker, TE Collin Meodor, OL Dan Matheny, DT Anthony DiTomasso, DE Nicholas Umar, DB Chris Rau, SS Travis Mack

Historical Note: Sophomore right half Julius Koshlap, who completed passes with both his left arm and right arm, led the Hoyas to an undefeated and untied 6-0-0 season in 1938, their best record in 65 years in football at that time. After the season, rather than play in the segregated South in the Dixie Bowl in Atlanta, Georgia, Georgetown's athletic director Gabriel Murphy declined the bowl invitation.

Last Year: A grim 1-10 season – Georgetown's first 10-loss season in 120 years of Hoya football - was a rough outing for coach Kevin Kelly. However, with a last-second 20-17 win over Bucknell, the Hoyas would get their first road Patriot League win since 2005.

This Year: The Patriot League's seventh-ranked offense finds themselves heading into 2008 to replace their leading receiver (Van Fleet) and their starting QB and second leading rusher (Bassuener) from 2007. It could be more grim times ahead for coach Kelly, RB Charlie Houghton, and LB Chris Rau.

Holy Cross Crusaders

Location: Worcester, MA

Stadium: Fitton Field (23,500)

Head Coach: Tom Gilmore (23-21, 23-21 overall)

Key Losses: WR Thomas Harrison, WR Ryan Maher, OL Dan Nolan, DE Adam Sadowski, LB Mark Kelliher, SS Kent Flanders, CB Obi Green, CB/KR Casey Gough

Key Returners: QB Dominic Randolph, RB Terrance Gass, WR Brent McDermott, OL Aaron Jones, DE Bryan Walwyn, LB Marcus Rodriguez, LB Ryan Stewart, CB Kyle Mushaweh, PK Matt Partain

Historical Note: 2008 is the 75th anniversary of legendary Holy Cross football coach Dr. Eddie Anderson's first football team at Holy Cross. Captain of the legendary Notre Dame football squad of 1921, Anderson's 1933 team would go 8-2, including wins over Harvard (10-7) and Brown (19-7).

Last Year: At 6-2. Holy Cross had high hopes to win their first Patriot League championship since 1991 when they traveled to the Bronx to face Fordham. But when QB Dominic Randolph's last-minute pass was intercepted in a 24-21 defeat, the Crusaders would drop two of their last three on their way to a second consecutive 7-4 season.

This Year: With QB Dominic Randolph, the Patriot League's best passer, and CB Kyle Mushaweh leading the defense, they once again will be a formidable team – if they figure out how to keep winning in the final third of the season. Can the Crusaders finally close the deal in November, where Holy Cross is 3-4 over the last three years?

Lafayette Leopards

Location: Easton, PA

Stadium: Fisher Field (13,750)

Head Coach: Frank Tavani (45-46-0, 45-46-0 overall)

Key Losses: WR Duaeno Dorsey, OL Jesse Padilla, OL Greg Lippert, DE Keith Bloom, DT Kyle Sprenkle, LB Mark Plumby, SS Marcel Quarterman, CB Adrian Lawson, P David Yankovich

Key Returners: QB Rob Curley, FB Joe Russo, RB Maurice White, WR Shaun Adair, OL Leo Plenski, NG Andrew Poulson, LB Mark Leggerio, LB Andy Romans, SS Marcel Quarterman, PK Davis Rodriguez

Historical Note: The 1937 team finished undefeated and untied with an 8-0-0 record as "Middle Three" conference champions. Led on defense by tackle Matt Driscoll and end Harold Simmons, they only allowed 6 points all year. Fittingly, Driscoll's blocked punt set up the only score in a 6-0 win in 71st meeting against Lehigh in "The Rivalry".

Last Year: High preseason hopes for the Leopards were dashed with a disastrous October, losing to Harvard (27-14), Fordham (34-23) and Colgate (36-27). Lafayette did manage to turn things around in November, however, finishing strong with three straight wins. The capper was the fourth straight win over hated rival Lehigh 21-17 in the 143rd meeting of "The Rivalry".

This Year: Coach Frank Tavani will have many key gears in one of the best defenses in FCS returning next year, including standout LB Andy Romans. It would hardly be a surprise to see Lafayette, with WR Shaun Adair leading the way on offense, finding themselves atop the Patriot League by season's end with another win over the Mountain Hawks.

Lehigh Mountain Hawks

Location: Bethlehem, PA

Stadium: Murray Goodman stadium (16,000)

Head Coach: Andy Coen (11-11, 11-11 overall)

Key Losses: QB Sedale Threatt, WR Pete Donchez, OL Jimmy Kehs, OL John Reese, DL Kyle Adams, LB Rashaun Gasaway, FS Ernest Moore, CB Brannan Thomas

Key Returners: RB Matt McGowan, WR Sekou Yansane, TE Troy Healion, OL Kevin Bayani, DL Brian Jackson, LB Tim Diamond, LB Matt Cohen, FS Brendan VanAckeren, P/K Jason Leo

Historical Note: Half the 1914 Engineer football team was hit with a "faculty ban" due to academics – two weeks before playing mighty Yale, who came back in the second half to beat them 20-3. Despite this setback, star QB Albert Chenoweth returned to the team in time to lead Lehigh to a 8-1 record and a thumping of Lafayette in the 48th meeting of "The Rivalry", 17-7.

Last Year: Picked to contend for the Patriot League title, 2007 ended in bitter disappointment with a 5-6 record and (most importantly) the fourth straight loss to Lafayette in "The Rivalry" by a 21-17 score. It would be Lehigh's first losing record in ten years, and the first time Lehigh seniors would go winless against Lafayette since 1950.

This Year: A solid defense led by DL Brian Jackson will return in 2008, but Lehigh's season will rest on the progress of its offense and the rushing of RBs Jaren Walker and Matt McGowan. If they pull it all together, however, you could

see them contend for a league title once again – or at least beat Lafayette for the first time in five years.

Pioneer Football League 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. San Diego
2. Dayton
3. Drake
4. Morehead State
5. Davidson
6. Jacksonville
7. Valparaiso
8. Butler
9. Campbell

Offensive Player of the Year: JT Rogan, RB, Senior, San Diego

Defensive Player of the Year: Kalen Hemmelgarn, DT, Senior, Dayton

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Josh Johnson, QB, San Diego

Johnson wrapped up his stellar career with the Toreros a year ago — finishing third in the final voting for the Walter Payton Award, and was a Second Team AP All-American and Third Team Sports Network All-American. In 2007, he tossed a school record 43 touchdowns while ranking first in the nation in total offense, passing efficiency and points responsible for. He leaves USD with all the career passing records and also is the new NCAA career leader in passing efficiency with a 176.68 rating. He was selected by Tampa Bay in the fifth round of the NFL draft in April.

* * *

And then there was one. The Pioneer Football League is the last true nonscholarship league in Division I football. With the Metro Atlantic losing Duquesne to the newly instated scholarship Northeastern Conference and LaSalle dropping its football program during the offseason, that league was down to two teams and the league disbanded. In fact, Marist — one of the two left — will be a Pioneer member starting in 2009.

This year, however, the PFL will have just one new team in Campbell — in Buies Creek, N.C. The addition of Campbell gives the Pioneer nine teams for this 2008 season. With the addition of Marist (and possible addition of the other MAAC remaining team in Iona) for 2009, the league will most likely return to divisional play in 2009.

All PFL teams will play a full round-robin schedule in 2008 and the league will again have a postseason bowl game as in the last two years when the PFL winner played the winner of the Northeast Conference. The PFL winner has won

the first two such contests and won the Sports Network Cup (voted title for the top Mid-Major FCS team) each of those seasons. This year's game will be at the NEC champion's home field.

Dayton won last year's PFL title and Sports Network Cup. San Diego won the previous two titles and finished second in the voting a year ago. Those two schools will likely be the frontrunners again and will see the highest competition from Drake and Morehead State.

San Diego finished 2007 tied with Dayton in the PFL standings after the Toreros lost to the Flyers in the regular season meeting in Dayton. USD also lost to the Great West's UC Davis by a field goal to finish its season at 9-2. The big question mark for USD centers around quarterback. Who will be the quarterback for second year Coach Ron Caragher with the graduation of All-American Josh Johnson? But all is not lost in San Diego as the Toreros return 14 starters — seven each on both sides of the ball to make them the team to beat again. They also face Dayton in southern California this year.

The Toreros have senior All-American running back JT Rogan (1,021 rushing yards, 331 receiving yards, 17 total TDs) to build their offense around, while they attempt to replace fellow All-Americans Johnson and wideout Wes Doyle's offensive production. The new USD quarterback appears to be last year's backup in junior Andrew Rolin, who saw quite a bit of game action last year in lopsided games throwing for 249 yards and five touchdowns. Rolin, however, could be pressed by junior college transfer Sebastian Trujillo. While one All-American wideout is gone, another returns for the new quarterback in senior John Matthews, who recorded a team high 1,088 receiving yards and 16 touchdowns.

Upfront, the Toreros have All-American senior tackle Deene Kabiling and fellow senior tackle Jason McFarland as the leaders. The offensive line helped lead USD to the top-ranked total offense and points. In the rare case when USD offense stalled, it had an All-PFL performer in now-junior punter John McSorley, who had just under a 36 yard per punt average.

USD's defense also will need to replace a PFL Player of the Year in Eric Bakhtiari, who was fifth in the 2007 Buck Buchanan voting. Similar to the offense, however, the USD defense will not be completely new and the secondary should lead the unit. Heading the group is Second Team All-American senior cornerback Ben Hannula, who had 39 tackles and three interceptions in 2007. He will be joined by fellow cornerback, All-PFL Gabe Derricks and junior safety Patrick O'Neill in the secondary. Derricks recorded 55 tackles and O'Neill is the leading returning tackler (55) and a team high four interceptions.

Last year, **Dayton** had a complete resurrection to win not only the PFL title but also as mentioned the Division I Mid-Major title after defeating Northeast Conference champion Albany 42-21 to finish 11-1 overall. The turnaround for the Flyers was unexpected after a 4-6 season in 2006. This season will be different, however, for the Flyers. Gone is longtime coach Mike Kelly after 27 years as the head man in Dayton. First-year coach Rick Chamberlin is not new to the Flyer program as he is a former player and has spent 28 years as a Flyer assistant.

Chamberlin's last role before becoming the head coach was as Dayton defensive coordinator where the team has shined under his control. Dayton has led the Pioneer Football League in scoring defense the last seven seasons, including finishing second in NCAA Division I-AA (9.8) in 2002, third (14.1) in 2005 and fourth in FCS in 2007 (15.6). This year's team should be no different with five returning starters including five All-PFL members from a year ago. Heading the group will be first-teamer senior defensive tackle Kalen Hemmelgarn, who recorded 41 tackles as well as 8.5 sacks a year ago.

Elsewhere on the defensive side, last year's PFL Freshman of the Year Joe Castaneda should lead the secondary. The now sophomore cornerback had an impressive 51 tackles, three interceptions (tied for team high) and eight pass breakups. The third all-star returning and should aid Castaneda in the secondary is senior safety Corey Vossler, who was third on the team in tackles with 71 and tied for the team lead with three interceptions. Other All-PFL members in seniors, linebacker Steve McDonald and defensive end Scott Vossler should give the defense further leadership.

The Flyer offense will lose PFL Player of the Year quarterback Kevin Hoyng and returns only two starters overall in senior linemen: guard Pat McCormick and tackle Ryan Pollock. The quarterback position likely will be shared by two players. It might go to sophomore Steve Valentino, who was third on the depth chart last year. He played in 11 games in 2007, going 3-for-5 passing. He also gained 56 rushing yards but also is listed as a wideout as one of the team's fastest players. More likely, the opening day quarterback is likely to be senior Rob Florian, who has seen limited action in his first three seasons. Whoever the new quarterback is, he will have an inexperienced runningback behind him. Senior Joe Gulick, who rushed 82 yards and three touchdowns and also had four catches for 44 yards, is the returning rusher with the most experience.

Drake will be breaking in its second new head coach in as many years in 2008. Chris Creighton will replace Steve Loney, who resigned to become the offensive line coach for the NFL's St. Louis Rams after just one season in Des Moines following the departure of current Montana State coach Rob Ash. Creighton comes to Iowa's largest city after serving as head coach at Division III Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., the last seven years. He constructed a 63-15 record with teams winning four North Coast Athletic Conference championships, while competing in three DIII playoffs.

The Bulldogs team made a name for themselves a year ago in defeating the Gateway's Illinois State but Drake finished just 6-5 overall and lost four of its last five games. It will look to improve on that with their new coach and 12 starters returning.

The Bulldog offense will miss four-year All-PFL performer runningback Scott Phaydavong, who is Drake's all-time leading rusher with 5,830 yards. Creighton hopes to rely on senior quarterback Cole Ingle's leadership after the graduation of Phaydavong. Senior-to-be Derek Retherford shared time with Ingle last year but decided to forgo his senior season. The two QBs shared time last year with Ingle throwing for 1,387 yards and 11 touchdowns and Retherford throwing for 985 yards and five touchdowns. Junior Ben Ostermann, who played in five games with only five pass attempts last year, likely will be the strongest competitor for the starting position with Ingle. The Bulldog quarterback will have an All-PFL performer in junior center Quinn McVey.

Senior runningback Michael Bialas is a potential front-runner to replace Phaydavong. He was the second-leading rusher last season with 122 yards, and also was the second-leading rusher in 2005 with 413 yards. The wide receiver position will be headed by senior Zach Brower, who led the team with 651 yards and 47 receptions a year ago.

Drake likely will need to improve its defense to improve its victory total after yielding more than 26 points a game a year ago. The Bulldog will look to progress by building around senior safety Andy Green, who was an All-PFL performer a year ago with 69 tackles and three interceptions. Fellow All-PFL performer junior Andrew Asbell should head the defensive line after leading the team with 8.0 tackles for a loss and had 28 tackles overall. Leading tackler sophomore Ben Morrison will guide the linebacker group after his 74.5 tackles a year ago.

Morehead State was the lone team to beat Sports Network Cup winner Dayton a year ago. Unfortunately, the Eagles finished 7-4 overall and lost twice to PFL foes. MSU also lost to FBS newcomer Western Kentucky but still finished .500 or better for the 12th straight season. This year's team will look to be more consistent and is hopeful of finishing atop the PFL standings with 13 starters returning.

The Eagle defense was the hallmark of the team in 2007. MSU led the nation in rushing defense (53.9 yards/game) and returns six of last year's starting lineup. MSU also had another national leader in now senior cornerback David Hyland, who had a nation's best eight interceptions with one of those returned for a touchdown. Junior Andrew Doan is the Coach Matt Ballard's second first team All-PFL returnee on defense after he had a team second best 11 tackles for a loss and a total of 33 tackles from his defensive end position.

The Eagles also had two other returning All-PFL members from the second team in juniors; defensive tackle Derick Steiner and linebacker Wes McDermott. A year ago, Steiner added 34 tackles with seven for a loss while McDermott had a team second high 64 tackles with 8.5 for a loss and added two interceptions.

The Eagle offense must replace quarterback Brian Yost, but returns seven starters including four All-PFL performers. The option running attack that the Eagles employ should be fine with two All-PFL runningbacks returning in senior Eric Fitzpatrick and junior Jared Pendleton. Those two helped lead the Eagles to more than 144 yards a game rushing. The passing game should be good for the new quarterback, which likely will be last year's backup sophomore Evan Sawyer, with All-PFL receiver and kick returner Nick Feldman back for his senior year. Feldman led the team in receiving yards with 735 on 45 catches and had five touchdowns. Upfront, All-PFL center Nick Schoenfeld should be the offensive line leader in his senior campaign.

At **Davidson**, the talk last spring was about the North Carolina school's basketball team that advanced to the NCAA Basketball Tournament's Elite Eight and who narrowly lost in that round to eventual champion Kansas. The Wildcat fans should have a lot to look forward to with the football team, too. Coach Tripp Merritt returns 15 starters after a 6-4 2007 campaign with three of the losses coming within the Pioneer League play.

The Wildcat offense will be led by senior quarterback Ryan Alexander (2,238 yards, 18 TDs in 2007), the school's career record holder in passing and all-purpose yardage and an All-PFL performer a year ago. Also back are the Wildcats' top three tailbacks, Chad Barnes (372 yards, 2 TDs), Justin Williams (367 yards, 10 TDs) and Kenny Mantuo (316 yards, 7 TDs), as well as All-PFL wide receiver Kirk Benedict (19 receptions, 175 yards, 4 TDs). The offensive line will be headed by All-PFL senior tackle Will Nolte. The Wildcat offense hopes to continue the scoring with new offensive coordinator and offensive line coach Ryan Heasley, who made his way to Davidson from Washington University in St. Louis. Last year, Davidson average more than 31 points per game. Benedict replaces Mike Clark, who left Davidson to become the head coach at DIII Lycoming, Pa.

The Wildcat defense is where Coach Merritt hopes to improve as the team allowed over 28 points per game in 2007. The Davidson defense will try to reverse their fortunes by building around their top two 2007 tacklers in All-PFL senior linebacker Peter Bakke (71 tackles, 4.5 TFL, 2.5 sacks) and senior safety Matt Easton (71 tackles, 8.0 TFL, 2 sacks). The Wildcats also return All-PFL Honorable Mention senior nose guard Will Funderburg (9 tackles for loss, 4 sacks) to head the four down linemen.

Second year coach Kerwin Bell hopes his **Jacksonville** squad can turn things around in 2008. The Dolphins finished the 2007 season with just a 3-8 mark and loses 11 starters from that team. To make matters even more difficult, Bell's team will play a tougher schedule this year including a road contest at three-time defending FCS champion Appalachian State.

The biggest contest during spring and going into fall practices is the Dolphins' quarterback position. Four candidates are in the running for the starting position after the graduation loss of last year's quarterback Chris Horton. Erik Stepelton, Jeremy Thornton, Spencer Endsley and Jonathan Jones are all in the mix for the starting job. Sophomore Stepelton served as the backup last season and appeared in six games, throwing for 657 yards and three touchdowns and was the star of JU's spring game; throwing for 141 yards and one touchdown on 10-of-15 passing. Senior wide receiver Geavon Tribble will likely be a main receiving target. He was Jacksonville's leading receiver last year with 41 receptions for a team high 701 yards and five touchdowns.

Senior All-PFL honorable mention fullback Jeremy Brown should be a lead blocker for the rushing game but will be doing it for a new rusher after the loss of top tailback Jerry Brant. Brown rushed for two touchdowns but his main job is to pave the way for tailbacks, sophomore Tommie Rogers and junior Ron Harris. Senior tackle Mike Aguilar should anchor the offensive line.

The Dolphin defense hopes to improve around defensive backs Robson Noel and James Mills this year after giving up more than 425 yards per game a year ago. Senior Noel led the Dolphins in tackles with 80 from his cornerback position while being named to the All-PFL second team. Junior strong safety Jason Wood also should be a leader in the Dolphin secondary after recording 41 tackles. Linebacker Chris Cherry (48 tackles) should be the leader of the linebacker group.

Another team hoping to rebound in 2008 is **Valparaiso**. The Crusaders were 5-6 last year with just two of the victories coming within the PFL. This year, Coach Stacy Adams' team will get a new playing surface in which to play. Valparaiso's football stadium of Brown Field is getting a \$2.6 million dollar face-lift that will include a synthetic turf, a new scoreboard with video message board, and renovations of the existing seating to bring it into compliance with current ADA guidelines. In total, the Crusaders will return 18 starters to try to improve their victory total.

The Crusaders' offense was the best in the PFL in rushing last year and should again be good with the return of All-PFL honorees in senior tackle Ryan Kozey, senior wide receiver Steve Ogden and junior running back John Popper. Kozey helped pave the way for the ground game that averaged 203.5 yards per contest. Ogden led Valpo in receiving with 42 catches for 669 yards with seven touchdowns despite playing in just eight games and is in the Crusaders' top-five

all-time in receiving yards. Popper carried for 291 yards with four touchdowns a year ago.

The Valpo defense also will have several All-PFL performers returning as well on a team that was 12th in the country a year ago in number of sacks per game (2.73/game). These performers include senior linebacker Ryan Koepke, junior cornerback Kyle Himmelwright, and defensive ends, senior Andrew Mack and junior Adam Rundh. Koepke led the Crusaders in tackles with 79 stops, including five behind the line of scrimmage. Himmelwright led the team with five pass breakups and also had a team tying high three interceptions. Mack had 11.5 tackles for loss, including 5.5 sacks last season. Rundh led the team with 16 tackles for loss, including 7.5 sacks.

Butler is a team that did turn things around slightly last fall despite finishing with just a 4-7 overall mark. The Bulldogs finished a game better than the 2006 season and the highlight of the season for Jeff Voris' squad was winning its first four games — albeit all against lower divisional teams. After the 4-0 starter, however, the Bulldogs went winless against the PFL squads but return 15 starters from a year ago to build upon.

The Butler offense will be headed by team MVP sophomore runningback Scott Gray. Playing his first season with the Bulldogs last year, Gray led the PFL in scoring with 15 touchdowns, and he topped the Bulldogs in rushing with 547 yards. He will be led by all five offensive linemen returning in front of him but will see a new quarterback handing him the ball after the graduation of TJ Brown. The new signal caller will most likely be sophomore Matt Kobli, who saw action in eight games and passed for 465 yards last year. His top receiver returning is junior Dan Bohrer after catching 36 passes for 389 yards last season. Should the offense stall, All-PFL senior place kicker Jordan Quiroz can be called upon after finishing second on the team in scoring in 2007 with 53 points.

The Bulldog defense will need to replace two All-PFL performers in the Marzotto brothers, Chris and Mike. Junior linebacker Derek Guggenberger, who led the Bulldogs in tackles with 68, and senior linebacker Mike Bennett, who finished second on the team with 57 tackles, will look to be this year's defensive leaders.

Campbell is one of the newest teams to Division I football and will field a football team this fall for the first time in more than 50 years. The university is in Buies Creek, N.C., which is a little more than 160 miles east of Pioneer's other North Carolina school Davidson and is about 30 miles south of Raleigh. The Camels are members of the Atlantic Sun Conference for all non-football sports. Campbell was a junior college when it last fielded a team in 1950.

The Camels' head coach is Dale Steele, who was announced as the school's coach in June 2006. He comes to Buies Creek with more than 25 years of

football coaching experience — most recently spending two years as assistant head coach and running backs coach at the Southern Conference's Elon.

Campbell will play a full PFL schedule and also will play four lower-level schools including its first game at CU Football Stadium and home opener against DIII Birmingham-Southern Saturday. The Camels will play their five home games at their new home, which broke ground on March 15, 2007.

On that field, the biggest standouts during their spring practices have been freshman running back Carl Smith, who rushed for 114 yards in the Camels' spring game and the play of two other freshmen at the cornerback positions in Jared Hart and Brad Brower. The team will look for leadership from FBS Marshall defensive end transfer E.J. Rascoe, who is the team's only non-freshman but is only a sophomore.

* * *

Pioneer League Game of the Week

Marist @ San Diego, Aug. 29

Early out-of-conference test for the Toreros against the now Indy Red Foxes on this Friday night at home.

Jacksonville @ Appalachian State, Sept. 6

The Dolphins stepped up their out-of-conference schedule. Was this too big of a test, however, against the three-time defending FCS national champion Mountaineers?

Fordham @ Dayton, Sept. 13

The Flyers defeated the Patriot league champion Rams a year ago on the road. Will they be able to do the same at home?

San Diego @ Campbell, Sept. 20

The Camels first Pioneer league home contest. Will this game will be tough against USD?

San Diego @ Drake, Sept. 27

Early season test for these top two traditional teams in the Toreros and Bulldogs in the Pioneer League.

Morehead State @ Davidson, Oct. 4

The Wildcats hope that the home field again this year will put them over the edge against the Eagles. It did not help last year in an Eagle route, however.

Drake @ Dayton, Oct. 11

Before San Diego won the title three years ago, the winner of this contest usually had been the PFL winner. Even with the emergence of USD, this should still be a highly fought battle.

Dayton @ Davidson, Oct. 18

The Wildcats hung tough on the road last year at the Flyers. Will the home field be a true advantage this year for Davidson?

Morehead State @ Butler, Oct. 25

The Bulldogs come into the season having gone nearly two years without a PFL victory. Will they have a win at this time or will this be a game at home that might stop this losing streak?

Dayton @ San Diego, Nov. 1

This likely will be the PFL game of the year, and the winner likely will be the PFL and Sports Network Cup winner as well.

San Diego @ Davidson, Nov. 8

Coming across country for the Toreros is never easy. Will this help the Wildcats to a victory in this game?

Morehead State @ Dayton, Nov. 15

The Eagles handed the Flyers their only loss a year ago. The Flyers will be out for revenge on MSU spoiling their perfect season opportunity a year ago.

UC Davis @ San Diego, Nov. 22

This California battle has been in the northern part of the state the last two years with the Aggies getting the victories in both. Will the home field give USD the advantage in this game and send the Toreros to the FCS playoffs?

Gridiron Classic Pioneer Conf. Champion @ Northeast Conf. Champion, Dec. 6
Can the PFL winner take a third Gridiron Classic in a row?

* * *

Butler Bulldogs

Location: Indianapolis, Ind.

Stadium: Butler Bowl (3,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Jeff Voris (7-15 @ BU & 22-49 Overall) 3rd Season at BU

Who's Gone: QB T. J. Brown, WR Nate Miller, DE Chris Marzotto, FS Zack Zimmer, SS Dale Murzyn.

Who's Back: RB Scott Gray, LB Derek Guggenberger, LB Mike Bennett, PK Jordan Quiroz, WR Dan Bohrer, QB Matt Kobli.

Historical Fact: The Bulldogs competed in the Division II playoffs three times — 1983, 1988 and 1991. BU is 0-3 all-time in postseason play.

Last Season: Butler's four victories were the most since 2002. The Bulldogs won their first four games but lost their last seven to finish 4-7.

This Season: In Coach Voris' third season, the Bulldog faithful hope he can produce even more victories this season.

Campbell Fighting Camels

Location: Buies Creek, N.C.

Stadium: CU Football Stadium (5,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Dale Steele (0-0 @ CU & Overall) 1st Season at CU

Who's Gone: None

Who's Back: RB Carl Smith, OT Bobby Trimble, WR Kelvin Murphy, CB Jared Hart, CB Brad Brower, DE Jason Hill, WR Alex Royal, OC Troy Horan, TE Josh Owens.

Historical Fact: The Camels last fielded a football team in 1950 as a junior college.

Last Season: The team practiced last fall, August through November but did not play any games.

This Season: With mostly freshmen in their first year of play, the Camels likely will have some growing pains this year for Steele, but the team should get experience for several talented, young players to work toward the future.

Davidson Wildcats

Location: Davidson, N.C.

Stadium: Richardson Stadium (6,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Guy "Tripp" Merritt (16-14 @ DU & Overall) 4th Season @ DU

Who's Gone: WR Ryan Hubbard, OT George Zoeckler, LB Bud Crawford.

Who's Back: QB Ryan Alexander, RB Chad Barnes, RB Justin Williams, RB Kenny Mantuo, FB Kirk Benedict, OT Will Nolte, DL Will Funderburg, LB Peter Bakke, S Matt Easton.

Historical Fact: The last conference championship for the Wildcats came in 1959 as a Southern Conference member.

Last Season: Davidson finished the 2007 campaign with a 6-4 record for the second consecutive season and posted a 4-3 mark in PFL play.

This Season: Merritt hopes to exceed the six victory total for the first time since 2002 (7-4).

Dayton Flyers

Location: Dayton, Ohio

Stadium: Welcome Stadium (12,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Rick Chamberlin (0-0 @ DU & Overall) 1st Season @ UD

Who's Gone: QB Kevin Hoyng, TE Matt Champa, OC Blake Bikowski, OT Jim Croghan.

Who's Back: DE Scott Vossler, DT Kalen Hemmelgarn, CB Joe Castaneda, LB Steve McDonald, DE Scott Vossler, OG Pat McCormick, OT Ryan Pollock.

Historical Fact: The Flyers claimed the co-championship in the PFL a year ago, the school's ninth league title in the last 15 years.

Last Season: The 11-1 team was voted The Sports Network FCS Mid-Major National Champions after defeating No. 3 Albany 42-21 in the Gridiron Classic Bowl Game.

This Season: The Flyers look to repeat as champions, but they'll have to do it with half of their starters from a year ago lost.

Drake Bulldogs

Location: Des Moines, Iowa

Stadium: Drake Stadium (14,557 Capacity)

Head Coach: Chris Creighton (0-0 @ DU, 63-15 Overall) 1st Season @ DU

Who's Gone: RB Scott Phaydavong, QB Derek Retherford, DB Jacob Craig, TE Dan Marx.

Who's Back: QB Cole Ingle, QB Ben Ostermann, S Andy Green, OC Quinn McVey, DT Andrew Asbell, LB Ben Morrison, RB Michael Bialas, LB Cole Douglas, LB Cale Hunt.

Historical Fact: Drake has made it to postseason play six times — the last being a 2004 PFL Championship game victory over Morehead State.

Last Season: The Bulldogs finished 6-5 under stopgap coach Steve Loney, who returned to the NFL as an assistant. He replaced longtime coach Rob Ash, now at Montana State, in summer 2007.

This Season: Creighton hopes to improve on last year's six victory total, but he is the third coach in as many years in Des Moines.

Jacksonville Dolphins

Location: Jacksonville, Fla.

Stadium: D.B. Mine Field (5,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Kerwin Bell (3-8 @ JU & Overall) 2nd Season @ JU

Who's Gone: WR/RS Nate Connor, QB Chris Horton, OG David Locander, DB James Mills.

Who's Back: CB Robson Noel, FB Jeremy Brown, OT Mike Aguilar, RB Rudell Small, WR Geavon Tribble, SS Jason Wood, LB Chris Cherry, LB Joseph Fennell, DL Austin Knipp.

Historical Fact: In 1996 the program was instated. The Dolphins began play in 1998. JU has one PFL South title (when league was split into two divisions) in that time in 2001.

Last Season: Coach Bell's first season in Jacksonville resulted in just a 3-8 record.

This Season: The Dolphins will play a top 10 FCS team for the first time in their history when they visit Appalachian State and overall, they hope to improve from the three victory total from a year ago.

Morehead State Eagles

Location: Morehead, Ky.

Stadium: Jayne Stadium (10,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Matt Ballard (81-70 @ MSU & 116-95-1 Overall, 15th Season @ MSU

Who's Gone: QB Brian Yost, LB Brett Mazzaro, LB Andrew Sturzenbecker, S Bryan Gray, S Jordan Shafer, DE Aaron Diaz.

Who's Back: OG Jacob Nail, OC Nick Schoenfeld, OT Chris Setters, WR Nick Feldman RB Erick Fitzpatrick, RB Jerrod Pendleton, DT Derick Steiner, DT Andrew Wilhoite, LB Wes McDermott, CB David Hyland, CB Henry Hudson.

Historical Fact: Two former Eagle quarterbacks transformed playing and coaching careers into positions in television sports and are among some of the best-known analysts in the industry in Phil Simms (CBS) and Mike Gottfried (ESPN).

Last Season: Coach Matt Ballard's Eagles finished third in the PFL behind Mid-Major national champion Dayton and San Diego, both of whom had 6-1 league records. MSU handed Dayton its only loss.

This Season: With six players on each side of the ball returning as starters, Morehead State hopes to surpass Dayton and San Diego to obtain its first conference title since winning the PFL South title in 2005.

San Diego Toreros

Location: San Diego, Calif.

Stadium: Torero Stadium (7,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Ron Caragher (9-2 @ USD & Overall, 2nd Season @ USD)

Who's Gone: QB Josh Johnson, DE Eric Bakhtiari, WR Wes Doyle, OC Jordan Paopao, LB Ronnie Pentz, PK Hutch Parker, OG Gabe DeAnda, LB Tyler Evans.

Who's Back: RB JT Rogan, WR John Matthews, CB Gabe Derricks, CB Ben Hannula, OT Deene Kabling, OG Conrad Smith, OT Jason McFarland, TE Mitch Ryan, FB Nick Coppedge, S Patrick O'Neill, DT Chris Gianelli, LB Jordan Sinclair, NG Alex Rice, DE Julian Strickland.

Historical Fact: Former Torero quarterback Josh Johnson became USD's first football player to be selected in the NFL Draft when the Tampa Bay Buccaneers picked him in the 5th round (160 pick overall).

Last Season: In Coach Caragher's first season, USD finished 9-2 overall but a loss at eventual champion Dayton doomed its chances at another Sports Network Cup.

This Season: The Toreros return 15 starters total in the hopes of getting past Dayton and the remainder of the PFL for another conference and potentially another national title.

Valparaiso Crusaders

Location: Valparaiso, Ind.

Stadium: Brown Field (5,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Stacy Adams (11-22 @ VU & Overall, 4th Season @ VU)

Who's Gone: RB Jeff Horton, WR Bret Jaskiw, WR Ben Faulkner, DL Doug Howard.

Who's Back: WR Steve Ogden, OT Ryan Kozey, LB Ryan Koepke, DE Andrew Mack, DE Adam Rundh, CB Kyle Himmelwright, RB John Popper, DB Matt Watkins.

Historical Fact: The 2003 PFL championship victory gave the Crusaders their first outright PFL title since joining the league as a charter member in 1993. Valpo also shared the title in 2000.

Last Season: Coach Adams' team finished two games better than in 2006 but was still under .500 at 5-6.

This Season: The Crusaders hope to finish above .500 for the first time since winning the PFL title in 2003 and should have a good chance with 18 starters returning.

Davidson plays Division I football. Really, they do.

By Chuck Burton, CSN Columnist

Although their football team is a bit overshadowed these days by their Elite 8 appearance in the men's NCAA basketball tournament, Davidson does indeed play non-scholarship football at the Division I level. They play in the Pioneer Football League (or PFL), a football-only league which features nine institutions that pursue cost-containment football in the form of no football scholarships.

You could say that many of the schools in the PFL are closely tied to their basketball roots. Six PFL teams have had great recent success on the men's hardwood, all qualifying for postseason play this year in men's hoops.

In addition to Davidson's thrilling run in the men's NCAA tournament, PFL leaguemates Butler, Drake, and San Diego all made the tournament this as well year -- and had Drake made one more basket against Western Kentucky, all four schools would have won first-round games. Dayton, the PFL champion in football, qualified for the NIT in men's basketball and may just win it. And Valparaiso, who famously qualified for the Sweet 16 in 1998, recently won their first round game in the inaugural College Basketball Invitational, or CBI.

In fact, if you add to the mix Marist, who will be joining the PFL in 2009, and Campbell, who is joining in the fall of this year, eight of the soon-to-be eleven PFL members have had men's basketball teams who have made the NCAA tournament in the last 10 years. Three of those teams have made runs to the men's Sweet 16 (Valparaiso, Butler and Davidson), while another (Marist) had their women's team make the Sweet 16 two years ago as well.

What's the story behind their success in basketball and their determination to play non-scholarship Division I football? It starts with an NCAA rule change in 1991 which in effect created a "subdivision within a division".

The 'Dayton Rule'

Dayton has had a long and illustrious history in football at the Division I level, including a stint in what is now the MAC and a bowl game appearance. In 1977,

however, Dayton made the move to drop to Division III in football but keep the rest of their athletic programs in Division I, including their wildly successful men's basketball program.

Inadvertently, this made Dayton a Division III powerhouse. Once they abolished football scholarships they went 158-29-3 in Division III. From 1980 to 1992, Dayton qualified for the playoffs 8 out of 12 years, appearing in five Division III championship games and winning two of them. Although Dayton didn't offer athletic scholarships, they could offer other things – such as Division I training facilities and tickets to see Dayton basketball games.

"For instance, we had a 200-piece marching band," former Dayton head football coach Mike Kelly told the *Dayton Daily News*. "There were some who thought that wasn't what Division III was meant to be. My answer was I don't remember any of our band members running for a touchdown."

As a result of this dominance and these differences that made D-III schools uncomfortable, the "Dayton Rule" was born. Essentially, it prevented schools to do what Dayton and others had done: namely, host a non-scholarship football team at the Division III level while maintaining the rest of their athletics program as Division I.

Faced with being forced to play at the Division I level, unable to play in the lower Division playoffs, the six schools in Dayton's situation (Dayton, Valparaiso, Butler, Drake, Evansville, and San Diego) bonded together and formed the Pioneer Football League in 1992.

"The league was created by necessity," said Ted Kissell, Dayton's athletic director, to the *Dayton Daily News*. "It was without historical rivals, without tradition, but with essentially a common problem, as we wanted to continue to play this brand of football. The rug had been pulled out from under us, all of us. The challenge there is keeping the fans involved as much as recruiting players."

The Golden Goose

Schools like Butler and Dayton get men's basketball exposure that some schools can only dream of. "We bring in over 9 million dollars per year on men's basketball," said Kissell. "They get what they need to compete at the highest level."

"Some of the benefits may be intangible," noted Barry Collier, athletic director at Butler, to the *Des Moines Register*. "But some of them are immense. The publicity Butler has received [in men's basketball] in the last two years amounts to a 40-hour national television infomercial."

It's no secret that the schools who pursue non-scholarship football at the Division I level generally are schools that have basketball programs that can make a good

mid-major run at a national championship. What may be a secret is that they've decided to keep football on board while watching other schools let their football teams wither or cut the sport entirely.

Through the years, many smaller schools have folded their football programs in order to put resources into men's basketball. The Division I football graveyard is littered with such schools like Santa Clara, St. Mary's (CA), Pacific, Centenary and Gonzaga who made the choice to pursue Division I basketball to its fullest and discontinue football to push more dollars that way.

Just this last year the MAAC ceased to exist as a non-scholarship football conference when over its 14 year history six of its members (LaSalle, Canisius, St. John's, Fairfield, Siena, and St. Peter's) discontinued football.

Though most of these schools have quoted budgetary and Title IX concerns as reasons to drop football, Kissell doesn't feel that Dayton's spending on football has any ill effect on the basketball program at all.

"We're very proud of our strong non-scholarship football tradition," he said. "The financial piece is actually a plus for Dayton since we have about 110 kids per year on the roster. After academic and need-based aid are subtracted, the University of Dayton still brings in about \$1.4 million for a program that costs at most \$1 million. That \$1M figure includes not just the cost of football, but the gender equity and student-athlete services consequences [Title IX] of sponsoring football."

Of course, the success of the basketball program also has a positive effect on the football programs as well.

"They've (Dayton, Butler, Drake, San Diego) really done well, haven't they?" Kelly asked the *Dayton Daily News*. "That's all good for the PFL, for the football piece of it. It just gives us all more exposure."

The Brand Of Football

The PFL flies in the face of these schools that have dropped football entirely. They have come up with another way of fielding a football team amid rising basketball expense: fund a non-scholarship team. You can pursue your dreams of basketball grandeur – and still have a proper homecoming weekend in October, too.

It attracts the coaching professions' best and brightest, too. Commitment to football was also in the forefront of San Diego athletic director Ky Snyder's mind when he convinced NFL veteran Jim Harbaugh to come to sunny San Diego to coach the Toreros in 2004. After three wildly successful seasons – including only one league loss, two league championships and a win in the Gridiron Classic – Harbaugh ultimately became Stanford's head football coach in 2007.

The hiring of Harbaugh, men's basketball coach Bill Grier and women's basketball coach Cindy Williams defines Snyder's tenure as athletic director – and demonstrates that San Diego is firmly committed to winning championships with some of the best coaching staffs in the business. That commitment includes football.

“Football is an important part of Valpo's athletics tradition,” said Mark LaBarbera, Valparaiso's athletic director. “We have been playing football since 1919, played in a bowl game in the 1950's, have two alumni who have played on Super Bowl championship teams, and have won eight conference championships. We believe that football adds to the richness of the campus experience since it is an opportunity to bring alumni and current students together. Homecoming is an important event on campus that is centered around football. Our alumni value our continuing commitment to football.”

It also does something else important – it attracts men to their predominantly female campuses. With a non-scholarship football program, it decreases the ratio of men to women for Title IX without spending on athletic scholarships for this team. And – paradoxically – it theoretically allows these schools to allow more men's scholarships in other sports as a result.

Spending

On average PFL teams spend less on football than the rest of their FCS peers. For comparison, in 2007 Butler spent about \$438,000 to support their football program, which included a trip to Jacksonville, Florida for a PFL league game against the Dolphins. Compare those numbers to Indiana State of the Gateway conference, who spent \$1.7 million dollars on their football program and whose furthest road game was a six hour road trip to Missouri State.

“We have found that non-scholarship football brings leaders to Davidson without the requisite levels of financial aid, salary support, recruiting expense, staffing requirements and admission concerns derived from full-scholarship football,” says Davidson athletics director Jim Murphy. “Adding the extra few million dollars to our operating budgets does not make sense.”

Athletic budgets for football vary wildly throughout the PFL. San Diego spent nearly three times Butler's budget on football, while the average amount PFL teams spend on their programs are about \$700,000.

“The major difference in commitment between our brand of football and others in the FCS is scholarships,” says Drake athletic director Sandra Clubb. “The coaching is comparable and investments in other areas of the program are, for the most part, comparable.”

Although the football teams don't offer scholarships, that doesn't mean that everyone on each team is paying for their education. There are other ways that football athletes in the PFL can receive scholarships.

For example, academic scholarships can be won by athletes as well as regular students: Drake defensive back Stacey Walker won an academic scholarship in 2006 from the Boys' and Girls' Clubs in their "National Youth Of The Year" campaign.

Trust Us

Davidson may not have scholarships targeted for football specifically. However, the Wildcats get to take advantage of a program available to every student that can have the same effect as being a scholarship.

Davidson offers an extremely generous financial aid program to all of their students, including non-scholarship football players. This is done through an endowed organization called the Davidson Trust.

In 2007, Davidson announced the creation of this trust and the intent to replace all student loan portions with grants in all its need-based financial aid packages. What this means for incoming students is that they still need to go through the admissions office and the financial aid office to determine aid – but the packages will not have any loan portion anymore, only grant and work-study.

The Davidson Trust, though not fully endowed through alumni donations just yet, has already had a great positive impact on Davidson. "Our applications are up 10%," Murphy said. "So I think from a sheer volume standpoint the Davidson Trust has had a very positive effect upon interest level amongst high school students. But I also think there are some other factors that might enter into that – certainly the success of our men's basketball program, and the positive publicity we've received along with that, I think all of that has affected the increase.

"We want students to understand that we're need-blind," Murphy told me. "The Davidson trust tells them that we can provide a Davidson education to anyone regardless of their financial situation. And that applies for all students, not just athletes."

When announcing the program, Davidson president Tom Ross said "This name says something about who we are as a college, and who we are as a community. It harkens back to our founding principles, and it reminds us of the ongoing authority of the Honor Code. It is a pledge to prospective students, and a promise to our alumni. The Davidson Trust will strengthen Davidson in many ways."

One of those ways, apparently, has been men's basketball. Although Davidson offers athletic scholarships in basketball, the availability of generous financial aid

for walk-on athletes as well gives Davidson great flexibility on how to allocate their scholarship dollars.

In theory, this could also benefit Davidson non-scholarship football significantly as well. Even though no scholarship dollars are available, a student that wishes to play Division I football that qualifies for Davidson will have generous grant dollars at their disposal for financial aid. It's identical to the Patriot League's grant-in-aid program except that the aid is available to all students, not just athletes.

In theory, however, the upshot to Davidson is the same: more athletes who will be leaving college debt-free since they are receiving grants in order to pursue their education at Davidson. From a student's perspective, that's not much different than getting an athletic scholarship from Missouri State – either way, their education is paid for.

"Intuitively, the effect to athletic recruiting has to be positive," Murphy said.

Expansion

With Campbell starting up a non-scholarship team this fall, Marist out of New York joining the PFL party in 2009, and multiple schools considering starting up non-scholarship programs in the future, the future, overall, looks pretty bright.

Whether fueled by men's basketball or not, one thing that is clear is that the non-scholarship brand of football of the PFL is thriving.

Southern Conference 2008 Preview

By Myron Hosea, CSN So South Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Appalachian State
2. Elon
- 3.(Tie) The Citadel
Furman
Georgia Southern
Wofford
7. Chattanooga
8. Western Carolina
9. Samford

Offensive Player of the Year: QB Armanti Edwards, Junior, Appalachian State

Defensive Player of the Year: LB Pierre Banks, Senior, Appalachian State

Biggest Shoes to Fill

Corey Lynch, Safety, Appalachian State

The Mountaineers have loads of talent, and it seems likely that one or two players will become playmakers for the defense. Will they match Lynch's uncanny prowess for being in the right place so often? In 56 career games – that, of course, included three national championship games – Lynch made 358 tackles and intercepted 24 passes. His six blocked kicks included the game-saver against Michigan. Combining interceptions and fumbles recovered, he took the ball away 31 times. In 2007, he made 111 tackles and six interceptions en route to being named SoCon Defensive Player of the Year as well as an All American.

* * *

As people discuss Appalachian State's historic three-year title run, they might overlook an important aspect of the achievement. Mountaineer head coach Jerry Moore referenced it following the huge upset of Michigan. He tempered the enthusiasm just a bit that day by reminding everyone that the Southern Conference schedule remained. A full season of tests awaited Appalachian State.

Moore knew the Southern Conference was going to be its most balanced and competitive in some time, perhaps ever. The Mountaineers lost twice in 2007, both times to SoCon foes. Three of the team's six losses during the three-year championship run have been to Southern Conference teams (the other three came against FBS teams).

Indeed, Appalachian State's titles have been forged in the competitive fires of the Southern Conference. Those fires might never have burned hotter than they did in 2007.

With two weeks to go in the 2007 season, five teams still had a shot at the top two spots in the conference. Only once before had a team won the Southern Conference with more than one loss (Furman in 1981), and last year two teams tied for the title with two losses each. Appalachian State and Wofford tied for the title with the Terriers receiving the automatic playoff spot thanks to their victory over the Mountaineers last September. Four other teams – The Citadel, Elon, Furman and Georgia Southern – tied for the next spot at 4-3.

The competitive fires should burn hot again this year. Six teams – Appalachian State (at No. 1), Wofford (10), Elon (15), Georgia Southern (16), The Citadel (21) and Furman (25) – have made the 2008 AGS Preseason Top 25. Clearly, the predictions at the beginning of this section, particularly for the tie at third if not for all of the top six teams, could be tossed into the air to create another, legitimate ranking.

Appalachian State has the talent – led by quarterback Armanti Edwards – to pursue title No. 4. Elon and The Citadel had breakthrough seasons, and both want to sustain that energy. Wofford looks to retool yet again and contend while Furman and Georgia Southern desire to return to the position of conference leader and playoff participant. Chattanooga and Western Carolina are just plain hungry. Samford certainly wants to make a statement in its Southern Conference debut.

It should be another great year of competitive football in the Southern Conference.

Opponents have to find it frustrating that after three straight national championships, **Appalachian State** still appears formidable and capable of going the distance. Of course, to the Mountaineers faithful, it's great news indeed.

Head coach Jerry Moore and his staff do have some large holes to fill. Corey Lynch, one of the best defensive playmakers in SoCon history leaves a big gap at safety. Replacing Kevin Richardson's 4,804 rushing yards and 66 rushing touchdowns is no small task. Place-kicker Julian Rauch kicked 17 field goals a year ago and scored 373 points for his career. A bundle of players who helped make Appalachian State a power – offensive guard Kerry Brown, wide receivers Dexter Jackson and Hans Batichon, center Scott Suttle, backup quarterback Trey Elder, and corners Justin Woazeah and Jerome Touchstone – have departed. Now the focus rests on the 14 returning starters and the players who have their time to shine.

Any preview of the Mountaineers begins with junior quarterback Armanti Edwards. Looking like a magician many times, Edwards began the season by guiding Appalachian to the upset of Michigan. He fought back from an injury that kept him out or limited in a few games. He rushed for 1,588 yards and 21 touchdowns while throwing for 1,948 yards and 17 more scores. Edwards showed his ability with 313 yards rushing in the national semifinal win over Richmond. The team hopes Edwards will be more durable this season. The Mountaineers will miss Elder as the backup quarterback. He stepped in for Edwards and led the team to a couple of early wins.

Despite the loss of skill position talent, Appalachian has several players to depend on. Devon Moore takes over for Richardson. He rushed for 459 yards and seven touchdowns. He helped the Mountaineers land a staggering early punch in the title game against Delaware with a 46-yard touchdown run on the team's second possession.

Several receivers are lined up to replace Jackson and Batichon. Coco Hillary caught 23 passes while T. J. Courman and Josh Johnson caught 18 and 17 passes respectively. Tavaris Washington, Blake Elder, Brian Quick, and James Hill figure in the mix as well. On the line, tackles Brad Coley and Jonathan Bieschke will anchor a line needing a bit of rebuilding.

The defense welcomes back six starters, including five of the team's top seven tacklers. Linebackers Jacque Roman (127 tackles) and D. J. Smith (121) led the team in tackles and will team with Bandit Pierre Banks (108 tackles) to take the role of playmaker on the defense. Combined, they accounted for three interceptions and six fumbles recovered.

They have the advantage of operating behind a solid front wall with three returning starters. Ends Tony Robertson and tackles Daniel Finnerty and Anthony Williams made 167 tackles, 35.5 tackles for loss, and 12 sacks. They will miss end Gary Tharrington (84 tackles, 18 for loss, 5 sacks) who was ruled academically ineligible.

New faces will be found in the secondary as all four starters are gone. Coming out of spring practice, Mark LeGree held the safety spot Lynch once did. Leonard Love is the starter at nickel while Cortez Gilbert and Jared Reine start at the corners. Gilbert and Love both recorded interceptions while Gilbert made 27 stops, LeGree 20, and Love 19.

Punter Neil Young returns after averaging 37.8 per punt. Stepping up to replace Rauch in the place-kicker role is sophomore Jason Vitaris, who made both of his extra point attempts and handled a few kickoffs. The Mountaineers will miss the exciting Jackson as punt returner, but Hillary may take on that role along with kickoff returns. He averaged 24 yards per kickoff return and returned three punts at 18 yards per.

The Mountaineers do have a challenging schedule between them and a return to the playoffs. The win over Michigan shows anything is possible, but the opening game match up of defending Division I champs will be tough. The nationally-televised game at LSU will generate a lot of interest. Appalachian also faces a rematch with James Madison, this time in Harrisonburg, VA. The Dukes stood three yards from knocking the Mountaineers out of the playoffs in the first round last year. Oh, and don't forget the eight SoCon foes who would love nothing more than upsetting Appalachian State. It will be interesting to see how the Mountaineers handle the challenge.

Elon's first four seasons in the Southern Conference were unexceptional if not miserable. The Phoenix won just five of 29 league games while going 13-32 overall. Then things seemed to connect in Pete Lembo's second year as head coach, and Elon broke through for a 7-4 record – the first winning season since 2000. The team was one of the four schools tied at 4-3.

Lembo has a squad that should continue to make noise in the SoCon. The Phoenix returns eight starters on offense, 10 on defense and both kickers.

Quarterback Scott Riddle earned the National Freshman of the Year honor by registering impressive numbers. Under his command, the Phoenix offense finished second in passing in all of FCS, averaging 357 yards a game. They also finished 10th in scoring at 36 a game. Riddle threw 508 times, completing 346 for 3,817 yards and 31 touchdowns.

Riddle teams with wide receiver Terrell Hudgins to generate lots of yardage. Hudgins caught 117 passes last year for 1,474 yards and 18 scores. Hudgins and Michael Mayers finished 1-2 in the SoCon in receiving the last two years, but Mayers has graduated. Bo Williamson steps up from third receiver to second after catching 40 passes in 2007. Tight end Matt Leddy (17 receptions) and wide receiver Sean Jeffcoat will be available, too.

In this passing scheme, protection is important, and Elon has experienced players up front. Chris Werden, David Harrison, Jeff Allen and Dave McClain headline the offensive line.

With the focus on the passing attack, Elon rushed for only 710 yards as a team. Leading rusher T. J. Clegg finished his Elon career, so sophomores Brandon Newsome (238 yards) and Dontay Taylor (170) will fill the tailback spot.

The 10 returning defensive starters will look to improve on their 2007 numbers when Elon surrendered 30 points and 407 yards a game. In the last two conference games, the team yielded 52 points to Furman and 42 to The Citadel in losses that cost the Phoenix a shot at the title and the playoffs.

Linebackers Brandon Wiggins and Corey Weaver have all-conference potential. Wiggins made 83 stops while Weaver added 80, including 10.5 tackles for losses and four sacks. Other leaders are defensive backs Walker White (76 tackles) and Nolan Ward (three interceptions).

Defensive ends Tim Happer and Jordan Gibson anchor the front wall along with nose guard Eric Ludwig. Cornerback Karlos Sullivan (41 tackles, 2 interceptions) and free safety Cameron McGlenn (60 tackles) give the Phoenix an experienced secondary.

Andrew Wilcox was one of several solid placekickers in the SoCon last year. He made all 50 extra point attempts and 14 of 24 field goals. His overtime field goal lifted Elon to a key home triumph over Georgia Southern. Brandon Lane led the conference in punting at 42.9 per kick. Sullivan finished second in the SoCon in punt returns at 11.8 per, but the Phoenix will have to replace Mayers, who led the conference in kickoff returns.

The Phoenix has its own challenging schedule to manage. They open at home against national semifinalist Richmond and close the season at defending Big South champ Liberty. Among conference opponents, they have to travel to Georgia Southern and Appalachian State. The latter is the team's last SoCon game of the season and could be a deciding factor in the league race.

Under Mike Ayers, **Wofford** College has been a model of consistency. The Terriers have six straight winning seasons, and they captured a share of the league title in 2007. The season emitted a roller-coaster feel, however, embodied in Wofford winning the league's automatic qualifier then getting sent across the country to play unbeaten Montana. Typical of the Terriers, though, they upset Montana, just as they had done to then No. 1 Appalachian State in September.

Wofford returns six starters from an offense that finished second nationally in rushing offense with 318 yards a game. Quarterback Josh Collier is gone, but Ben Widmyer capably filled in when Collier missed a couple of early games due to injury. Widmyer threw for 361 yards and four scores and ran for 242 yards and two scores.

The imaginative Terrier offense utilizes several players – eight rushed for 100 or more yards – and they'll need someone to step in for Kevious Johnson, who rushed for 1,262 yards. They also have to replace fullbacks Michael Hobbs and Adrian Young, who combined for 922 yards and 12 touchdowns. Jeremy Marshall (418 yards) and Michael Rucker are the leading candidates at halfback while Dane Romero (360 yards, five touchdowns) is expected to start at fullback. Sean Lees and Matthew Boggs should carry the ball as well.

Wofford receivers don't catch many passes, but in 2007 they were known for catching passes at critical times. Wide receiver Andy Strickland (30 catches, five

scores), tight end Fenn Allen (16 receptions) and wide receiver Justice Joslin (13 catches) often made key receptions.

Leading the way for the skill positions are three returning starters on the offensive line: tackles Ben Quick and Derek Wooten and guard Ben Miller. Trey Johnson and Pat Illig are expected to start at center and guard, respectively.

The Terriers return just four starters to a defense that finished second in the league in rush defense and total defense. They also led in scoring defense, allowing 24.8 points a game. As the offense did, though, Wofford utilized a lot of players, so defenders with some experience remain available.

All conference linebacker Seth Goldwire led the team with 108 tackles. Fellow linebacker starters James Mitchell (48 tackles) and Matt Norcia (five sacks) return to give Wofford a solid middle defensively.

Nose tackle Layton Backer brings his 28 tackles, 7.5 for loss, back to the defense. New starters Mitch Clark and Ryan Young (25 tackles) flank Baker at the defensive end positions. The secondary features four new starters: corners Jordan Ingram and Mychael Johnson and safeties Jason Leventis and Greg Gasparato. Leventis and Gasparato – along with backups Gary Blount (linebacker) and Buck Brown (safety) – all have started games in the past.

Placekicker Patrick Mugan set school records in 2007 for points by a kicker (84) and extra points (57 of 59). Punter Chris Tommie averaged 39.8 per kick.

This year, Wofford spends September on the road with trips to Charleston Southern, South Carolina and Georgia Southern. It will face Appalachian State's bid for payback on Halloween night in Boone. As always, the rivalry game with Furman will mean a lot in the standings, especially because it comes in the last week of the season.

Kevin Higgins has guided **The Citadel** to steady improvement in his three years, capped by 2007's 7-4 record and 4-3 conference mark. The Bulldogs played Wisconsin even on the road for three quarters before losing 45-31, then won key conference games against Furman and Elon. They did this with a senior-laden team and this year will seek to show the program has developed depth.

Quarterback Duran Lawson, running Tory Cooper and wide receiver Andre Roberts paced the offense for much of the season. Lawson went down for the year with an injury in the eighth game. While that hurt, it did give Bart Blanchard much needed experience. Now a sophomore, Blanchard's resume shows 201 yards rushing and 824 yards passing. He completed 64 percent of his passes and tossed just one interceptions.

He benefits from Roberts' return. Roberts caught 78 passes for 1,060 yards and 10 scores. Wide receiver Joshua Haney (18 catches) and tight end Taylor Cornett possess the most experience among other returning receivers.

Cooper and Lawson finished as The Citadel's leading rushers in 2007. Cooper's 1,041 yards and 19 touchdowns on the ground represent challenging numbers for prospective replacements. Sophomore Cody Wilson rushed for 240 yards in 2007. The blockers will be key to the running game. Tackles Daniel DeHaven and David Morbitzer return along with guard Clay Muirhead.

The defense lost just four starters, but they played key roles as The Citadel finished third in the league in scoring defense (28.2 a game). Linebacker Andrew Rowell (102 tackles), safety Joshua Lawson (96), and lineman Trevar Broughton (5.5 sacks) led the defense and were particularly important to the unit.

Tackle Kevin McCaskill posted the most tackles (55) among the returnees. Cornerback Tillman Millhouse and strong safety Dwight House started every game, and cornerback Ryan Jones started several. End Dewitt Jones and noseguard Terrence Reese join McCaskill as returning starters on the line. Sophomore Reggie Rice started nine games at linebacker.

The Bulldogs must replace placekicker Mike Adams (92 points), but punter Mark Kaspar, second in the league at 40.9 per punt, returns. Roberts averaged 10.7 yards per punt return.

The Citadel visits Clemson in Week Two and closes the season at Florida. The team also travels to Appalachian State and Furman in October. Keeping the momentum for another winning season and a shot at the conference title represents a real challenge against this schedule.

Under the weight of a tough early schedule and after losses to rivals Wofford, The Citadel and Appalachian State, **Furman** appeared headed for a losing season going into Week Nine. Head coach Bobby Lamb rallied the team, though, and the Paladins nipped Elon and Georgia Southern by three and two points, respectively, and then beat Western Carolina for a 6-5 record and a spot among the second-place four.

The Paladins face the challenge of rebounding against another tough schedule while finding players to step into key roles. Fullback Jerome Felton took his career rushing touchdown record and big play ability to the pros. Quarterback Renaldo Gray, tailback Cedrick Gipson, center Reggie Goolsby and receivers Ryan McKie and Patrick Sprague departed as well.

Junior quarterback Jordan Sorrells has played significant snaps and even started a few games his first two seasons. His game relies on his arm and not running as

Gray could. Sorrells threw for 553 yards a year ago. He'll look to all-conference tight end Larry Hedden (36 catches) to be a key receiver.

Sophomore tailback Mike Brown exerted his presence as the season wore on, averaging 6.5 yards per rush on the way to 314 yards. He should lead the tailback race along with Stephone LaFrance (267 yards). Fullback Brantley Kendall acquired a good bit of experience spelling Felton the last few years.

The strength of the Paladin offense might be the offensive line. All conference tackle Joel Bell headlines four returning starters. Other returnees include guards Heath Cockburn and Tyler Haynes and tackle Thomas Slaughter.

Defensively, Furman led the conference by giving up just 135 yards a game on the ground. Few other highlights exist as the Paladins surrendered 264 yards passing and 31.8 points per game. With seven starters gone, the Furman staff tinkered with the defensive alignment to get players to the ball more quickly.

Twins Hunter (linebacker) and Thomas (free safety) Twitty make up half of the four returnees. Thomas landed on the second team all-conference after leading Furman with 95 tackles. Noseguard Justin Brown recorded 55 tackles and three sacks. The other returning starter is cornerback William Middleton, who led with three interceptions.

To fill the gaps, Furman will look to Phillip Morris and Brandon Williams at linebacker and Julian Hicks, Max Lerner and Dustin Gourdin in the secondary.

The Paladins spent the spring trying out placekickers to replace Scott Beckler, who left as the school's leading scorer by kicking. Punter Trent Hawk (38.4) returns. Brown (25.9) and LaFrance (24.8) finished second and third, respectively, in the league in kickoff returns.

Weeks two through four are critical for the Paladins, who can't afford to go into conference play with three losses. They visit Virginia Tech and then travel to Colgate. On Sept. 20, they return home to face national runner-up Delaware. In the league, they tackle Elon, Appalachian State and Wofford on the road.

Georgia Southern responded to the leadership of first-year head coach Chris Hatcher to finish 7-4 and 4-3, rebounding from the dismal 3-8 of 2006. Still, the Eagles missed the postseason again, the first two-year playoff drought since 1991-1992. They'll count on 13 starters, including nine on defense, for a return to the playoffs.

At Valdosta State, Hatcher was known for a high-octane passing attack. After meeting Jayson Foster, he saw the benefits of a strong ground attack. Foster, the all SoCon quarterback, departed with his 1,844 yards and 24 touchdowns on the ground and 1,203 yards passing. Redshirt freshman Lee Chapple finished the

spring as the starting quarterback as Billy Lowe, the only returning quarterback with game experience, went out with an injury and is uncertain for the fall. Sophomore Kyle Collins is currently number two. The Eagles also will welcome Antonio Henton, a transfer from Ohio State, to the quarterback battle in August.

Senior Raja Andrews leads the receiving corps after catching 38 passes a year ago. Also returning are receivers Irving Campbell, Michael McIntosh, Joe Haynie, and Tim Camp. At running back, Mike Hamilton (350 yards, six touchdowns) and Chris Teal (214) collected the most yards among returnees. Zeke Rozier gained 101 yards in the first two games before being lost to an injury. His return bolsters the running game. The offensive line will have a complete set of new starters.

The experience situation appears much better on the defensive side of the ball. Defensive ends Larry Beard (first team All SoCon) and Damon Suggs (second team) anchor the front line. All three linebackers return, too. Quentin Taylor and E. J. Webb combined for 116 stops. Harland Bower added 38 more.

The Eagles possess depth in the secondary, headed by leading tackler Chris Covington, who made 67 tackles and four interceptions from his strong safety position. Carson Hill (three interceptions), Ronnie Wiggins (41 tackles), and Chris Rogers (37 tackles) add to the experience in the defensive backfield.

Place-kicker Jesse Hartley made second team all conference. He was perfect on his 47 extra point attempts and added 17 of 24 field goals to score 98 points. Andrews returned just four punts, but he averaged 28.5 yards and took one back for a score. He also averaged 21 yards per kickoff return.

Georgia Southern has an opportunity to build wins early with four home games in a row and five out of six following the season opener at Georgia. That early season home stretch includes three of the top contenders for the conference title: Elon, Wofford, and Appalachian State.

Five times in 2007, **Chattanooga** took the lead on an opponent only to lose en route to a 2-9 overall record and a 2-5 SoCon mark. That's the sixth time in seven seasons that the Mocs have won three or fewer games.

To improve on that mark, head coach Rodney Allison's team will need more consistency on offense. The offense features experienced players at key skill positions, giving the squad hopes of improving on its 23.2 points and 325 yards of total offense per game, both lows in the SoCon. Running backs Bryan Fitzgerald and Erroll Wynn ran for 798 and 776 yards, respectively, but combined for only six touchdowns.

There's also talent returning at the receiver positions. Clint Woods (45 catches, three touchdowns) and Blue Cooper (37, four) hold down the top spots. Allison's team likes to run trick plays, and Woods and Cooper each threw touchdown

passes last year (Woods one, Cooper two). Thomas Hinton, Jordan Hazard, Joseph Pitman and Chris Pitchford provide depth at receiver.

The question on offense remains who will take snaps. Tony Pastore and Cody Romans played some in 2007 when Antonio Miller fell to an injury. Three other quarterbacks joined them in the spring battle for starter: redshirt freshman Sloan Allison and junior college transfers Jare Gault and Mike McDonald. Among those looking to protect whichever quarterback takes the field are offensive linemen Robbie Elliott, William Giles and T. J. Hurlless.

The defense played well at times and finished fourth in the league in total defense, yet the Mocs allowed 33.5 points a game. They'll enter 2008 without six of the team's top 10 tacklers, including free safety Chris Camacho, linebacker Charles Johnson and rover Jeff Phillips.

Linebacker Joseph Thornton will provide leadership for the defense. He comes off a season in which he made 66 tackles, including 18 for loss. Thornton also led the team with four interceptions. In the secondary, defensive backs Raeshon Ball, Buster Skrine and Anthony Brodnax expect to receive lots of playing time. Others being counted on to improve the defense's effectiveness include defensive linemen Rodney Beamon, Neil Brown and Eddie Evans as well as linebacker Kenny Scrivens.

The Chattanooga staff signed 10 junior college transfers, several of whom enrolled before spring practice, to help speed the program's development. The schedule offers a challenging climb for the Mocs, who will visit Oklahoma and Florida State and host Jacksonville State. In the SoCon, they will make the South Carolina tour with visits to Furman, Wofford and The Citadel.

A one-victory 2007 meant a time of change for **Western Carolina**. Now, the Catamounts prepare for season one under new head coach Dennis Wagner. The former offensive line coach at Nebraska and former head coach at Wayne State inherits a program that has gone 3-19 the last two seasons and has not won a SoCon game since November 2005.

The Catamounts moved the ball well at times last year, often through the air as they placed second in the league with 250 yards passing a game. Quarterback Adam Hearn split time with Todd Spitzer, who has completed his eligibility. Hearn passed for 1,375 yards with 12 touchdowns and seven interceptions. The Cats benefit from his mobility as well. Hearn ran for 237 yards and four scores.

Western Carolina loses leading receiver Eddie Cohen, an all-conference performer. Marquel Pittman, though, steps up to lead the receivers after averaging 16.4 yards on his 29 receptions. He also caught five touchdown passes. The Cats have to build some depth at the receiving positions.

As a senior Mike Malone led the team in rushing and kickoff returns, so Wagner and staff are looking for new leaders. Runningback Willie Harper figures to be the lead runner. He ran for 256 yards and had 12 receptions last year. The team does line up some experience on the front wall. James Singletary and Sam Jackson return at the tackle positions along with center Kevin Wiggins and guard Ben Davies. Fullback/tight end Andrew Rogers represents the sixth returning starter on offense.

In a league full of good linebackers, Quinton Phillips turned many heads in 2007, finishing second in the SoCon with 127 tackles. Michael Shaw (54 tackles) joins Phillips as a returning starter at linebacker. They'll welcome back three starters on the line. Defensive ends Brandon Drumgoole and Jeff Bradley made 55 and 43 stops, respectively. Bradley led the team with 4.5 sacks. Defensive tackle Keanon Orr made 24 tackles.

Two starters return in the secondary. Free safety Chris Collins collected 94 tackles while cornerback Darrell Gray made 49 stops.

Improving results on defense ranks as a primary concern for the new staff. Opponents hammered the Catamounts for 46 points and 461 per game. Western Carolina seeks to improve turnover margin as well. The team intercepted just two passes and recovered seven fumbles while making 27 turnovers. Progress will be difficult against a schedule that not only includes eight SoCon games but also nonconference games against Florida State, defending Big South champ Liberty and high-scoring Presbyterian.

When **Samford** begins Southern Conference play this fall, head coach Pat Sullivan will bring an experienced squad into the fray. Seven offensive starters and eight defensive starters return from a Bulldog team that went 4-7 overall and 2-6 in its final Ohio Valley Conference season. Last year also was Sullivan's first as head coach at the Birmingham, Ala., school.

Running back Chris Evans rushed for 1,033 yards in 2007, scoring five touchdowns, and caught 14 passes. Fullback Adrian Bradley returns to clear a path for Evans. He also caught 17 passes. Backup runningback Alex Barrett picked up 435 yards and four touchdowns on the ground.

Two key losses for the offense are quarterback Jefferson Adcock (2,472 yards passing) and leading receiver Jeff Moore (61 receptions for 996 yards and six scores). Dante Williams backed up Adcock and completed 20 of his 24 pass attempts for 172 yards and a pair of touchdowns. Wide receiver Jonathan Lowery, who caught 56 passes for 485 yards and four scores, steps into the No. 1 receiver role. Brock Johnson can make an impact receiving or by rusing.

The backs can look to four returning offensive line starters for protection: center John Weber and linemen Thomas Gray, Tommy Smith and Mitchell Waters.

The Bulldogs allowed 35 points a game in 2007 but the 69-14 loss at Georgia Tech and a 59-52 victory over Tennessee Tech skewed those numbers a bit. They allowed an average of 367 yards a game.

Three defensive line starters return. Mark Brown, Brent Nall and Curt Smith combined for 104 tackles. At linebacker, Rodney Shepherd led the team with 88 tackles while Quinton Smith was close behind with 82. Free safety Ty Levie made 67 stops and three interceptions) and returns to the secondary along with Jamael Lett (32 tackles) and Kyle Morton (63).

Placekicker Mark Prevost booted 14 of 21 field goals and 28 of 31 extra points. Bob Hooper averaged 39 yards on his 11 punts.

The Bulldogs host lower-division schools West Georgia and Faulkner to start the season and then visit Ole Miss. They begin SoCon games on Sept. 27 at Elon with the first conference home game coming Oct. 11 against Appalachian State. Welcome to the Southern Conference.

* * *

Southern Conference Games of the Week

Appalachian State at Louisiana State & Richmond at Elon – August 30
An intriguing late-afternoon match up of defending Division I champs will occur on the Bayou as BCS titlist LSU hosts three-time FCS champ Appalachian State. How much more magic do the Mountaineers have? As last year's playoff selections showed, a rising team like the Phoenix need big non-conference wins. The season opener against national semifinalist Richmond ranks as a big game for Elon.

Elon at Stony Brook & Wofford at Charleston Southern – September 6
These are important games for Elon and Wofford to continue the SoCon's edge over the upstart Big South since the leagues compete for players and attention in roughly the same region.

Furman at Colgate – September 13
This one will feel familiar to the Furman faithful. An early season loss at Hofstra cost the Paladins dearly in 2007, and they can't afford to suffer a similar blow to Colgate this year.

Appalachian State at James Madison & Delaware at Furman – September 20
This CAA versus SoCon twin bill will have a huge impact on the season and the playoffs. James Madison stood three yards from ending the Mountaineers third-straight title run in the first round last year. Now they get a shot at payback at home. Meanwhile, the Blue Hens, who lost the title game to Appalachian State,

will be a tough visitor for a Furman team seeking a return to the top of the SoCon and the playoffs.

Wofford at Georgia Southern – September 27

The Eagles won last year's game between these two consistent programs by three points. Expect another close battle in a game that should help decide playoff possibilities.

Furman at Elon – October 4

Elon had a shot at the conference title and the playoffs until Furman beat them late in the 2007 season. The Phoenix passing attack will test the Paladins revamped defense.

Elon at The Citadel – October 11

These were the breakthrough teams of 2007 in the SoCon, and both hope to build on that success. Neither can afford to lose this game.

Appalachian State at Georgia Southern – October 18

Among the current SoCon football teams, Appalachian State and Georgia Southern have the top two winning percentages in conference games, .678 and .724 respectively. Obviously, this game is big and should be good.

Furman at Appalachian State – October 25

In one of the fiercest rivalries in the SoCon, Appalachian State has dominated recently, winning six of the past seven contests overall and the past six at home. For Furman to return to the top of the conference, they must win in Boone.

Wofford at Appalachian State – October 31

The Terriers brought the Mountaineers back to earth last September with a victory in Spartanburg. In a televised Halloween night game, they'll bring their Trick-or-Treat offense to the Rock where Appalachian State owns a 10-2 record against Wofford.

The Citadel at Wofford – November 8

It's Lowcountry versus Upstate South Carolina when The Citadel and Wofford clash. The Bulldogs lead this series 40-19-1, but the Terriers have won the last nine meetings.

Elon at Appalachian State & Georgia Southern at Furman – November 15

This season should look a lot like last year when most of the league's football teams still had a shot at the title entering the last two weeks of the season. These two games may well decide the championship.

Furman at Wofford – November 22

This 82nd meeting between rivals 30 minutes apart should factor in the conference race and playoff decisions. Wofford whipped Furman in Greenville last year, ending the Paladins' three-year winning streak in the series.

Southland Conference 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN West Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. McNeese State
2. Central Arkansas
3. Sam Houston State
4. Northwestern State
5. Texas State
6. Nicholls State
7. Southeastern Louisiana
8. Stephen F. Austin

Offensive Player of the Year: Nathan Brown, Central Arkansas, QB, Sr.
Defensive Player of the Year: Ladarius Webb, Nicholls State, DB, Sr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Bryan Smith, DE, McNeese State

Smith headed a McNeese State defense that helped lead the Cowboys to an undefeated regular season and he was named the SLC Player of the Year. He ranked third nationally in 2007 with 1.05 quarterback sacks per game. He had 10.5 sacks among his 51 total tackles on the year. On his way to being named the SLC's Defensive Player of the Year in 2006, Smith finished with a league record 13.5 sacks as a junior. Included was an SLC record five sacks in one game. Smith was a third round pick by the Philadelphia Eagles in this year's NFL Draft.

* * *

All appeared to be back in order a year ago for the Southland—arguably one of the top five FCS conferences of all time. Perennial national power McNeese State was given a #2 seed in the FCS playoffs after finishing the season with an unblemished 11-0 mark that included a win over FBS Louisiana-Lafayette. The Cowboys would have home field advantage throughout the playoffs to the title game. The postseason party for the Southland's only playoff entrant, however, was spoiled in the opening round by the Big Sky's second place team Eastern Washington in a blowout fashion 44-15.

McNeese State is by far the most FCS playoff prominent team in the Southland as the Cowboys were selected for a 13th time last year—seven more than their nearest SLC mate (Northwestern State). The Cowboys should again be the team to beat this year in the Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas based conference. Newcomer Central Arkansas saw a breakthrough first season last year with a tie for second place with Sam Houston State. Those two squads, along with Northwestern State, seem like the most likely candidates to unseat the two time defending SLC champions.

Whoever wins the title (and any at-large SLC squad) hopes to break a two year drought of FCS playoff wins. The last playoff victory was Texas State's second round win over Cal Poly in 2005. McNeese State has been the lone SLC playoff bid holder the past two years (opening round loss at Montana in 2006).

The playoff losing year streak ending is a priority for **McNeese State** this off-season. The Cowboys actually have a personal four game playoff losing streak. MSU had also been the top seed in 2003 and lost to another Big Sky team in Northern Arizona and the year before, the Cowboys lost the national championship game to now FBS Western Kentucky. One thing the Cowboys will have different this year is the playing surface at Cowboy Stadium. The natural grass at had been at the stadium since it was built in 1965 is being replaced with GeoMax2 "replicated grass".

While there will be a new surface at the so called "Hole", there will be a number of players back to play from last year's undefeated regular season squad. Heading the offensive side will be junior quarterback Derrick Fourroux, who threw for 2,054 yards and 16 TD in being named to the All-SLC Second Team. Fourroux will have the luxury of 2006 SLC Player of the Year Steven Whitehead, who was granted another year of eligibility after being lost in the second game of the season with a knee injury that also included bruising of the bone. Whitehead's career totals include 79 pass receptions for 886 yards and five touchdowns, 499 yards and three touchdowns rushing, 702 yards and a touchdown on 55 punt returns and 1,399 yards on 57 kickoff returns. His 3,486 all purpose yards ranks in the top 10 for the Cowboys. He will be joined by fellow senior All-SLC performer Quinten Lawrence (50 catches, 823 yards, 4 TD) at the wide receiver position to aid Fourroux.

The Cowboy offense will also have two All-SLC linemen to protect Fourroux and aid the running game in seniors; tackle Kyle Link and guard Eman Naghavi. The running game should again be by committee as it was last year. Quarterback Fourroux actually was the second leading ground gainer and top returning rusher with 550 yards and another seven touchdowns. The leading returning full-time runner is junior Toddrick Pendland, who was third on the team with 377 yards.

The Cowboy defense will need to replace SLC Player of the Year Bryan Smith but does return five starters from last year's 14th best scoring defense in the country. The defensive team leaders will include two All-SLC First Team members in seniors; defensive tackle Vaalyn Jackson and linebacker Allen Nelson. Senior Kenneth Lundy will join Jackson on the line and senior safeties Brant Linde and Jamelle Juneau should give the other, young secondary members some experience.

The Cowboys also possess an All-American kicker in senior place kicker Blake Bercegeay, who was named an All-American after his sophomore season. Last

year's junior campaign was a little off but still led the team in scoring with 78 points on 8-of-13 field goals and 56-of-58 extra points. He is also the Cowboys' punter and achieved a 39.9 yard punting average.

2006 newcomer **Central Arkansas** shocked the league by going 5-2 in their first in the Southland Conference campaign last year, which was good enough for a share of second place. The Bears are currently still in their transition portion from moving up from the Division II ranks and will not be eligible for either the NCAA postseason or the SLC automatic playoff bid until 2010. The Bears finished their second FCS season overall at 6-5 and return 20 starters from that team this year.

The Bears will return All-SLC quarterback senior Nathan Brown, who led the SLC in passing at 280.4 yards per game. He was also the total offense leader with 292.4 yards and completed 256 of his 377 pass attempts (67.9 percent) with 26 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. Brown will be protected by returning All-SLC guard senior Brad Gordon and junior tackle Lane Freiwald. The passing game should remain good with returning receivers in junior All-SLC Second Teamers in wide out Preston Echols (34 catches, 530 yards, 4 TD) and senior tight end Marquez Branson (37 catches, 499 yards, 7 TD).

The Bears offense will also have one of the top conference running backs in junior Brent Grimes, who was named to the Honorable Mention SLC team a year ago. Grimes rushed for 618 yards and 11 touchdowns. He also was an aid to Brown and the passing game with 27 catches and 258 yards and three more scores.

The Bear defense will likely determine if the Bears will improve on their six win total from a year ago. While the Bear offense scored over 33 points per game, the defense gave up over 31 points per game. Coach Clint Conque will also lose an All-American performer in defensive back Tristan Jackson, who was also a top kick returner. The Bears, however, will have the other ten 2007 returning players to aid in improving that statistical mark this year. Heading the group back includes All-SLC performers in junior defensive end Taylor Scott (51 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 5.5 sacks). He will be joined by All-Honorable Mention SLC linebackers; junior James Lancaster and senior Corey McMurrian. The two backers tied for the Bear team lead with 64 tackles each.

Central Arkansas actually shared second place a year ago with **Sam Houston State**. The Bearkats were projected to contend for the Southland title in 2007 but had a four game losing streak in the mid-season to prevent a playoff spot. SHSU started the season with two wins—albeit against DII competition—then went on the four game losing streak but finished the season with a five game winning streak to finish with a 7-4 overall mark. This year's team will return a total of 12 starters from both sides of the ball in the hopes of gaining at least another overall

victory to be in playoff contention this year and build off of the five game winning streak they are currently maintaining.

The Bearkat offense was suppose to be very productive with Oklahoma transfer Rhett Bomar and the now senior was a key Southland performer a year ago even though he missed two games because of a knee injury to end the season. Bomar was an SLC Honorable Mention performer after rolling up 2,209 yards passing and 406 yards rushing while throwing 10 touchdown passes and running for seven more scores. Those totals placed him 11th nationally in total offense. Bomar led the offense to score over 26 points per game and will have a twosome of returning receivers back including last year's leading receiver in junior Catron Houston (46 catches, 597 yards, 2 TD), as well as senior Justin Wells (42 catches, 660 yards, 4 TD).

The Bearkats running and passing game will have All-SLC Honorable Mention performers to pave the way in guard junior Hunter Schmidt. Seniors tackle Aaron Saunders and center Jordan Bowersox should provide the Bearkat line with further leadership.

The SHSU defense will likely need to improve to get to at least to the eight win mark after the group gave up over 23 points per game a season ago. This year's team will be anchored by SLC First Team junior defensive tackle Chris Brown. He led the Bearkats in quarterback sacks with seven and totaled 60 tackles for 2007. Senior Nolen Bucek, who was a second team All-SLC member, should head the linebackers after he led the team and entire league in tackles a year ago with 88.

The Bearkat special teams were key members to the team last year and the two kickers return this year in juniors; place kicker Taylor Wilkins. Wilkins led the team in scoring with 75 on 14-of-18 field goal attempts.

Northwestern State has really not been the same type of team since the Demons won the Southland title in 2004. Since that year, NSU has not finished above .500 and a year ago, the Demons finished just 4-7. Their last three losses, however, were by no more than a touchdown each, including a near come from behind victory against BCS Mississippi State before falling 38-31. The Demons also nearly came from behind to defeat Southland champion McNeese State after losing their top two quarterbacks but fell 27-21. This year, the Demons return 16 players in which they hope to help right the ship.

The quarterback position is likely the biggest question mark on the NSU offense. The team's top three quarterbacks were injured last year and even true freshman walk-on Carson Martinez saw action. The injured signal callers back this year include returning performers junior Germaine Edmond and senior Drew Branch vying for the job. Two FBS transfers may also play a role in the starting quarterback position in John Hundley, (Louisiana-Lafayette), and Brock Landry,

(Southern Mississippi). Whichever quarterback is picked; he will have two strong receivers to find down field in seniors Dudley Guice (28 catches, 430 yards, 4 TD) and Adam Varnado (17 catches, 200 yards, 1 TD).

The Demon quarterback will have a solid running game behind him in senior tail back Byron Lawrence, who was the 2007 Southland Conference rushing champion. Lawrence rushed for 1,377 yards and five touchdowns and very well could leave Natchitoches as the school's all time leading rusher. The offensive line will need to replace NFL drafted tackle Demetrius Bell but returns SLC Honorable Mention guard Tim Henderson for his senior season to be the leader up front.

The so named "Purple Swarm" defense of the Demons was not very swarming last year after giving up over 33 points per game. The team hopes the rehiring of defensive coordinator Brad Laird, who was in charge in 2004 when as mentioned, Northwestern last won the Southland, will lead to the Swarm's rebuilding this year. A year ago, NSU gave up a league second best 368.1 yards per game so the rework will not be a complete overhaul but needs to keep teams out of the end zone when called upon. The Demon defense returns eight starters including All-SLC performers in junior tackle Albert Smith, junior safety Gary Riggs, and senior linebacker Mack Dampier.

Like NSU, **Texas State** would like to return to the top of the SLC standings—a place the Bobcats have not seen since their semi-finals playoff run of 2005. Another change in San Marcos is the likelihood of Texas State moving up to the FBS ranks. The school's Athletics Strategic Planning Committee has prepared the necessary steps to get us to FBS status—likely after the NCAA division movement ban is uplifted in five years. For now though, Texas State is still a vibrant member of the Southland and this year will hope to improve on a 4-7 campaign from 2007.

The Bobcat offense has two spectacular performers returning to aid in both the running and passing games. The running game should be in good health with last year's SLC Freshman of the Year Karrington Bush, who rushed 137 times for a SLC third-best 1,039 yards and scored three touchdowns after being thrust into the starting role when now senior Stan Zwinggi (still played 8 games with 9 total TD) went down with an injury early in the season. Bush also led the conference in yards per carry with a 7.6 yard average. The passing game will be supported by senior Cameron Luke, who was an All-SLC receiver a year ago. He broke Texas State records for receiving yards (1,035) and touchdown receptions (12) while tying the school record of 60 receptions. Junior Bradley George is back as the Texas State quarterback after being third in the league with 2,099 passing yards—throwing for 16 touchdowns and running for three more.

The defense will be headed by sophomore linebacker Marcus Clark, who was a SLC Honorable Mention performer a year ago. Clark worked his way into the

starting lineup last fall despite being a walk-on performer. He led the team in tackles (71) and interceptions (4). Coach Brad Wright hired new Defensive co-coordinator Fred Bleil in the hopes to improve a defense that gave up over 37 point per game. Bleil was the linebackers coach at FBS Tulane a year ago where he helped lead them to a Conference-USA best rushing defense, allowing 132.6 yards per game.

The Bobcat kicking game lost All-American Chris MacDonald, who is now a NFL hopeful but has a senior place kicker that was part of the All-SLC team in Andrew Ireland. He led the Bobcats in scoring with 67 points on 10-of-15 field goals with a long of 52 yards.

Nicholls State is another team that hopes for a rebound in 2008. The Colonels finished 2007 with a 6-5 record that included arguably the biggest win in school history over FBS Rice (16-14) to start off the season. Nicholls accomplished another feat in tying the NCAA record for most interception returns in a game for touchdowns with four against Northwestern State in a 58-0 victory over the Demons. This year, Coach Jay Thomas' team hopes to return to the top half of the league with more consistent play with his 13 overall returning starters. The Colonels will get two chances to pull off another FBS upset this year with games at New Mexico State and Memphis.

The Colonel defense should provide the highlights on the team with All-American and SLC Newcomer of the Year in senior strong safety Lardarius Webb, who is the only player in NCAA history to win all three weekly conference awards (offense, defense, and special teams) through the course of a season. The Buck Buchanan Award Finalist finished last season with 51 total tackles, eight pass breakups, five interceptions, three interception returns for touchdowns, 1,162 total all-purpose yards and five total scores. Webb hopes to take over the leadership role after SLC Defensive Player of the Year and NFL drafted (Washington in 6th Round) Kareem Moore exhausted his eligibility.

Elsewhere on the defensive side, Nicholls should have linebackers; junior Garrick Spain and senior Dwayne Jones to aid this side of the ball. Jones was second on the team in tackles with 51.5 and tied for the team lead in tackles for a loss with eight. Spain was a All-SLC Honorable Mention performer and was third on the team in tackles with 50.

The Colonels offense will need to be rebuilt in a number of areas with just five starters back. The offense loses three running backs including NFL hopeful Broderick Cole and that is a big loss considering Nicholls runs the triple option. Starting the option, however, begins with the quarterback position and senior Vincent Montgomery is back after gaining the team second best 459 yards (behind Cole) on the ground and throwing for 676 yards. Entering his third year starting at center is senior Nigel Cormier who has made 22 consecutive starts at the position and will anchor the most experienced element of the offense with two

other returning senior starters up front (tackles Jonathon DeAvila & Davonn Dulton). The Colonels will also have a FBS UCLA transfer center in senior Aaron Meyer.

Southeastern Louisiana's team will likely be playing with some heavy hearts this season after former coach and athletic director Dennis Roland lost his battle with non-Hodgkins Lymphoma this past winter. Roland last coached the Lions sparingly in 2006 and was replaced much of that year by current Coach Mike Lucas, who was the defensive coordinator under Roland. Lucas finished his first official season last year with a 3-8 mark but did win two SLC contests and three of the losses were to FBS teams in New Mexico State, Kansas, and Tulane. In 2007, he will have 16 starters back in the hopes of upping the win total and the Lions only play two FBS teams this year in Louisiana Tech and Mississippi State.

Eight starters return on defense, led by All-SLC second team defensive back junior Tommy Connors, who finished second on the team in tackles (75) in 2007. The linebacker corps will be headed by sophomore Mark Newbill, who was an All-SLC honorable mention performer after being the Lions' team leader in tackles as a freshman (83).

The offense has less in terms of experience in numbers but does return All-American candidate senior Jay Lucas at the running back position. He rushed for over 1,200 yards and 12 touchdowns while catching a team-high 51 passes for three scores. Junior quarterback Brian Babin, who threw for nearly 2,000 yards and 12 TDs last season is also back and will be joined by returning senior wide receiver Merrick Lanaux, senior fullback Brock DeLong and sophomore tight end Cole Wardell. With four senior starters from last season's offensive line gone, lone returner sophomore guard David Ward will be looked upon as one of the leaders up front.

The Lions also possess one of the nation's best place kickers in junior Jeff Turner, who was named to a number of All-American teams a year ago. He converted 17-of-20 field goals during the season with a string of 13 straight made attempts and finished second amongst FCS kickers in field goals per game (1.89).

Stephen F. Austin is not accustomed to losing but the Lumberjacks actually lost all eleven games a year ago for first year Coach J.C. Harper. The Lumberjacks were once one of the elite teams in the country (making the championship game in 1989) but now must try to come up from ground zero. The Lumberjacks have two sub-division I teams (Langston & Kentucky Wesleyan) near the beginning of their schedule so their year long losing streak will likely end early in 2007. Last year's team was young so it might explain why they struggled at times. This year's team will return 15 starters overall.

The SFA defense will lose just two starters from a year ago. Junior defensive end Tim Knicky should be a leader upfront after finishing fourth on the squad with 60 tackles and second in the league with 15 tackles for losses. Safety Bry Roby was one of many freshmen that saw significant playing time a year ago and will be looked as a leader in the secondary as a sophomore. He was an SLC Academic All-League performer starting in the secondary but played linebacker due to several injuries at that position. Roby finished with 29 tackles, including two for losses.

The Lumberjack offense will have two experienced sophomore quarterbacks this year in Jeremy Moses and Jeremy Claybon. Both of these players saw action a year ago but Moses appears to be the quarterback of the future. Taking over the starting job midway through the season, he completed 62 percent of his passes for 1,253 yards and six touchdowns. Among his highlights, Moses set single-game school records in completions (41) and pass attempts (59) for 508 yards at Texas State. He will have junior wide out Aaron Rhea, who was on the All-SLC Honorable Mention squad after 31 catches for 496 yards and four touchdown receptions. Leading receiver senior Dominique Edison will also be a prime target for Moses after catching 55 balls for 582 yards and a touchdown in 2007.

* * *

Southland Games of the Week

Southeastern Louisiana @ Alcorn State, Aug. 30

The Lions travel to the SWAC's Braves. The last time these two met was in 2005 with the Lions getting an easy win at home. Will 2008 have the same result for the Lions on the road?

UC Davis @ Central Arkansas, Sept. 6

The Bears lost by 20 two years ago in California. Will the home field help UCA this year?

Arkansas-Pine Bluff @ Central Arkansas, Sept. 13

The FCS battle of Arkansas. Can the Bears beat the SWAC's Lions?

Cal Poly @ Northwestern State, Sept. 20

Cal Poly makes their second visit to a Southland team. Will their hangover from a visit at McNeese State the week before be too much to overcome against the Demons?

South Dakota State @ Stephen F. Austin, Sept. 27

The Lumberjacks host the Gateway's newcomer Jackrabbits. SDSU defeated SFA 45-0 in Brookings a year ago. Will the home field help the Lumberjacks to a win in this game?

McNeese State @ South Dakota State, Oct. 4

The Jackrabbits play their second straight Southland team but get the Cowboys at home. This is a matchup of two conference champions after SDSU won the Great West a year ago and MSU won the Southland.

Sam Houston State @ Central Arkansas, Oct. 11

This early season conference matchup will likely decide who will be competing with McNeese State this year.

McNeese State @ Sam Houston State, Oct. 18

The Bearkats get a second straight tough matchup. Will the home field in Huntsville help SHSU send the Cowboys home with their first conference loss in two seasons?

Nicholls State @ McNeese State, Oct. 25

The Colonels always seem to give the Cowboys a good game with their triple option attack. Will this year be any different?

Stephen F. Austin @ Sam Houston State, Nov. 1

Southland's Battle of the Piney Woods. Who will win this FCS battle of Texas?

Northwestern State @ Central Arkansas, Nov. 8

The Demons could be in a position for a playoff spot. With the Bears still being a transitional team, they will look to spoil NSU's hopes of a postseason spot.

McNeese State @ Northwestern State, Nov. 15

Southland's traditionally top Louisiana rivalry. Will the trip to Natchitoches be kind to the Cowboys again like it was two years ago in a victory?

Texas State @ Sam Houston State, Nov. 22

This Texas in-state battle likely will decide if SHSU makes the postseason or stays home. Can the Bobcats stop the Bearkats?

* * *

Team Capsules

Central Arkansas Bears

Location: Conway, AR

Stadium: Estes Stadium (8,500)

Head Coach: Clint Conque (58-34, UCA & Overall) 9th Season

Who's Gone: CB/RS Tristan Jackson, WR Aaron Fairouz.

Who's Back: QB Nathan Brown, TE Marquez Branson, OL Brad Gordon, WR

Preston Echols, DL Taylor Scott, LB James Lancaster, DL Quad Sanders.

Historical Note: UCA has had success under Conque with two Division II playoff appearances with the last being in 2005 when the Bears lost in the quarterfinals to North Alabama.

Last Year: The Bears surprised many within the Southland by finishing tied for second (5-2) in their first year in the league and finished 6-5 overall.

This Year: The Bears return 19 starters so expectations are high to contend for the Southland title despite being playoff ineligible until for three more seasons.

McNeese State Cowboys

Location: Lake Charles, LA

Stadium: Cowboy Stadium (17,410 Capacity)

Head Coach: Matt Viator (17-3, MSU & Overall) 3rd Season @ MSU

Who's Gone: DE Bryan Smith, WR Carlese Franklin, LB Trey Bennett, DB Jonathan Walker.

Who's Back: QB Derrick Fourroux, WR Quinten Lawrence, WR Steven Whitehead, TE Wes Mangan, OT Kyle Link, OG Eman Naghavi, OC Lance Fremin, OT David Ballard, DT Vaalyn Jackson, DT Kenneth Lundy, LB Allen Nelson, SS John Vigers, FS Brant Linde, PK/P Blake Bercegeay.

Historical Note: Among the many former McNeese State athletes who have gone on to professional stardom are: Joe Dumars in basketball (now president-Detroit Pistons), B.J. Sams (kick returner-Kansas City Chiefs) and Keith Smith (defensive back for Detroit Lions) in football and Ray Fontenot (New York Yankees) and Ben Broussard (Texas Rangers) in baseball.

Last Year: The Cowboys returned to near the top of the rankings and finished their regular season undefeated at 11-0. Unfortunately for MSU, they lost to Eastern Washington in the opening round of the playoffs.

This Year: The Cowboys return seven starters back on offense, five on defense and one specialist in the hopes of obtaining their third straight Southland title.

Nicholls State Colonels

Location: Thibodaux, LA

Stadium: John L. Guidry Stadium (12,800 Capacity)

Head Coach: Jay Thomas (21-21, NSU & Overall) 5th Season @ NSU

Who's Gone: DB Kareem Moore, FB Broderick Cole, OL Ben Gombossy, DL Jordan Stone.

Who's Back: DB Ladarius Webb, LB Garrick Spain, LB Dwayne Jones, QB Vincent Montgomery, OC Nigel Cormier, OT Jonathon DeAvila, OT Davonn Dulton.

Historical Note: In 2005, the Colonels won their first SLC crown and nearly defeating Furman in the playoff opening round on the road for the school's first Division I postseason win since 1986.

Last Year: The Colonels improved by two games to finish 6-5 overall and a win over FBS Rice highlighted the season.

This Year: Coach Thomas hopes to get back to a playoff caliber team this year but will have to replace their top four running backs from a year ago to do so.

Northwestern State Demons

Location: Natchitoches, LA

Stadium: Turpin Stadium (17,971 Capacity)

Head Coach: Scott Stoker (36-33, Overall & NSU) 7th Season @ NSU

Who's Gone: OT Demetrius Bell, DL Ray Martin, DB C.L. Grogan, TE Clay Broyles.

Who's Back: DT Albert Smith, S Gary Riggs, WR Dudley Guice, WR Adam Varnado, QB Germaine Edmond, QB Drew Branch, RB Byron Lawrence, OG Tim Henderson, LB Mack Dampier.

Historical Note: The wooden statue known as "Chief Caddo" is not only the largest trophy in college football, or in college sports, but in the sports world, period. The Demons play Stephen F. Austin for the trophy.

Last Year: The Demons recorded their second straight 4-7 season and lost four of their last five games but did give BCS Mississippi a close game—losing just by a touchdown in that span.

This Year: Northwestern State again plays just one FBS team this year in Baylor after playing two such teams a year ago and three two years ago.

Sam Houston State Bearkats

Location: Huntsville, TX

Stadium: Bowers Stadium (14,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Todd Whitten (16-16, SHSU, 56-34 Overall) 4th Season @ SHSU

Who's Gone: TE Blake Martin, OL Brandon Hale, DB Byran Richmond.

Who's Back: QB Rhett Bomar, DE Chris Brown, OT John Dirk, OG Hunter Schmidt, RB Chris Poullard, PK Taylor Wilkins, LB Nolan Bucek.

Historical Note: SHSU made it to the semi-final round of the playoffs in 2004—the team's last playoff birth. In total, SHSU has made the FCS postseason

Last Year: A mid-season four game losing streak cost SHSU a playoff birth.

SHSU won their last five games to finish 7-4.

This Year: The Bearkats lose 10 starters from last year but will look to Rhett Bomar and their five game winning streak to attempt to get to the postseason for the first time since 2004.

Southeastern Louisiana Lions

Location: Hammond, LA

Stadium: Strawberry Stadium (7,408 Capacity)

Head Coach: Mike Lucas (3-11, SLU & Overall) 3rd Season @ SLU

Who's Gone: DB Eric Jackson, LB Antonio Richardson, WR Byron Ross.

Who's Back: RB Jay Lucas, QB Brian Babin, LB Mark Newbill, DB Tommy Connors, DB Jared Byers, PK Jeff Turner, TE Cole Wardell, WR Merrick Lanaux, OC Brad Bardy.

Historical Note: The Lions went 18 years without football before bringing the sport back for the 2003 season.

Last Year: Three losses to FBS foes in Coach Lucas' first full season as the coach cost the Lions to finish just 3-8 overall.

This Year: SLU returns 15 starters this fall in the hopes to get back to a winning season—something seen just once since the Lions return football (7-4 in 2004).

Stephen F. Austin Lumberjacks

Location: Nacogdoches, TX

Stadium: Homer Bryce Stadium (14,575)

Head Coach: J.C Harper (0-11 SFA & Overall) 2nd Season @ SFA

Who's Gone: OL Taylor Cobb, OL Scott Dover, OL Brock Pasteur, RB Louie Runnels, LB Bug Aymond

Who's Back: DE Tim Knicky, WR Dominique Edison, OL Karl Glimp, QB Jeremy Moses, WR Aaron Rhea, LB Jabara Williams, WR Tyrell Williams, SS Chad Haynes.

Historical Note: The Lumberjacks have made the FCS playoffs five times but the last was in 1995 when they made it to the semi-final round.

Last Year: Coach Harper's first season in Nacogdoches was not a pleasant one as his team finished winless, 0-11.

This Year: SFA has two sub-DI teams on the slate to try to get a win for the first time since they defeated Northwestern State to end the 2006 season.

Texas State Bobcats

Location: San Marcos, TX

Stadium: Bobcat Stadium (15,218 Capacity)

Head Coach: Brad Wright (4-7 TSU & Overall) 2nd Season @ TSU

Who's Gone: P Chris MacDonald, OL Crawford May

Who's Back: WR Cameron Luke, RB Karrington Bush, QB Bradley George, FB Blake Burton, WR Morris Crosby, TE Galen Dunk, OL Alex Luna, OL Jeff Bowen, OL Calvin Gore, DT Ray Parker, LB Freddy Paige, LB Marcus Clark, LB Brian Williams, CB Will Thompson, SS Mike Rutledge, PK Andrew Ireland.

Historical Note: Texas State used to be known as Southwest Texas State and as that title, they won a DII titles in 1981 and 1982 before moving up to the DI level.

Last year: In Coach Wright's first season in San Marcos, the Bobcats finished just 4-7 but did win three of their last five games.

This Year: With nine offensive and six defensive starters returning from the 2007 season, the Texas State team hopes to return to the SLC top like they say in a semi-final run in 2005.

Southwestern Athletic Conference 2008 Preview

By Brandon Williams, CSN SWAC Attack Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish:

SWAC East

1. Jackson State
2. Alabama A&M
3. Alabama State
4. Mississippi Valley State
5. Alcorn State

SWAC West

1. Prairie View A&M
2. Grambling State
3. Southern
4. Arkansas-Pine Bluff
5. Texas Southern

Offensive Player of the Year: Bryant Lee, QB, Southern
Co-Defensive Players of the Year: Zach East, LB, Prairie View A&M and
Ledarius Anthony, DE, Arkansas-Pine Bluff

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Kelcy Luke, QB Alabama A&M

* * *

Eight presidents and 44 years have passed since Prairie View A&M celebrated a championship. That could all change this fall.

Oh, sure, the Panthers "earned" the title of "Worst team in college football" when they endured an 80-game losing streak that made them a sure-fire punchline throughout the 1990s, but since the arrival of coach Henry Frazier III five years ago, the laughter has slowly died, reaching a dead silence when Prairie View finished 7-3 last last season for the school's first winning campaign since 1964.

Winning isn't enough for these Panthers, not with 17 returning starters, including Southwestern Athletic Conference defensive player of the year LB Zach East anchoring a unit that allowed a conference-low 15.2 points per game.

If the Panthers can run an October gauntlet that features West title contenders Grambling and Southern, they'll find themselves in Birmingham, Ala. to take on a Jackson State team that should overcome the loss of QB Jimmy Oliver and ride a sound defense to its second straight East championship. In the end, it could be Prairie View completing a long journey from chumps to champs.

What makes **Prairie View** the choice to win its first West division title? An offense that found its voice during the last month of the season behind QB Mark Spivey. The Panthers averaged 30 points in wins over Jackson State and Alabama A&M to close out the campaign as Spivey threw six touchdown passes. With the 6-5 senior recently receiving a medical hardship from the NCAA, the Prairie View offense will have its triggerman under center to guide an attack rich in skill position players.

The Panthers also discovered RB Donald Babers down the stretch, as the junior rushed for the bulk of his 482 yards down the stretch. Prairie View also received a boost in the backfield when former Florida State RB Russell Ball transferred, giving the team another home run threat. WR Anthony Weeden is a dual threat, leading the team in receptions while also finishing second among FCS players in punt return average (17.3). The offensive line returns three starters along with unsung FB Herman Bray, who serves as a sixth lineman.

Of course, it will be the "Purple Haze" defense that will determine the fate of the Panthers, as the unit brings back 10 starters. Talk of the D begins with East, who spent the winter gathering accolades after recording 127 tackles, 14 1/2 stops behind the line and four forced fumbles. East is the focal point of the unit, but fellow LB Gary Hicks has quietly established himself as one of the SWAC's premier defensive players as well.

The work of the linebackers is made easy by a front line led by 320-pound NT Dalvin Neetles, whose size forces numerous double-teams. Sophomore DE Quinton Spears is on the verge of a breakout season of his own. PV returns its entire secondary as DBs Anthony Beck, Val Ford, Riante Jones and Ed Moore comprise a quartet that allowed just 190.3 yards per game in the air.

Frazier's commitment to special teams paid off, as freshman P Pedro Ventura finished second in the SWAC (40.3 average) while K Brady Faggard provided stability.

No game will be important to Prairie View's title hopes than an Oct. 4 tilt with Grambling State in Dallas' Cotton Bowl. The defending West champions escaped with a 17-14 victory last year, and coach Rod Broadway knows this year's meeting could decide the West championship.

Grambling -- as usual -- should have no problem putting points on the board as QB Brandon Landers returns to guide an attack which averaged 27 points per game in 2007. Landers completed 56 percent of his passes for a SWAC-best 2,609 yards and 23 touchdowns, but was his own worst enemy at times, tossing a a league-high 18 interceptions.

Landers must adjust to the departure of WRs Clyde Edwards and Reginald

Jackson, who combined for 124 receptions and 16 touchdowns last fall. For the first time since 2002, the Tigers don't have a returning wideout with at least 20 catches, making the race for starting roles a very competitive one. Until Grambling finds a receiving threat, they will rely on a running game featuring sophomores Frank Warren and Cornelius Walker, who combined for nearly 1,500 yards on the ground.

The offensive line is in transition; how quickly the unit jells will determine how potent Broadway's attack will be.

Defensively, the Tigers should be fine. DE Christian Anthony has (six sacks) has already drawn the attention of NFL scouts, as he and 305-pound DT Melvin Matthews anchor a group that finished second only to Jackson State in total defense. Grambling is counting on big things from a group of young, hard-hitting linebackers, led by senior Keefe Hall (64 tackles). Derrick Johnson is a name to watch at the position. S Jeffery Jack (77 tackles) is the team's top returning stopper and will be counted on to guide a secondary that had its share of up and down moments.

Pete Richardson brought **Southern** back to its winning ways, finishing 8-3. Confidence levels are high on the Bluff as quarterback Bryant Lee comes off a sophomore season that saw him lead the conference in total offense while completing an impressive 66 percent of his passes for 2,326 yards and a solid 23-4 touchdown-interception ratio.

The Jaguars will need RB Brian Threat to fill the void the departed Darren Coates left in order to keep defenses from zeroing in on Lee. Gerald Landry's 48 receptions and nine touchdowns also graduated, but senior Del Roberts (42-474-2) will step into the feature role. Junior JuMorris Stewart has the potential to break out. The 6-3, 195-pounder averaged 17.3 yards per catch and has big-play ability.

Demarcus Stewart leads a group of three returners on an offensive line that helped Southern pave the way to 386 yards per game.

DE Vincent Landis is the heart and soul of the defense, which had a +10 turnover margin. Landis' (7 1/2 sacks, 22 tackles for loss) versatility makes him a terror for offenses, which have to account for his every move. In a conference filled with talented linebackers, Glenn Bell (team-best 80 tackles) ranks among the upper tier. Ballhawk DB Michael Williams recorded three interceptions, but his 41 solo tackles were equally impressive.

Former Washington Redskins LB Monte Coleman inherits an **Arkansas-Pine Bluff** team that finished the season as a spoiler. Wins over Prairie View and Southern cost both in their chase of Grambling and helped erase some of the sting that came from a 1-7 start. If the Lions have any hope of being more than

just a pain the backside of West contenders, improving an offense that managed just 272 yards per game and 19 total touchdowns would be a start.

QB Jonathan Moore completed just 42 percent of his passes, but gave the unit stability down the stretch. The ground game does have promise in the form of Mickey Dean and Martell Mallett, who teamed up for almost 900 yards and seven touchdowns. The ability to control the clock will be crucial for the Lions, who struggled to convert on third downs (33 percent).

Coleman does get a defense that is loaded with talent, beginning with DE LeDarius Anthony, a 6-6, 270-pound senior who had 8 1/2 sacks and three forced fumbles to go along with his 66 tackles. Anthony is considered to be the SWAC's best NFL prospect and could get make an bigger impact on his professional future with another dominant fall.

LB Tim Turner rattled off 122 tackles last fall, while FS Stewart Franks is a lights-out hitter who is also beginning to draw attention from professional scouts.

If the offense can catch up with the offense, Arkansas-Pine Bluff could emerge as a darkhorse.

Texas Southern welcomed back native son Johnnie Cole to help turn around a program that has gone 4-40 since 2004. Out with the old, in with the new: Cole brought in 65 new faces into camp as the Tigers try to rebound from an 0-11 season.

Few winless teams have the type of talent TSU has offensively. Former Oklahoma State QB Bobbie Reid will run Cole's HOBBO (high octane, big-play offense) attack, and the Davey O'Brien award candidate will have ex-prep phenom WR Fred Rouse to team up with steady returning wideout B.J. Haith to spark an offense that averaged a paltry 13.3 points per game.

L.G. Cole (Johnnie's brother) will help revive a defense that was battered to no end last fall. The Tigers spent much of the spring trying to identify talent on that side of the ball. It won't be a shock to see a wave of freshmen learning under fire this fall, but the program has been sparked by the changes on the gridiron. Johnnie Cole expects his team to improve this fall, the first step on what Cole thinks will be a shorter route to contention than many expect.

Don't think that **Jackson State's** stay atop the SWAC East roost will be short-lived. Coach Rick Comegy turned around a program in decline, resulting in an 8-4 season that was highlighted by an offense that averaged 29.2 points per game and a rock-solid defensive unit that allowed the fewest yards in the conference (282.2).

The Tigers will rely on the defense while Comegy looks for a replacement for

departed QB Jimmy Oliver. That's fine, because JSU brings back seven starters on D, headlined by DE Marcus Bernard, who had a SWAC-high nine sacks. LB Marcellus Speaks hits loud (85 tackles) and anchors a unit that has looked to be in midseason form during the first two weeks of practice. The Tigers may have the best secondary in the SWAC, as Malcolm Palmer and Domonique Johnson combined for nine interceptions. Johnson (6-2, 200) is on the list of the conference's potential NFL performers, as the Missouri transfer came in gave Jackson State a lock-down presence.

Trae Rutland had brief flashes of success in eight games last season, but JSU will need more than just momentary magic from its new quarterback. Rutland can run the ball, but his left arm could hold the key to the Tigers' season. He completed just 33 percent of his passes last season and could be challenged by freshmen signal-callers Dedric McDonald and Dominick Britt, both of whom could see extensive action this fall.

RB Erik Shaw returns after a 630-yard, seven-TD season and will be the most experienced runner in a backfield bringing in new faces. Whoever wins the starting QB job will have WR Carlos Simpson (team-high 41 catches) to throw to. Simpson's speed and versatility will be on full display, as the Tigers will find ways to get the ball into his hands.

Alabama A&M lit up scoreboards to the tune of 31 points per game last fall. Much of that came from the arm of QB Kelcy Luke, who led a Bulldogs attack that rolled up nearly 400 yards an outing.

Well, Luke is gone, and coach Anthony Jones will be counting on talented but untested southpaw Kevin Atkins to take the reigns. He'll have to do so in order for the Nov. 15 clash between A&M and Jackson State to have meaning for the Bulldogs.

Atkins will have support in the form of RB Ulysses Banks, who comes off a 887-yard season. Banks also led the conference with a 5.4 yard average and is the type of home run hitter that will take pressure off Atkins. Junior WR Thomas Harris (51-936-7) might be the SWAC's best at his position; if Atkins finds him often, Harris will easily eclipse his 2007 totals. OT Darius Turner is a first-team all-SWAC performer who gives the offensive line a steady presence.

S Al Donaldson picked off nine passes in 2007 while adding 11 pass breakups. His nose for the ball will be important for a Bulldogs team that will have to rely on its offense. Not that the defense was that great last season; the Bulldogs finished only ahead of Mississippi Valley State in yards allowed. D -- or the lack thereof -- could hold back ASU more than Atkins' progress.

Alabama State lit up scoreboards to the tune of 31 points per game last fall. Much of that came from the arm of QB Kelcy Luke, who led a Bulldogs attack

that rolled up nearly 400 yards an outing.

Well, Luke is gone, and coach Anthony Jones will be counting on talented but untested southpaw Kevin Atkins to take the reigns. He'll have to do so in order for the Nov. 15 clash between A&M and Jackson State to have meaning for the Bulldogs.

Atkins will have support in the form of RB Ulysses Banks, who comes off a 887-yard season. Banks also led the conference with a 5.4 yard average and is the type of home run hitter that will take pressure off Atkins. Junior WR Thomas Harris (51-936-7) might be the SWAC's best at his position; if Atkins finds him often, Harris will easily eclipse his 2007 totals. OT Darius Turner is a first-team all-SWAC performer who gives the offensive line a steady presence.

S Al Donaldson picked off nine passes in 2007 while adding 11 pass breakups. His nose for the ball will be important for a Bulldogs team that will have to rely on its offense. Not that the defense was that great last season; the Bulldogs finished only ahead of Mississippi Valley State in yards allowed. D -- or the lack thereof -- could hold back ASU more than Atkins' progress.

Former NFLer Reggie Barlow unveiled a spread offense at Alabama State this spring, and the results have been promising. Redshirt freshman Brandon Dowell and Alex Engram, who started last season, are in a tight duel for the opening day nod for the Hornets, but the edge could go to Dowell, who has carried the momentum of an impressive spring into the early fall practice sessions.

All-purpose RB Jay Peck has graduated, leaving the door for someone to step into the gap. That "someone" could be WR Fred Ragsdale, who led the team in receptions in '07 and could double his total of 23 receptions. TE Todd Leichtfuss could also thrive in his new role in the spread.

While the offense gets familiar with its new scheme, the Hornets will stay true to a defense that returns nine starters. LBs Rechar Johnson, Leland Jones and Jon Hogan give Alabama State a foundation to a unit that kept them in most games last season. DB Travis Rayford is the key member in the secondary.

This could be a crucial season for Willie Totten. The **Mississippi Valley State** icon is coming off a 3-8 season in which the offense averaged just under 16 points per game and finished last in the SWAC in total yards. The good (or bad) news for the Delta Demons is that eight starters return to the unit. No position will be more watched than the race at quarterback, where Ryan Burciaga appears to have taken the edge over Paul Roberts and Semaj Williams for the starting role.

RB Ronald Brewer was a revelation as a freshman, rushing for 782 yards and seven scores. He gives MVSU its only offensive threat, which will have to change if the Delta Demons expect to end its recent stint near the bottom of the SWAC

East. WR Alvin McKlerkin, a converted defensive back, has shined in fall camp and is primed to become the featured threat in the passing game.

As bad as the offense was, the Delta Demons' D was worse, finishing last in the SWAC in total defense. There is talent that Totten can build around, starting with NT Ronald Green. DE Fred Poole and LB Kevin Golden also have potential.

Like Alabama State, **Alcorn State** looked to shake up its offense after a lackluster 2-8 season. New coach Ernest Jones wants to push the tempo, installing a no-huddle attack in the spring. Tony Hobson won the starting job at QB, as he tries to jump-start an offense that sputtered far too often in 2007. Only TSU finished with fewer rushing yards than the Braves, who are looking at either Devarius Pilchner, Ke'onnn Rutley or Antoine Young to ignite the ground game. WR Emmanuel Arceneaux could benefit from the team's no-huddle scheme; he finished with 34 catches in '07 and will see more action.

The defense did a solid job defending the pass, limiting quarterbacks to just a 48 percent completion rate. DB Rod Williams had a pair of interceptions and forced opposing passers to avoid his side of the field. The unit also gets a boost from LB Lee Robinson and Idly Etienne, who combined for 141 tackles last fall.

* * *

SWAC Games of the Week

Aug. 30: Texas Southern vs. Prairie View A&M, Reliant Stadium, Houston
Former Tigers QB Johnnie Cole makes his coaching debut at his alma mater and he brought some friends, namely former Oklahoma State QB Bobbie Reid and one-time Florida State WR Fred Rouse. The Panthers can ill-afford to overlook a TSU program looking to turn the page from the Steve Wilson era.

Aug. 31: Jackson State vs. Hampton (Sunday, Orlando, Fla.)
The annual SWAC-MEAC Challenge pits defending SWAC champ JSU, which brings back seven defensive starters, including DE Marcus Benard, an NFL prospect. The Tigers must get production out of QB Trae Rutland, who won the starting job, but has a pair of promising freshmen waiting in the wings. Jerry Holmes takes over the coaching reigns for the Hornets and has several weapons (including WR Jeremy Gilchrist) that will help Hampton return back atop the conference after Delaware State snapped their three-year run last fall.

Sept. 6: Alabama A&M at Jacksonville State
Without QB Kelcy Luke, the Bulldogs must face a Gamecocks squad that received a huge offensive jolt when troubled QB Ryan Perriloux found his way from LSU to run Jack Crowe's wide-open attack.

Sept. 13: Prairie View at Sam Houston State

The Panthers' "Purple Haze" defense had better be on its 'A' game. Bearkat QB Rhett Bomar was among the FCS leaders in total offense before a knee injury ended his season. Now healthy, Bomar also returns three of his top four receivers, setting the stage for a classic 'good offense vs. good defense' clash.

Sept. 20: Jackson State at Grambling

Would anyone be shocked if these two teams met in Birmingham, Ala. on Dec. 13? Wouldn't think so.

Sept. 27: Alabama A&M at Arkansas-Pine Bluff

If the Lions want to become a factor in the SWAC West, this would be a great chance to make a statement.

Oct. 4: Grambling vs. Prairie View, Cotton Bowl, Dallas

The regular season game of the year could decide the SWAC West and -- if Prairie View wins -- signal a changing of the guard in the division.

Oct. 11: Jackson State at Arkansas-Pine Bluff

The Tigers could have a freshman QB (either Dedric McDonald or Dominick Britt) under center. That could spell trouble against a Lions defense that returns nine starters.

Oct. 18: Florida A&M at Southern

Bryant Lee should have a field day against the Rattlers, giving the SWAC bragging rights against their MEAC brethren.

Oct. 25: Southern vs. Prairie View A&M, Reliant Stadium, Houston

If the Panthers defeat both Grambling and Southern, PV fans and alum won't be faulted for going on Priceline.com to check room rates in Birmingham.

Nov. 1: Jackson State at Alabama State

The Hornets (4-1 at the time) lost to Jackson State last season, triggering a five-game losing streak that shattered their SWAC title hopes. Don't think that coach Reggie Barlow wouldn't mind returning the favor.

Nov. 8: Grambling at Arkansas-Pine Bluff

If the Tigers are in control of the SWAC West, this could shape up to be a trap game.

Nov. 15: Southern vs. Alabama State

Both schools could be fighting for contention in what could be an elimination game.

Nov. 20: Texas Southern vs. Grambling, San Antonio

We'll see how far along TSU's reconstruction project is on a Thursday night near the Alamo.

Nov. 29: Grambling vs. Southern, New Orleans

If you have to ask about the significance of this game, then you shouldn't be on this site.

FCS Independents 2008 Preview

By Kent Schmidt, CSN West Columnist

Predicted Order of Finish

1. Iona
2. North Carolina Central
3. Marist
4. Bryant
5. Savannah State

Offensive Player of the Year: Stadford Brown, North Carolina Central, QB, Jr.

Defensive Player of the Year: Javorris Jackson, Savannah State, FS, Sr.

Biggest Shoes to Fill: Dane Samuels, RB, Iona

Samuels led the Gaels' former conference, the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC), in rushing for the second straight year, carrying the ball 174 times for 1,018 yards and eight touchdowns this season for the Gaels. He was also first on the conference's all-purpose list, averaging 174.9 yards per game. Samuels ranked fourth on the conference's total offense list, averaging 92.5 yards per game, second in kick returns with 20 for 432 yards, and ninth on the reception chart with 33 catches for 474 yards and two touchdowns

* * *

This year, the Independent teams are at five in number after four such teams in 2007. Two teams from last year are now in the Big South Conference in Presbyterian and Stony Brook. Two teams remain as independents in Savannah State and North Carolina Central. Three teams are new to the independent ranks this year in Bryant, Iona, and Marist.

Bryant is new to the FCS ranks after moving up from Division II this year. Both Iona and Marist are now conference-less with the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) disbanding after last season. The MAAC is no more after LaSalle decided to drop its football program and Duquesne joined the Northeast Conference—a place Bryant will also go after their transition.

Marist will join the Pioneer Football League next year for sure and they may be joined by former MAAC-mate Iona, should they and the PFL choose.

North Carolina Central and Savannah State are HBCUs and both hope to gain acceptance into the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) but that league has not yet come calling. NCCU moved up from the Division II ranks before last season and Savannah State has been an independent for nearly a decade. NCCU seems to be inching closer to a MEAC bid.

There will be several games pitting independents against each other. Bryant will travel to both Marist and Iona and the Red Foxes and Gaels will play each other as well at Marist. Savannah State and North Carolina Central will play each other but neither will play the other three independents so it is tough to place the five in a finishing order but believe Iona will be the top team after they tied for the MAAC Conference title last year and have a number of returning starters back.

Iona hopes its first independent season this year can be a memorable one. The Gaels finished tied for the final MAAC crown and finished fifth in the Sports Network Cup voting with a 7-4 overall mark. That seven win mark was the best for Coach Fred Mariani in his 11 years at the New Rochelle, NY school. Iona will play six home games and will play at two scholarship teams in UC Davis and Maine and host another in Stony Brook. This year's team will return 10 starters from last year's team in the hopes of finishing above fifth in the Mid-Major rankings this year.

The Gaels offense is the most experienced side of the ball with seven starters back this fall on a team that scored over 26 points per game. Leading the group is All-MAAC senior wide out Tim Mastrino and last year's MAAC offensive rookie of the year in junior fullback Caesar Sanchez. Mastrino caught 36 balls for 538 yards and four touchdowns. Sanchez did not have impressive numbers—had six carries for 10 yards and one touchdown along with two receptions for 25 yards. Sanchez main contribution was as a blocker opening holes for tailbacks and now-junior quarterback Nick Rossetti to run through. Rossetti passed for 1,774 yards and rushed for 200 more while accounting for 16 total touchdowns.

The Gaels also return three offensive linemen including All-MAAC performers; senior guard Jonathan Hili, junior center Mike Butler, and senior tight end Michael Day. Day was also a help for the passing game with five catches and a touchdown but was mainly an aid for blocking in 2007.

The Iona defense is less experienced than their offensive counterparts but should be built around All-MAAC senior strong safety Matt McGuire. He added 31 tackles and three interceptions a year ago for a team that gave up just over 21 points per game.

Moving from a New York school to one from the Southeast, **North Carolina Central** hopes to rekindle the magic that made them the two time DII CIAA champions and after the 2006 season, were named the 2006 Black College Football national champions with a 11-1 overall mark. In the Eagles first Division I season in 2007, NCCU finished just 6-4 with just two victories coming against FCS opponents in North Carolina A&T and Savannah State. The Eagles played half of their schedule last year against DI competition and this year they will step up with just two lower level teams on the slate. NCCU loses 13 starting seniors,

including nine on defense, from last season's squad so Coach Mose Risen will need to rebuild.

The Eagle offense is the most experienced part of the team and returns team leader junior quarterback Stadford Brown, who has been the Eagles starter since gaining his eligibility. A year ago, Brown threw for just over 1,700 yards and threw for nearly as many interceptions (13) as touchdowns (14). In his freshman season, however, he threw for over 2,500 yards and 26 touchdowns. Coach Risen hopes Brown can return to his freshman championship team form this fall after his team scored just over 17 points per game in 2007. He will have two senior wide outs to aid in the passing game in Will Scott (31 receptions, 482 yards, 4 TD) and Wayne Blackwell (42 receptions, 509 yards, 4 TD). Sophomore running back Tim Shankle should again be the ground gain leader after leading the team a year ago with 598 yards and three touchdowns.

The NCCU defense kept the Eagles in many games in giving up just over 19 points per game. Should NCCU have been FCS statistical eligible a year ago, they would have ranked tied for sixth in interceptions (16), eighth in pass defense (151.33 yards per game), tied for eighth in turnovers gained (25), 12th in pass efficiency defense (101.6 rating), tied for 13th in turnover margin (1.22), 14th in scoring defense (17.8 points allowed per game), and 15th in total defense (300.78 yards per game). With just two starters back, Coach Risen will need his younger performers to step up to duplicate these types of numbers in 2008. Sophomore defensive end Donald Laster (48 tackles) and junior strong safety Rasheed Muhammad (20 tackles, 2 pass break-ups) are the two returning starters to be the defensive team leaders.

Moving back to the state of New York, **Marist** joins Iona as the other displaced MAAC team this year playing as an independent. The Red Foxes will certainly be an independent just for one season and will join the Pioneer Football League in 2009 as they play their second year at the new Leonidoff Field. A year ago, Marist didn't have much trouble within the MAAC in winning a share of that league's final title with a 2-1 mark but Coach Jim Parady's team won just one other contest to finish 3-8 overall. This year's team will feature an entire Division I schedule with six of the eleven contests at their Poughkeepsie home and nine starters lost from a year ago.

The Red Fox offense will need to replace All-MAAC quarterback Stephen McGrath, along with All-MAAC running back Obozua Ehikioya and All-American tackle Dan Cooper. The cupboards are completely bare, however, for Marist. Coach Parady has two senior All-MAAC returnees in center Neil Walsh and tackle Jake Dembow to build around. Having a new set of offensive specialists could actually be a benefit after the Red Foxes scored just over 17 points per game.

The Marist defense is the area that is most experienced side of the team. The team returns seven starters, including five that were members of the All-MAAC team to build upon. Coach Parady hopes the experience will lead to a better team defense, which gave up nearly 400 yards of offense per game in 2007. The returning all-stars include junior defensive tackles Tony Riley (38 tackles, 4.0 TFL) and Dan Sullivan (53 tackles, 7.5 TFL), senior defensive end O.G. Igbinosun (22 tackles, 5.5 TFL), junior cornerback Kwame Carlor (42 tackles, 7 pass breakups), and sophomore safety Rory Foley (55 tackles, 5.0 TFL). Foley was also named the All-MAAC Defensive Rookie of the Year a season ago.

Staying in the Northeast, **Bryant** is another team that will be an independent for a short time—just during the team's transition period to move from Division II to Division I. The Smithfield, RI school had been a very competitive Division II school the past few seasons and will move from the DII Northeast 10 conference to the DI Northeast Conference but will not be a full member until the school is completely through its transition in 2012. The Bulldogs advanced to the DII playoff's each of the past two years as the NE-10 champions but each year failed to get out of the opening round. This year's team loses 12 senior starters from last year so Coach Marty Fine's team will be somewhat inexperienced in their first DI campaign.

Offensively, the Bulldogs return All-NE10 running back Lindsey Gamble for his junior season and he will have to become a more of a leader after last year's NE10 Player of the Year in quarterback Charlie Granatell graduated. Gamble headed the Bulldog ground game with 85.5 yards rushing per game and has 14 rushing touchdowns. He will be aided in the ground game by senior All-NE10 tackle Jacob Meyers, who helped the team gain over 180 rushing and 180 passing yards per game a year ago.

The Bulldog defense will be more experienced and has more talent returning than their offensive counterparts with six starters back. Junior linebacker Paul Polomski should be the team leader after recording 63 tackles and three interceptions a year ago while being named to the All-NE10's first team. Bryant also has a defensive weapon that is a special team performer in All-NE10 senior punter Brian Donnelly, who had 38.0 yard per punt average with a long of 57 yards and 16 inside the opponent's 20 yard line.

The longest running current FCS independent is **Savannah State** with no real signs the Tigers are getting closer to a conference for any sports. In fact, SSU has another new coach this season—which might be the last chance for the struggling DI program to turn things around before moving down a division. SSU moved up to the DI football ranks in 2001 and have not won more than two games in a season since the move. The latest coaching casualty is Theo Lemon, who was at the Georgia school for just two years and recorded just a 3-18 record in that span. The Tigers were just 1-9 a year ago and have now hired Robby Wells to try to turn the losing program around. Wells comes to Savannah

after holding the defensive coordinator and football marketing director positions at Benedict College (SC). He has coaching prior experience—getting his first coaching job at a HBCU in 2002. From 2002-2005, Wells served as the defensive coordinator at South Carolina State.

Two spots that Wells will have penciled in are at the defensive safety positions. All-America Honorable Mention Honoree Javorris Jackson is back for his senior season at free safety after leading the team in pass breakups with seven and interceptions with five a year ago. He was also second on the team in tackles with 74. He will be joined by leading tackler, junior strong safety Antwan Allen, who recorded 82 tackles. Senior middle linebacker Calvin Leonard should also be a defensive player to star this fall after actually tying Jackson as the team second high tackler.

The Tiger offense was one the worst outputting units in all of FCS in 2007 in scoring under nine points per game. Coach Wells hopes to rely on nine returning starters, as well as some new faces to improve that mark. Sophomore tailback Antwan Edwards led the team in rushing with 440 yards and again should be the prime rusher this fall.

* * *

Independents Games of the Week

Bryant @ Central Connecticut State, Aug. 30

The Bulldogs start their DI transition with a game with the future Northeast Conference rival Blue Devils.

Lafayette @ Marist, Sept. 6

The Red Foxes and Leopards meet for the fifth time in their history and have met the past four years. Will the home field lead to a Red Fox win?

Savannah State @ Winston-Salem State, Sept. 13

The Tigers and Rams were both in the running for a MEAC bid. WSSU won out in that contest. Can SSU take out some of that frustration on the road?

Wagner @ Marist, Sept. 19

In a rare Friday night game, the Red Foxes hope to handle the Seahawks at home.

Savannah State vs. Howard @ Miami, FL Classic, Sept. 27

The Tigers and Bison travel to south Florida to see who will win this classic game.

North Carolina A&T vs. North Carolina Central @ Charlotte, NC, Oct. 4

HBCU in-state FCS North Carolina battle. Who will this neutral site game in Charlotte?

Bryant @ Marist, Oct. 11

The first of the Independent vs. Independent matchups. Can the Red Foxes hold off the transitioning Bulldogs?

Iona @ UC Davis, Oct. 18

The Gaels make the trip to California for the second year in a row. Can they play better against the Aggies than their blowout loss at Cal Poly?

Iona @ Marist, Oct. 25

The two former Metro-Atlantic squads face-off in Poughkeepsie. The winner will potentially remain in the running for the Sports Network Cup.

Duquesne @ Bryant, Nov. 1

Former MAAC, now Northeast conference Dukes play at a soon-to-be conference mate Bulldogs.

North Carolina Central @ Cal Poly, Nov. 8

NCCU plays a game in the state of California for the first time since the played Sacramento State in the DII playoffs in 1988.

Bryant @ Iona, Nov. 15

The third of the three northeastern Indy team games. Who will win the most in this group?

Savannah State @ North Carolina Central, Nov. 22

The two HBCU Indy teams play in their season finale. Who will get the bragging rights?

* * *

Bryant Bulldogs

Location: Smithfield, RI

Stadium: Bulldog Stadium (3,400 Capacity)

Head Coach: Marty Fine (27-14 @ BU, 37-25 Overall) 5th Season @ BU

Who's Gone: OG Ralph Squitieri, SS Marcus Lindsey, QB Charlie Granatell, FS Chris Wohlheter, DL Jay Stahl.

Who's Back: RB Lindsey Gamble, LB Paul Polomski, PK Brian Donnelly, OL Jacob Meyers, RB Jerell Smith, WR Anthony DiNaso, LB Dan Curci, LB Paul Polomski.

Historical Note: Bryant has only fielded a football team since 1999. In that time, the Bulldogs have two DII playoff births.

Last Year: The Bulldogs finished last year with an 8-3 record and lost in the DII opening round of the playoffs to Southern Connecticut.

This Year: This will be the Bulldogs first transition year moving from DII to DI. Upon completion of the four-year transition process, the Bulldogs will become official members of the Northeast Conference.

Iona Gaels

Location: New Rochelle, NY

Stadium: Mazzella Field (2,400 Capacity)

Head Coach: Fred Mariani (43-60 Iona & Overall) 11th Season @ Iona

Who's Gone: RB Dane Samuels, LB Adam Lipski, RB Rudy Arcara, WR DeMarcus White, OL Rob Valletti.

Who's Back: FB Caesar Sanchez, QB Nick Rossetti, OL Jon Hili, WR Tim Mastrino, TE Mike Day, OL Mike Butler, DB Matt McGuire.

Historical Note: The symbol of Iona College's athletic teams is the popular Gael. A Gael is anyone of Irish-Gaelic ancestry, consistent with the Irish tradition of Iona. The College was founded in 1940 by the Congregation of Christian Brothers, commonly known as the Irish Christian Brothers.

Last Year: The Gaels' won a share of the final Metro-Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) with Marist and finished the season just 7-4 overall.

This Year: Iona will try their fortunes as an independent this season with the MAAC disbanding and will do so with 11 starters returning.

Marist Red Foxes

Location: Poughkeepsie, NY

Stadium: Leonidoff Field (2,500)

Head Coach: Jim Parady (85-77-1 overall) 17th Season @ Marist

Who's Gone: OT Dan Cooper, RB Obozua Ehikioya, LB Dan Smith, CB Daniel Diaz.

Who's Back: OC Neil Walsh, DL Tony Riley, DL Tony Riley, OT Jake Dembow, DL O.G. Igbinosun, CB Kwame Carlor, S Rory Foley.

Historical Note: The Red Foxes earned a share of the MAAC Football League title last season and in 2006, their third MAAC crown in program history. Marist won the MAAC outright in its first year in the league (1994).

Last Year: The Red Foxes were not great overall but saved their best football within the MAAC play in achieving two of their three victories in the conference to share the title. Marist finished just 3-8 overall but 2-1 within the league.

This Year: Like Iona, Marist will try their fortunes as an independent this year but will not have to wait long for another conference. Marist has accepted an offer to start play in the Pioneer League in 2009.

North Carolina Central Eagles

Location: Durham, NC

Stadium: O'Kelly-Riddick Stadium (10,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Mose Rison (6-4 NCCU & Overall) 2nd Season @ NCCU

Who's Gone: LB Derrick Ray, LB Eric Ray, DE Xavier Joe, FS Darren Brothers, CB Craig Amos, LB D.J. Fretwell.

Who's Back: FB Saeed Abdul-Azeez, WR Wayne Blackwell, QB Stadford Brown, OL Jovan Olafioye, RB Will Scott, RB Tim Shankle, OL Eric Stanley, DE Donald Laster, SS Rasheed Muhammad.

Historical Note: With an 18-10 victory over Elizabeth City State last year inside Giants Stadium, the Eagles remain undefeated inside National Football League stadiums with a 3-0 record. NCCU edged Morris Brown, 19-16, inside Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, Pa. on Sept. 30, 2000. A year later (Nov. 4, 2001), the Eagles beat J.C. Smith, 34-3, inside the Carolina Panthers' home, then called Ericsson Stadium, in Charlotte, N.C.

Last Year: In the Eagles first DI transition year, they did not have the success seen in their final DII season (11-1 record). NCCU finished the 2007 6-4, including wins over DI foes NC A&T and Savannah State.

This Year: NCCU will play just two sub-DI opponents after playing five such squads a year ago. Coach Rison's squad will need to rebuild given the tougher schedule, especially the defense with just nine total starters returning.

Savannah State Tigers

Location: Savannah, GA

Stadium: Ted A. Wright Stadium (8,000)

Head Coach: Robert "Robby" Wells (0-0, SSU & Overall) 1st Season @ SSU

Who's Gone: DE Dominique Clark, DT Randy Harling, FB Jamie Beard, OT Rashad Jackson.

Who's Back: FS Javorris Jackson, SS Antwan Allen, LB Calvin Leonard, RB Antwan Edwards, QB JaCorey Kilcrease.

Historical Note: All-Pro NFL tight end Shannon Sharpe is the best known player to come from Savannah State. He played for the Tigers before the school moved up to the DI level from 1986-1989. SSU moved up to the DI level in 2001.

Last Year: The Tigers finished last year just 1-9 and cost former Coach Theo Lemon his job.

This Year: New Coach Wells hopes to find the right mix of players to run his shotgun, spread offense to bring the Tigers back to respectability this year and for upcoming seasons.