BY EDWARD G. ROBINSON III - Staff Writer
WASHINGTON -- As he has done throughout this season, Ruffin McNeill will lead East Carolina football players onto the field when the Pirates sprint onto the natural grass turf at RFK Stadium on Wednesday to participate in the Military Bowl.

It's his 14th appearance in a bowl game as a coach, but first as a full-time head coach - a significant milestone in a 25-year collegiate career, especially considering the unusual circumstances that he faced as Texas Tech's interim head coach last season.

This past weekend, the former ECU strong safety, who played in the team's 1978 Independence Bowl victory over Louisiana Tech, toured the nation's capital with his team, participated in Christmas festivities with his staff and posed for pictures in front of the U.S. Capitol.

He has enjoyed - as much as coaches can - the rewards for a six-win inaugural season that resulted in the Pirates' fifth consecutive bowl appearance.

The lead-up to this year's bowl game for McNeill has been a 'tis-the-season, green-and-red light party compared with last season.
"At this time last year, all of us were preparing to play Michigan State," McNeill said. "Everything was going all right until we got to the bowl site. There we got the word we would be taking over the team. It was one of the most challenging times in our lives. But it was also one of the most rewarding times. The weeks that followed were up and down."

It was just a season ago that McNeill, a defensive coordinator in his 10th season, worked for Texas Tech head coach Mike Leach. Several of East Carolina's current assistant coaches also served in roles for the Red Raiders. They were preparing to play the Spartans in the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio on Jan. 2.

Surrounding the Red Raiders' bowl preparations were allegations that Leach had mistreated receiver Adam James. It was alleged that James had twice been confined to a small, dark room as a punishment after he was diagnosed with a concussion.

Those speculations forced Texas Tech officials to suspend Leach on Dec. 28, 2009. Leach responded by suing the university, hoping the court would allow him to coach his team.

Subsequently, the university fired Leach on Dec. 30, 2009. McNeill, his interim replacement, was giving a news conference at the team hotel at the time the university released a statement regarding Leach's firing.
"In a defiant act of insubordination, Coach Leach continually refused to cooperate in a meaningful way to help resolve the complaint. He also refused to obey a suspension order and instead sued Texas Tech University," a university statement said.

**Order amid chaos**
Meanwhile, Texas Tech coaches were responsible for keeping team order in the midst of chaos.
"It was just a circus after that," ECU offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley said. "Just about the worst week you can imagine. It was hell."

Riley said coaches remained in the hotel for much of the bowl event, deciding not to dine out or tour the region. He said there was tremendous pressure surrounding the staff, with rumors that a loss would dash any hope of McNeill landing the Texas Tech job after the season ended.
Still, the Red Raiders went on to claim a 41-31 victory.

ECU defensive coordinator Brian Mitchell, a member of the Texas Tech staff at the time, said the team kept its composure.

"I take my hat off to Coach Ruff because he had blinders on," he said. "And his leadership and direction kind of guided each one of us through that. He had the confidence in our staff, in our administration and our team. And that's all we needed."

In the following weeks, McNeill was interviewed twice by Texas Tech for the head coaching position. Instead of hiring him, the university selected Tommy Tuberville.
With Skip Holtz leaving ECU for South Florida, the Pirates brought McNeill, a Lumberton native and 1980 East Carolina graduate, back home.

"What Coach McNeill did under the interim coach circumstances at Texas Tech put him on our radar screen, but I honestly did not expect to have a vacancy any time soon and I certainly expected Texas Tech to keep him," ECU athletic director Terry Holland said in an e-mail. "When I did call him about our position, he had a couple of other good job offers and was not sure that he wanted to put himself and Erlene through another search process. I waited a couple of days and called him back, so thank goodness I made that second call and he decided to interview."

Holland said it was clear that McNeill's "personal values and background as the son of teachers" made him the right candidate to lead the program.
The Pirates are 6-6 this season and looking to secure their first bowl game win since a 41-38 victory over Boise State in 2007.

The team, in the eyes of many, has overachieved considering the change of coaches, loss of key starters and the implementation of new offensive and defensive systems.
"I believe that every member of the Pirate Nation is pulling for Coach McNeill and this team to have the happy ending to the season," Holland added.
So it's with a lighter heart that McNeill celebrates this Christmas season and takes the field on Wednesday. Landing his first head coaching job with East Carolina helped soften a tough time as an interim coach.

"From that time on it has been a blessing," McNeill said. "This doesn't happen by accident, though. It has happened for a reason. The reason is not ours. I'm very blessed to have the opportunity to be here."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.
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Four months ago, doubts swirled around the East Carolina University football team. Though new Head Coach Ruffin McNeill preached an inspirational brand of optimism wherever he went, only the most die-hard Pirate fans expected that a team with so much attrition could emerge from a brutal schedule to earn a postseason bowl bid.

Yet Wednesday, East Carolina will face off with the University of Maryland in the Military Bowl at historic RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C, having long since turned doubters into dreamers with a relentless offense and a few miracle wins. The Pirates and their fans should enjoy the benefits of good fortune with this game and look forward to the prospects of greater success in the years to come.

When he arrived in Greenville earlier in January, McNeill offered words Pirate fans longed to hear from the skipper of their football team: “This is where I want to be until you tow me away from here. You'll have to drag me away.” The university could not drag such a commitment from many of his predecessors, despite the occasional effort, since many viewed the position as a stepping stone to bigger and better opportunities.

Perhaps that is part of the reason this season was such a special one. The McNeill era opened in thrilling style, with a last-second, Hail Mary touchdown pass to beat Conference USA opponent Tulsa. The Pirates proceeded at a steady clip, compiling a 5-2 record that included an epic overtime victory against rival N.C. State. In doing so, the team showcased a relentless offense under the direction of Offensive Coordinator Lincoln Riley and first-year starting quarterback Dominique Davis unlike anything seen in Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium.

Injuries, a lack of depth and defensive woes tempered the enthusiasm surrounding the team, leading to a 6-6 regular season finish. There was some understandable disappointment at the cool finish following the hot start and even some unjustified anger, particularly among those fans who doubted the Pirates' ability to make a bowl game this year. While the defense will be a source of emphasis in the offseason, there is ample reason to believe the program is in good hands with McNeill.

So cheer, Pirate fans. Enjoy the benefits of a somewhat surprising year of success. A win against the Terrapins in Washington would be an exceptional and welcome feather in East Carolina's cap, but making this game should be reason enough for celebration.
Maryland head football coach Ralph Friedgen pauses as he speaks during a news conference, in Washington, Monday, Dec. 27, 2010, to promote the 2010 Military Bowl, presented by Northrop Grumman, to be played at RFK Stadium in Washington on December 29. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Friedgen gets emotional

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The East Carolina football team is rallying around the knowledge that Wednesday's Military Bowl will be the encore performance for 18 senior ECU players, but that can't match the emotion fueling the Maryland Terrapins this week. That's because the Terps and 10th-year head coach Ralph Friedgen know that even a victory in the game won't let Friedgen finish his coaching career the way he would have liked.

Two Mondays ago, in the midst of his preparation for Wednesday's 2:30 p.m. kickoff inside RFK Stadium, Friedgen was fired by Maryland. Some of that emotion started to spill over on Monday afternoon in the nation's capital, the day Friedgen, 63, conducted his final practice with the 8-4 Terps, and very likely his last with any team.

“It'll be 23 years that I have put that blood, sweat and tears on that field,” said Friedgen, fighting back tears at Monday's Military Bowl press conference, prior to his team's final official practice before the game. “It'll be tough today. It'll be the last time I'll probably be out on the field, ever.”
Friedgen guided Maryland through a rousing comeback season, reversing last year's disastrous 2-10 record to give his team a chance at a 9-4 campaign. But the fact that it will be his last looms very large this week with the Terps, especially knowing that the coach wanted to stay in College Park.

“It's kind of like you're dying a slow death,” Friedgen said, describing the truncated end to his coaching tenure at Maryland. “Everything you experience is for the last time. It's been a very stressful week, especially from an emotional standpoint.”

No glove
East Carolina quarterback Dominique Davis took his final preparatory snaps for the Military Bowl inside the frozen-solid, wind-ravaged stadium at Eastern High School on Monday morning.

Davis, who enjoyed perhaps the greatest single-season in ECU quarterback history, did so without gloves to shield his hands from the cold. That's nothing new for the former Boston College transfer.

“I've never thrown the ball with a glove on, never tried it, so I'm going to stick to what I know,” said Davis, who threw for 3,699 yards and 36 touchdowns in his first season with the Pirates.

Davis was mindful Monday that the temperature was expected to rise by game time Wednesday.

“I don't think it could get worse that this,” he said. “It's going to be a nice day Wednesday. We've been through the bad, so come Wednesday it should be fine.”

Melvin's mission
Most of the talk in the ECU camp during December bowl practice has focused on the importance of trying to send the Pirates' 18 seniors out with a victory. But those seniors had a meeting recently, and it seems they see things a bit differently.

“Coach talks about the underclassmen wanting to send the seniors out right, but as a group of seniors, we met and we talked about sending the underclassmen and this program out in the right direction,” said senior middle linebacker Melvin Patterson, who is second on the team this year with 87 tackles. “We had our ups and downs this year, and we don't want to go out on a negative note. We're going to look good out there.”

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Dot Jones is somewhat of a local internet celebrity with his videos about how white people will always yell "gold" if you scream "purple." He's just released a music video called "purple & gold." (Rhett Butler/The Daily Reflector)

YouTube video of rally cry becomes hit
By Kristin Day
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Randy Jones never knew just how funny he is.
That was before he posted his 7 1/2-minute impromptu video documenting how if one yells “purple” to white people, they will scream “gold.”

Ever since, the 24-year-old aspiring musician and his visual portrayal of the ECU students' rally cry has been embraced by the 20-something sector of Pirate Nation.
The tongue-in-cheek viral hit reached more than 33,000 views on YouTube.com before Christmas.

With footage laden with inebriated party-goers and expletives — even his catchphrase contains a vulgarity — Jones says it's not so much his role in the film, but rather crowd participation that has the video spreading through social media networks and message boards.

“What really made the video popular wasn't necessarily me,” Jones, who uses the stage name .Com (Dot Com), said during a photo shoot by the cupola at ECU. “... What really made it so popular was the people themselves. Because they were funny and it was so many people, it was almost like cameos. Everybody's in the video. So they start sharing it like crazy, like on Facebook.”

Jones, from Henderson, started making videos for an online reality show with Carolina Nightlife, another entertainment portal in eastern North Carolina, in 2009. His first YouTube video chronicled his and his castmates' search for blacks at an ECU football game. They only found a few.
Then came “If You Yell Purple to White People,” which led to a “Part 2” — where now everyone he encounters is already a fan of his pervious work. Now he's looking to expand on the trend.

“Now I got follow-up videos,” he said laughing. “If you yell 'purple' to a deer, it will run. I got one coming (called), ‘If you yell purple to a horse, it will stand still.' I'm gonna just scream purple at anything now.”

In the spirit of the holidays, he even added a video featuring Santa. The best, yet unanticipated payoff for Jones is that his popularity is helping him promote what he's wanted people to hear all along: his music.

“The music is my backbone,” he said, “but at the same time I do have other talents. I'm a smart dude. I can act. I can do a little comedy. So I'm not going to, like, put myself in one box. But at the same time, the music is my passion. And as a musician, you can touch more people.”

Jones recently put out a song to the beat of Wiz Khalifa's Steeler anthem, “Black and Yellow,” called “Purple & Gold.” The video was approaching 3,000 views by press time. “These videos just made me accessible to people,” Jones said. “They made me visible. And they (people) may not have known that I have music.”

“I didn't do it formal,” he added. “It's not how I planned it, like I'm going to do this video and it's gonna make me popular so I can get my music out. It just happened. But that's basically what it did. Before I made this video, I had about 300 likes on my music page, and now I have 1,600.”

Jones also is producing what he calls a “recurring soundtrack” at www.everbodysay.com (explicit content) while he builds his foundation and fan base. “I feel like, in reality, in God's eyes, he gives you this voice because he's given you influence,” Jones said. “You have influence. It's not like I'm a star with fans. It's like I'm a leader and it's up to me to be positive.”

Check out the videos online at Mr.RealityTVshow on YouTube. Jones has rated his video R for explicit language.