THE DAILY CLIPS

December 30, 2009

News, commentary, and opinion compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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Paint Memphis purple

ECU fans begin trek to watch football team in the Liberty Bowl

By Kristin Day
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Memphis business owner Silky O’Sullivan says there’s a purple tsunami coming his way — and the local football fans are excited.

Sullivan said he was in his bar, Silky O’Sullivan’s, on Dec. 5, watching the C-USA Championship game on TV when ECU’s Van Eskridge intercepted what would’ve been a touchdown pass for Houston.

“Fifty people leaped up in the air and started yelling because ECU was coming,” he said.

Today, the 7,000 ECU fans who purchased tickets for Saturday’s Auto Zone Liberty Bowl against Arkansas will begin making their way to Memphis, Tenn., by car, bus, RV and plane. And many of them might not know what to expect.

At least, that’s how student Bogie Winn felt last year when he first arrived. Winn began attending ECU football games after his dad moved him to Greenville, and says he hasn’t missed more than one home game in the last 11 or 12 years. This will be his second consecutive year rooting for the Pirates in Memphis.

“Where they’ve come to now, to them I guess, the accomplishment puts the fun back into the game,” Winn said.

And last year, when he arrived in Memphis, he said he was surprised to find himself in a city of purple and gold.

“One of the best things is that the city accepts its role as host,” said Steven Asby, two-time graduate, doctorate student and employee in the Academic Advising and Support Center at ECU. This will be his second year in Memphis for the Liberty Bowl, as well. “It’s probably one of the better bowl experiences.”

But before it’s time to start tailgating, Memphis has a lot to offer those celebrating the New Year and supporting the Pirates.

“I think Memphis has a real soul to it that people love,” said Josh Spotts, director of catering and events at the Madison Hotel, a small, luxury hotel with a rooftop terrace 18 stories above downtown Memphis. “And there’s so much to do.”

Many hotels are offering special packages for New Year’s and the Liberty Bowl, and the Madison Hotel is no exception. Along with packages including room and luxury food while guests stay in the heart of the city, Spotts said the Madison also offers a Tailgate-To-Go, so guests can pick up everything they need for gameday at the front desk.

Outdoors, there is Graceland, the Memphis Zoo, the Liberty Bowl Parade on Friday, riverboat tours and riverfront parks. Francine Cooke, who is returning to the bowl with her family and friends, said that last year they made a special effort to see everything.

“Last year, we hired a driver who took us to the waterfront and local places you wouldn’t know about,” Cooke said, adding that newcomers should definitely try the local food — especially Memphis’ own style of barbecue.

Memphis also offers downtown shopping, an arts district, the National Civil Rights Museum and, for those who
want to partake in what Asby calls "pirate beverages," there's Beale Street.

Asby described Beale Street as a classier version of New Orleans' Bourbon Street. Spotts said the area has a different governance than the rest of the city, which allows bars to stay open until 4 a.m. and guests to carry open containers. But the best part, is the music.

"There's live music coming out of every door you can imagine," Spotts said. "That carries over into everything you see."

Some suggested Beale Street venues include Rendezvous Ribs, Rum Boogie, BB King's Blues Club and Grill 83, a part of Madison Hotel. But word has it that Pirate fans are gathering tonight at Silky O'Sullivan's.

"I am known as the international meeting place of anyone purple and gold," said Sullivan. Sullivan is a graduate of Louisiana State University, but said he became an instant Pirate fan after a one-time trip to the city some 20 years ago.

"There are three things in the world I respect: Jesus Christ, Roebuck Catalogue and Fifth Street," he said. "... Not only is it the spirit of the school (ECU), it's the people. You just feel like they're family."

So this year he's getting ready to welcome back his Pirate brethren with the usual shag music, gossip and his Purple Haze drink — and he might even share one of the Pirate Sweet Potatoes (purple potatoes from Stokes County) he received as a "thank you" gift this Christmas.

The day of the game, Winn, Asby and Cooke suggest fans stop by the buffet hosted by the East Carolina Alumni Association and Pirate Club, where they can exchange friendly banter with the other team's fans, as well as catch the Battle of the Bands between the Marching Pirates and the Razorback Marching Band.

Then, after a presumed ECU win, it's back to Beale Street for most, and maybe back to O'Sullivan's. But before leaving Greenville, Silky Sullivan has one request for Pirate fans: Bring your favorite shag CD. He needs more music.

Contact Kristin Day at kday@reflector.com or (252) 329-9579.

Pirate events

The East Carolina Alumni Association and Pirate Club have paired up to offer Pirates fans the ultimate Liberty Bowl experience in Memphis, Tenn. from Thursday-Saturday. Here is a list of scheduled events:

5 p.m. Thursday: Ring in the New Year at Handy Park on world-famous Beale Street in downtown Memphis. School spirit will be on display at an exciting pep rally with bands and cheerleaders. Free.

3 p.m. Friday: The annual Liberty Bowl Parade on Beale Street begins with decorated floats, marching bands, cheerleaders and many other special groups. Free.

Friday evening: The ECU fan party, the Pirate Party on Beale Street, begins immediately following the parade in downtown Memphis. Fans will enjoy access to King's Palace Café, Rum Boogie Café, Blues Hall and Beale Street Tap Room. Tickets are $20 per person in advance and $25 at the door (no cash) and include hors d'oeuvres and two drink tickets. Dinner and cash bar available at all restaurants. Tickets for the Pirate Party on Beale Street can be ordered by calling 800-DIAL-ECU or by visiting www.ECUpirates.com.

Noon Saturday: Join fellow Pirates fans for the Liberty Bowl Pregame Buffet in Arena Building. This event will feature the "Battle of the Bands" and all-you-can-eat-and-drink for $30 per person. Order online at www.ECUpirates.com or by calling 800-DIAL-ECU.

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EDITORIAL: What’s ahead - Familiar issues face City Council

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Public safety, development and transportation look to top the list of issues facing the Greenville City Council when it greets the new year. As such, members should be prepared for the work ahead, since these are areas with which the council is familiar.

While progress on these issues can be slow in coming, that is exactly what citizens will expect in 2010. Fresh from an election that saw voters replace two of its members, the City Council should begin the new year with a firm determination and a commitment to action.

As it began 2009, the City Council steeled itself for the effects of an economic downturn and positioned itself to make strides toward several long-term goals before the election. Some issues — such as the potential development of a second Wal-Mart store — carried over from the year before. Others — the public safety questions raised by several high-profile crimes — demanded the council’s immediate focus as the year progressed.

Now, as then, the council cannot predict with accuracy what the year will bring. But it can identify several areas that should receive focus in the months to come.

Chief among those will be the issue of crime and public safety, which continue to haunt the city following the tragic shooting deaths of two men on a Fifth Street sidewalk during the summer. Those deaths were in the heart of the city, and returned the spotlight to the larger issue of crime in this community. In the coming year, citizens expect to see tangible action with a promise for effectively reducing crime.

Managing development stands as a point of annual concern, since the city’s continued growth calls on elected officials to take a long-term approach to planning. Accommodating a larger student population at East Carolina University and integrating them into the fabric of the city remains a challenge as well.

The transportation needs of the city have received considerable attention in recent years, and will in 2010 as the council pursues completion of an intermodal hub downtown and the construction of the long-awaited 10th Street connector.

Residents should expect these issues to unfold against a backdrop of economic hardship, as the recession squeezes the city’s budget and forces tough choices from the council. Its members, new and old, may find the going tough as each penny spent will need careful scrutiny in the coming year.

None of the issues facing Greenville come as a surprise, and many have been the subject of ample discussion at City Hall for years. But citizens expect action from this council, and those who serve should be determined to deliver in the year to come.

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Three on NCSU's secret list for chancellor

The search committee for a new N.C. State University chancellor has given a list of three finalists to UNC system President Erskine Bowles, who pronounced himself thrilled with the candidates.

"This pool is terrific in every way," Bowles said.

Bowles said he was interviewing the candidates and would likely make his recommendation to the UNC Board of Governors - which has the final say - at the board's Jan.8 or Feb.12 meeting.

NCSU and system leaders are keeping candidates' names secret, saying that is the only way to ensure the best pool of applicants.

How quickly a new chancellor takes office could depend on whether he or she comes from outside NCSU. Senior university officials typically don't like to change schools during the academic year.

"Our goal was to have someone in place by May, and I think that is doable," said Bob Jordan, a trustee and former lieutenant governor who headed the search committee.

At Bowles' request, the committee didn't rank the finalists. "No matter who he picks out of that group, that person is going to be a great chancellor," said Cassius S. Williams of Greenville, a trustee and committee member.

The scandal over former first lady Mary Easley's NCSU job that triggered the resignations last spring of Chancellor James Oblinger, the provost and the chairman of the board of trustees, didn't seem to affect the quality of applicants, several committee members said. Indeed, Williams said, several were wooed by other universities but were interested only in NCSU.

One topic that committee members explored was how candidates would deal with a major crisis. Student Body President Jim Ceresnak of Charlotte, who was on the committee, said that question was proper to ask a chancellor candidate any time. He said it had particular resonance given what happened to Oblinger.

"It definitely added some weight to the question," Ceresnak said.
Cigna inks deal with UNC Health

Cigna HealthCare and the UNC Health Care System have signed a two-year contract, ending a dispute that could have disrupted care for thousands of Triangle patients.

The two sides had been in negotiations for months and recently began notifying patients about potential service interruptions. Their existing contract, which also covered Rex Healthcare in Raleigh, was set to expire Thursday.

Terms of the deal weren't disclosed. If a new agreement hadn't been reached, about 25,000 Cigna members would have had to pay "out of network" charges to visit UNC, Rex or affiliated physicians.

"We are pleased that Cigna and UNC/Rex will be continuing their long-standing relationship and that our customers will continue to have access to these quality hospitals and physicians at a reasonable cost," said Charles Pitts, president of Cigna HealthCare of North Carolina. "We are particularly pleased that part of the contract resolution includes the identification of areas to work together to improve service."

Cigna had notified members that UNC-Rex demanded rates that were twice as much as Medicare "has established as fair reimbursement in North Carolina." Those costs would be passed on to employer customers, something "difficult to imagine in a state with one of the highest levels of unemployment," Cigna's prepared statement said.

But UNC was "asking Cigna for fair and equitable payment" like other medical centers receive, UNC Health Care CEO William Roper wrote to patients.

In a prepared statement Tuesday, Roper said, "It was very important for UNC Health Care and CIGNA to work together to ensure continued coverage for the thousands of patients who choose us for their care."

Staff writer Alan M. Wolf
ECU coach Skip Holtz follows in father Lou's footsteps

Grew up around the game with Hall of Fame dad

By Phil Stukenborg

Wednesday, December 30, 2009

Saturday in the 51st AutoZone Liberty Bowl, Conference USA champion East Carolina plays the University of Arkansas in a game that will evoke fond memories for Skip Holtz ... but only if he stays focused in the past.

It was slightly more than 30 years ago that Holtz, ECU's successful fifth-year coach, developed a passion for the sport while his father, Lou, served as coach at North Carolina State in the early 1970s and for the NFL's New York Jets in 1976.

Although Skip enjoyed the family's time at N.C. State and its brief NFL stay -- he recalls former Jets quarterback Joe Namath taking him to lunch as an awestruck seventh-grader -- perhaps the most influential period of his young life came during his father's subsequent stop at Arkansas, where the younger Holtz nurtured his love for the game.

Beginning in 1977, Lou coached at Arkansas for seven seasons, leading the Razorbacks to six straight bowl appearances after they'd been to one in the previous five years. He remains one of only three coaches in the program's history to lead the Razorbacks to six straight bowl appearances.

When Lou Holtz took the job at Arkansas, Skip was 13. When Skip recalls that period in his life, it's as if he's 13 again.

"My childhood memories are running around that facility, that program, going up and eating at the training table," Skip said. "(Former Razorback QB) Ron Calcagni was a hero of mine. I used to go down to his room and hang out with him.

"But going out to the practice field, being at that facility, it was a dream come true."

Skip's playground was Razorback Stadium, the indoor practice facility behind the end zone, the outdoor practice fields, Southwest Conference road trips and bowl sites. The Arkansas players and assistant coaches' kids became extended family.

Memphian Pete Cordelli, an Arkansas assistant under Lou Holtz, remembers Skip as a young teenager. He said Skip, and his younger brother, Kevin, played with the children of two other Razorbacks assistants -- receivers coach Jesse Branch (two boys) and quarterback coach Don Breaux (two daughters).
"It was the four boys and the two girls," Cordelli said. "It seemed like they were best friends. If one did something, the other five were going to follow. And they all were great kids. It was fun to watch them at that age."

Shortly after the family settled in northwest Arkansas, Skip entered high school. He became a quarterback at nearby Fayetteville High and attended Holy Cross Junior College in South Bend, Ind., upon graduation.

Eventually, he reunited with his father at Notre Dame when Lou accepted the Fighting Irish job in 1986. Skip played one season at Notre Dame as a flanker and a member of the special teams realizing it was preparation for his calling, despite being a business management major.

"I was always enthralled with business and wanting to own my own business and run my own business," Skip said. "Essentially, that's what I'm doing now, when you look at it. When I first came out of Notre Dame as an undergrad, I turned down a very good job with very good pay to go make $400 a month at Florida State to be a graduate assistant.

"But this is what I wanted to do. I wanted to go down there and see if coaching is what I wanted to do."

Skip, 45, made the right choice. The Pirates will be appearing in their fourth consecutive bowl game and are the first program in C-USA history to win back-to-back league titles.

Successful in his first head coaching job at the University of Connecticut (from 1994-98), Skip spent six years as an assistant to his father at South Carolina before taking the ECU job. It has been a career that likely has made his father, a College Football Hall of Fame member, reflect on a conversation more than 20 years ago.

"He keeps telling the story about how he tried to talk me out of it for about an hour at lunch one day when I was a senior at Notre Dame," Skip said. "I told him this was what I really wanted to do and I wouldn't change my mind.

"I had written a bunch of letters and wanted to go somewhere and be a graduate assistant and get into this profession. Once he saw I was pretty determined that this was what I wanted to do, he asked me if I'd told my mom yet. I said 'Not yet.' He said to make sure she is unarmed when you tell her."

AutoZone Liberty Bowl

Who: East Carolina vs. Arkansas

When, where: 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium

TV, radio: ESPN, WHBQ-AM (560)
East Carolina QB Patrick Pinkney gets do-over

Senior set for 2nd Liberty shot

By Ron Higgins

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Patrick Pinkney, welcome to the 51st annual AutoZone Liberty Bowl Groundhog Day.

Just like the popular 1993 movie featuring Bill Murray, who keeps re-living the same
day over and over, Pinkney, a senior, is getting a chance to end his career for the
second straight season against a Southeastern Conference foe in Saturday's game.

Last year when Pinkney came to Memphis to face Kentucky, he was a fifth-year senior
who wasn't sure the NCAA was going to grant him a sixth year of eligibility. Pinkney
had missed the entire 2005 season due to a shoulder injury and subsequent multiple
procedures.

So when the NCAA gave Pinkney the go-ahead last Jan. 23, 21 days after the Pirates
lost 25-19 to Kentucky in the Liberty Bowl, he wanted that one more year.

"It was a 50-50 thing that I would be back," Pinkney said. "But when I got the OK (from
the NCAA), I wanted to be the first quarterback to win back-to-back Conference USA
championships. I knew what we had coming back with an experienced offensive line,
good receivers and some great running backs. I felt like I had no choice but to come
back."

He put this season to good use, as he rallied the Pirates from a 3-3 start to a 9-4 finish
and that second straight Conference USA title.

But it wasn't smooth from start to finish. In Pinkney's first six games, he averaged 178
yards passing for four TDs, completing just 56 percent. In the last seven games, he
averaged 238.6 yards, threw for 10 touchdowns and completed 62.6 percent.

"Patrick, being a sixth-year quarterback, tried to do too much early in the year," East
Carolina coach Skip Holtz said. "He put too much on his shoulders. He tried to make
things happen rather than playing within the system. He thought he had to be the guy.

"He went back to making the read, taking what the defense gives him and not trying to
go over the top and force the ball for a touchdown. He's doing a great job of managing
the game."

Also, he hasn't thrown an interception in the last four games, a span of 129 throws. His
last pick came in the fourth quarter of 16-3 loss to then-No. 22 Virginia Tech in game
nine.

"It was just rhythm, letting the game come to me," Pinkney said. "Once you get that rhythm in the passing game, you hit a high percentage of first down plays and third downs come easy. I'd been there before. I just had to play Patrick football. I had the guys behind me to make my job easier."

The bottom line is that Pinkney's improved play in the stretch increased ECU's scoring average from 21.2 points in the Pirates' first six games to 33.4 points in the last seven.

"Patrick has played really good football for us the last half of the season," ECU offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Todd Fitch said. "It certainly helped him that we overcame some running back injuries, and we got more consistent in the run game. Darryl Freeney gave us more of an outside receiving threat. And Patrick went back to fundamentals, doing what he's coached to do."

Pinkney is one of 28 ECU seniors, which ties the Pirates for the third-largest senior class in the Football Bowl Subdivision (Division 1-A) this year. Suffice to say, though, few players in the FBS have been around longer than Pinkney.

In fact, with the exception of Pinkney, the lone remaining holdover retained by ECU coach Skip Holtz in 2005 from previous coach John Thompson's staff, Pinkney has been at ECU longer than any other current coach.

"Next year, we're going to have to go back to ground zero at quarterback, assuming nobody knows anything," Fitch said. "In one sense, that's exciting as a coach because it keeps you fresh. But Patrick will be missed. He's a great kid who fought through a lot of injuries. He loves our university. He loves the program."