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ECU team visits children at St. Jude

By Nathan Summers  
The Daily Reflector  

Wednesday, December 30, 2009

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Young cancer patients at the St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis rub the nose on a statue of founder Danny Thomas for good luck before surgeries.

On Wednesday morning, East Carolina football players took the chance to rub elbows with some of those patients.

In keeping with a long-standing Liberty Bowl tradition, ECU players paid a visit to some of the kids being treated at the hospital, which has maintained the Thomas ideal of providing free and extended cancer care to kids from everywhere in the world.

After a brief tour of the hospital's main Memphis location, players were ushered behind a set of long tables, pens placed in their hands and all sorts of ECU memorabilia placed in front of them to be autographed. Within minutes, those players were in the face of dozens of patients and their families. The smiles in the room seemed to light up an otherwise dark and cold day in Memphis.

"This really just brings tears to my eyes," sophomore defensive lineman Maurice Mercer said. "It just makes me happy to come here and make the kids happy. Just to put a smile on their faces does everything for me.

"Honestly, out of all the things we’ve done — we went to a basketball game to see the Memphi Grizzlies play and everything else — this is by far the best thing our team has done."

For players, bowl week is the reward for a great season. For that reason, many of the events on the team’s itinerary are about them, but players wearing a Pirate jersey inside St. Jude didn’t seem to be thinking of themselves.

Just hours after their hospital visit the 9-4 Pirates were back on the practice field in preparation for Saturday’s Liberty Bowl, but while in the company of young cancer patients, the focus was something far away from football.

T.C. Baity, a walk-on fullback from High Point, said he’s been coming to the Liberty Bowl with his family since the Pirates first played in the game back in 1994.

"We'd drive by here all the time, and I thought it would be a great experience to come to," Baity said. "Now I actually get to do it as a player, and it's a cool thing to come and see these kids. They're going through so much, but they have these smiles on their faces. It just lightens your day up."

Seated next to Baity in the long line of Pirates players was quarterback-turned-receiver Taylor Mazzone, who never stopped smiling, interacting and scribbling his signature all over ECU plastic cups, scarves and even a few footballs brought by patients.

"It makes the day just go by beautifully," Mazzone said of his experience at St. Jude. "In the hotel and the meetings, it's all business, a business trip. Coming here is to make smiles on faces and make laughter."

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Fitch: Offense will have to walk ‘fine line’

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, December 31, 2009

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — East Carolina offensive coordinator Todd Fitch knows better than to try to do too much in Saturday’s Liberty Bowl clash with Arkansas.

But that doesn’t mean he’s not tempted to throw a few wrinkles into the game plan.

Fitch will command an ECU offense which is on a hot streak and which played a vital role in the Pirates’ four-game winning streak heading into Saturday’s 5:30 EST kickoff inside Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium.

In order for that to continue, Fitch knows his offense needs to help the defense keep doing what’s working.

“We want to sustain our drives and we want to occupy the clock as much as we can,” said Fitch, whose offense was sixth in scoring in high-flying Conference USA this season, averaging 27.8 points per game. “But we can’t shut it down and try ball control because Arkansas, with the talent they have, they’re going to score some points obviously. It’s a fine line. Three-and-outs can’t happen.”

Even with the ball in hand, Fitch said, the 9-4 Pirates will be thinking about what the Razorbacks (7-5) are capable of doing when they have the ball.

That means even on drives when the Pirates don’t score points, they at least need to be mindful of keeping the defense rested.

“We’ve got to let our guys regroup in between series,” Fitch said, stressing that cohesion between the offense, defense and special teams is the greatest facilitator of success. “We have a veteran defense with about eight or nine seniors back this year, and that is really the strength of our team, so we’ve always strived for balance.”

On offense, Fitch pointed straight to senior 1,000-yard rusher Dominique Lindsay as the biggest difference between this year and last.

Piggy-backing on the sentiments of head coach Skip Holtz and defensive coordinator Greg Hudson, Fitch hopes to keep things simple Saturday. That means handing the ball to Lindsay first and foremost and hoping the run will open up the pass for quarterback Patrick Pinkney.

Still, Fitch admits playing in a bowl game against a Southeastern Conference opponent makes it tempting to do more with the ball.

“You have to fight that temptation,” Fitch said, noting it can be even tougher to keep it simple with a veteran team that knows all of the basics. “We’re very fortunate in that we play a lot of BCS quality opponents during the course of our year, so we have enough variations in our offense that we’ll do a couple of different things with the matchup we have.”

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Hush-hush hazards

Maybe we could get a up a pool on how many people already know who the three finalists are for the chancellor's job at N.C. State University. Let's see, there's University of North Carolina system President Erskine Bowles, who'll make the final pick. There are the members of the search committee. There are trustees and influential supporters and, presumably, various other well-connected people. There are the finalists and their families and friends and colleagues. The idea that everything is going to remain absolutely confidential just because no public announcement is made is ridiculous.

There are the people who saw some candidates on campus or talked to somebody who saw them, or happened to overhear a conversation on an airplane. And so on.

In other words, Bowles' hush-hush on the names of the finalists is unrealistic. And it's not fair to the citizens of the NCSU community and the people of North Carolina. Both of those groups ought to know at least the names of the finalists, whereupon Bowles would get a free, additional vetting of all the candidates. Comments would be made. Stories would be told. Information about the finalists, in other words, would be disclosed beyond that which is in whatever report Bowles may have on his desk.

The argument that the best people won't apply if their names are disclosed somewhere in the process doesn't wash. First, in a search for a public university chancellor, secrecy is simply not appropriate. Second, people talk and there will be those wherever the finalists are working who will know about it, along with all the other aforementioned groups. University campuses are cauldrons of rumor and speculation and gossip. Third, being a serious candidate to head a major university such as NCSU is a distinction that many people would be proud to have known.

Successful searches have been conducted in the open, including in North Carolina. Bowles will make a good choice, but the secrecy of all this is not the way to go about it.
Lawyers want ID of informants in Carson case

HILLSBOROUGH -- Lawyers for the two men accused of killing and kidnapping UNC-CH student body president Eve Carson want to know who called police with what were supposed to be anonymous tips, a request that could undermine one of law enforcement's most effective investigative tools.

On Wednesday, lawyers for Demario Atwater and Laurence Alvin Lovette Jr. argued that they need to review the Crime Stoppers information, in part to see if there are other suspects that police may have neglected. Jim Woodall, Orange County's district attorney, asked Superior Court Judge Allen Baddour to keep the information out of the lawyers' hands, saying that could create a precedent that would jeopardize how police receive information in hard-to-solve crimes.

Baddour plans on reviewing the nearly 300 pages of tips and will hold another hearing Jan. 8 before deciding whether to force Woodall to hand over information collected through the Chapel Hill Police Department's Crime Stoppers program.

Atwater, now 23, and Lovette, 19, are both facing first-degree murder charges in connection with Carson's killing.

In March 2008, Carson, 22, a senior from Athens, Ga., was found dead from five gunshot wounds in the middle of a residential Chapel Hill street near the university campus. Woodall and federal prosecutors have said she was taken from her Chapel Hill apartment and her assailants withdrew money from her bank account at several ATMs before shooting her to death.

While Atwater faces a possible death sentence, Lovette will not. He was 17, an age that the U.S. Supreme Court has deemed too young to face execution, when Carson was killed. But Lovette could spend the rest of his life in prison without a chance of parole.

Crime Stoppers is a nationwide law enforcement program in which members of the public share information about crimes. Police assure callers that the source of the information, which often results in cash rewards if the tip proves reliable, will be anonymous.

At Wednesday's hearing, Baddour heard arguments about whether he should force prosecutors and police to share Crime Stoppers tips, including a call from an unnamed tipster, Caller 412, that ultimately led to Atwater's and Lovette's arrests.

North Carolina criminal discovery laws require prosecutors to share their entire file with defendants before trial. But Woodall argued that the tipster's information should be kept secret, and warned that crimes could become tougher to solve they were not.

"It's a very important program in this state and everywhere in this country," Woodall said. "By allowing this material to simply be produced for the defense, it will identify people who gave tips in this case. It will hamstring this program."

A whodunnit, they say
Lawyers for both Atwater and Lovette said they needed to know more about the tips in order to properly represent their clients. Someone else could have killed Carson, they argued.

"The reason that Laurence Lovette is sitting here is because a tipster called Crime Stoppers, an investigator decided it was important, and followed up," said Kevin Bradley, one of Lovette's two attorneys. "Perhaps if they followed up on other information, there'd be a different person sitting here."

The information given by Caller 412 showed up in police reports, and defense attorneys already have copies, Woodall said. Woodall said there were roughly 300 pages of calls that police received in the case - more than usual but expected in a high-profile killing such as Carson's in which police called for help from the public.

None of the lawyers described in court what Caller 412 shared with police.

In addition to facing state murder charges, Atwater is also looking at a possible federal death sentence, a rarity. Because Carson died as a result of what was said to be a carjacking, that charge carries the possibility of the death penalty.

Atwater's trial on federal carjacking, kidnapping and firearms charges is scheduled for May 10 in Winston-Salem, though his attorneys have asked that it be moved out of state because of the publicity Carson's killing received.

Lovette is also one of several men accused in the January 2008 death of Abhijit Mahato, a Duke doctoral engineering student from India who was shot to death in his Durham apartment in the midst of what police think was a robbery.

Lovette attended Wednesday's hearing in the Orange County Courthouse wearing an orange Durham jail jumpsuit and waved to two family members in the courtroom. Atwater, housed in a Forsyth County prison, agreed to let his attorneys go forward with the hearing without him.

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