

Wake Forest used to playing in big games

By JOEDY McCREARY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI

For Wake Forest, the Orange Bowl is shaping up as just the latest in a series of important games in school history.

No less than three of the Demon Deacons' previous contests this season could have been labeled the biggest in the 105 years of football at the school.

But those victories helped lead to the school's first major bowl game, the Orange Bowl against No. 5 Louisville tonight.

Maybe that's why some of the 15th-ranked Demon Deacons are downplaying their matchup against the Cardinals: They're getting used to playing meaningful games.

"We realize this is a real important game for us, but we just try to go in with the mentality that it's just another game," receiver Willie Idlette said. "We play hard every game that we go into, and this game will be no different."

It's been a season full of important games and landmark victories for the small, private university nestled in central North Carolina.

Among the milestone games that, before tonight's game in south Florida, could have staked a claim as the program's biggest:

- A 30-0 victory against Florida State in Tallahassee that marked the Seminoles' first shutout loss there in Bobby Bowden's tenure.



Wake Forest wide receiver Chip Brinkman, left, makes a catch during passing drills in practice Sunday in Davie, Fla. Wake Forest will face the Louisville Cardinals in the Orange Bowl tonight in Miami, Fla.

- A 38-24 season-ending win at Maryland with which the Demon Deacons clinched the Atlantic Division and a berth in the Atlantic Coast Conference title game.

- A 9-6 triumph against Georgia Tech in last month's ACC championship gave Wake Forest its first conference title since 1970 and sent the Demon Deacons to the Bowl Championship Series.

- And, now, the Orange Bowl. The school's first game in Janu-

ary since 1949 marks a stunning postseason destination for a team that was picked in the preseason to finish last in its division and lost its starting quarterback and tailback to season-ending injuries in September.

"You can't really see this as another game, because this is a chance to prove to a lot of people what Wake Forest football can do, our ability to play with anybody in the country," redshirt

freshman quarterback Riley Skinner said.

"And knowing that you're going to be the only game on in the country, it makes it a little more than just another game," he added. "Being in the Orange Bowl, being in a BCS game, it's something that you'll always watch when you're younger and think about playing in or dreaming about playing in."

"It's here now."

Clemson player honored for efforts as 'parent' to brother

By JOEDY McCREARY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI

Ray Ray McElrathbey is still working on his now-famous juggling act.

The 20-year-old Clemson cornerback became one of the best feel-good stories of 2006 when he took custody of his 12-year-old brother because their mother has a cocaine addiction and their father was addicted to gambling.

"My freshman year, everything was kind of new, but now it's kind of routine, so you're prepared for that," McElrathbey said. "But with a kid, being a parent, I can't prepare for it. I can only hope for the best and plan."

McElrathbey was introduced Monday as the winner of the Orange Bowl Courage Award, given by the Football Writers Association of America to the person in college football who displays courage on or off the field.

McElrathbey this season obtained temporary custody of his younger brother, Fahmarr, and planned to support him with Pell grants, odd jobs and the monthly stipend for living off-campus. The school received a waiver from the NCAA to allow a trust

NOTEBOOK

fund that would help McElrathbey care for his brother.

During the Tigers' recent trip to the Music City Bowl, McElrathbey said he discussed his mother's addiction with her and that because she needs to stabilize her situation, the arrangement is likely to be permanent.

"We said we're going to let her do everything she needs to do as far as get herself set up where it is just not as soon as she gets out (that) we throw kids at her," McElrathbey said.

Still the greatest

A Louisville fund-raiser Sunday night to talk about expansion at Papa John's Cardinal Stadium brought out some of the city's most powerful people.

Still, the room came to a halt when former heavyweight boxing champion and Louisville native Muhammad Ali stepped in. Ali is one of the ceremonial captains for the Orange Bowl.

"It was really special," said Louisville coach Bobby Petrino. "You knew the champ was walking in."

Wacky antics just part of being Ohio State football player

By RUSTY MILLER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio

A few feet from where Jim Tressel was explaining Ohio State's narrow victory against rival Michigan before a bank of microphones, offensive lineman Kirk Barton was puffing rings of smoke from an expensive Cuban cigar.

As if that wasn't enough to make jaws drop, moments later Barton happily regaled several listeners with how he had hid a bottle of champagne in the Buckeyes' locker room, keeping it chilled so the players could celebrate immediately after their 42-39 victory.

"I bought us a bottle of Dom Perignon; it was like \$350," Barton said in between draws on his stogie. "That took a big chunk out of my scholarship check."

Asked how the bubbly tasted, he smiled, tilted his head back and said, "Sweet."

Tressel — who has a sense of humor, but not in this instance — didn't find Barton's actions nearly so sweet. He said the offensive lineman would face some internal discipline.

The amazing part of the whole story is that when Ohio State's players are asked the biggest characters on this year's top-ranked team, Barton, always

quick with a quote or a quip, isn't even mentioned.

On a team of around 100 players, it figures there would be more than just a few independent thinkers and colorful personalities. And there are.

Offensive guard T.J. Downing sports a big, multicolored Mohawk hairstyle.

Center Doug Dattish is an expert on the Civil War.

Wide receiver Anthony Gonzalez sleeps in a clear, plastic tent to approximate the oxygen levels at higher altitudes.

Linebacker James Laurinaitis' father is Animal from WWE's Legion of Doom.

Ryan Pretorius, backup kicker, is a 27-year-old sophomore who grew up in South Africa, where he was the captain of his high school rugby and soccer teams (there was no football team).

Running back Chris Wells' family home back in Akron, Ohio, is painted scarlet and gray. Doug Worthington, a defensive end, enjoys writing lyrics in his spare time.

When it comes to practical jokes and playfully picking on players, Heisman Trophy winner Troy Smith also leads the team.

Midway through the 2004 season, a Columbus television reporter was asking the players if they

were voting in the upcoming presidential election.

Smith was asked what he thought about John Kerry, George W. Bush and third-party candidate Ralph Nader.

"Nader? Nader Abdallah?" Smith said with a grin, referring to a teammate. "He's my man!"

Abdallah, as it turns out, is also considered a joker by the rest of the Buckeyes.

"I've never met anyone like Nader Abdallah," said fellow defensive lineman David Patterson. "I don't know if it's because he's from New Orleans or what, but he's very energetic and fun guy to be around."

Smith usually is behind most of the jokes on the team.

"He poked fun at me today at practice," defensive back Brandon Mitchell said after a recent workout for the Buckeyes' Jan. 8 date with Florida in the national championship game. "He kind of threw a deep one on me, and the first thing he did when we came to the locker room, he stood on top of my locker and told me he was the king."

Just like on the field, Smith's lineman are his biggest defenders.

"The thing about Troy is he has the O-line behind him so nobody really, really gets to him," Mitchell said.

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