

Colonial Athletic Association 2008 Preview

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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.

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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.