

SPORTS

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2023 | newsadvance.com | SECTION B

NOTE TO READERS:

For high school football coverage, visit newsadvance.com and see Sunday's edition.

VIRGINIA FOOTBALL

Tech, UVa to battle in rival matchup



MATT GENTRY, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Virginia Tech coach Brent Pry points toward the field during the second quarter of the Hokies' Sept. 9 matchup with Purdue in Blacksburg. Pry will get his first taste as a head coach of Saturday's Commonwealth Cup clash against rival UVa.

Hokies train to retain Commonwealth Cup, become bowl eligible

DAMIEN SORDELETT
The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — Brent Pry's introduction to the Battle for the Commonwealth Cup came in 1995 as a graduate assistant. He didn't attend any games after his family moved from Huntington, West Virginia, to Lexington, so he made sure to take in the atmosphere at Scott Stadium on the November afternoon.

"I just remember the Sugar Bowl reps were on their sideline for most of the game and then all of a sudden in the fourth quarter, they're on ours," Pry recalled.

"They had jumped out on us and we had battled our way back and pick-six'd it to close it out."

The lasting memories of the instant classic featured Jermaine Holmes' go-ahead touchdown reception with 47 seconds remaining and Antonio Banks' pick-six as time expired. Those scores were part of the Hokies' 22-point fourth quarter in a 36-29 win between top-20 teams.

Pry felt the electricity from the 43,600 fans in attendance and witnessed Tech fans storm the field the moment Banks crossed the goal line. It was the precursor to the Hokies' rise in national prominence with the Sugar Bowl win over Texas coming a little more than one month later.

Sure, this is Pry's first Battle for the Commonwealth Cup as



Commonwealth Cup
Virginia Tech at Virginia
Saturday, 3:30 p.m., ACC Network

the Hokies' head coach, but he is well aware of the significance this game has on the fan bases and the programs.

"Always pressure to beat UVa. Always," he said with emphasis. "Doesn't matter the records. Doesn't matter this, that or the other. They're right down the highway. Like I said, a ton of familiarity and I know how much it means to everybody. You guys know I've been pretty much 1-0, 1-0. ... Well, this is a big 1-0 and

Please see RIVALRY, Page B4



LIBERTY AT UTEP
Regular-season finale
Saturday: 3:30 p.m.
TV: CBSN

Liberty eyes an exciting new year

Unbeaten LU contends to play in a New Year's Six bowl as they close out the regular season

DAVID TEEL
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Undefeated Liberty cracked the College Football Playoff rankings for the first time in program history Tuesday night, positioning the Flames for a possible bid to a prestigious New Year's Six bowl.

In its first season as a Conference USA member, Liberty is No. 25 in the rankings, just behind No. 23 and once-beaten Tulane of the American Athletic. The highest-ranked champion from the Group of Five conferences — the AAC, CUSA, Mountain West, Sun Belt and Mid-American — receives a bid to a New Year's Six game, which this season will be either the Peach, Cotton or Fiesta Bowl.

The chairman of the CFP selection committee, N.C. State athletic director Boo Corrigan, said the panel ranked the Flames because "they keep winning games, and the value of winning games. They've scored a lot of points, averaged a lot of yards, obviously the strength of

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RYAN ANDERSON, LIBERTY ATHLETICS

Liberty quarterback Kaidon Salter (7) is lifted by lineman X'Zauvea Gadlin after scoring a touchdown against UMass on Nov. 18 at Williams Stadium.

Flames aim to keep focus

No. 22 Liberty hopes to stay 'locked in' during regular-season finale, improve to historic 12-0

BEN CATES
The News & Advance

Jamey Chadwell knows his team needs to stay locked in Saturday.

That's every coach's hope, but it's particularly important for Liberty right now. The Flames are ranked No. 22 in the Associated Press Top 25 poll and the coaches poll, and this week cracked the College Football Playoff poll for

the first time in program history, checking in at No. 25.

Eyes are on the Flames as they head to the University of Texas El Paso for Saturday's regular-season finale. The conference championship game looms next week, it'd be very easy to look past the finale, with its weekend-after-Thanksgiving and pre-conference-championship trappings. "As a team, can we stay hun-

gry and not look ahead and stay in the moment?" Chadwell said this week. "I think that's always a challenge as you get later in the season when you do have another game guaranteed and you're only one of two in your conference that has that (LU plays New Mexico State for the Conference USA title on Dec. 1), is our motivation for that week: 'Are we locked in on performing our best that week or are we looking ahead?' 'Cause if we get caught looking ahead, then we'll get beat."

UTEP (3-8, 2-5 CUSA) enters

on a two-game losing streak, including last week's 34-30 loss at Middle Tennessee.

UTEP quarterback Cade McConnell threw for 364 yards last week against Middle Tennessee, and the Miners held the Blue Raiders to a woeful 5 of 15 on third-down conversion attempts, but the comeback effort fell short.

"The message to the team was a tremendous effort with a lot of guys making a ton of plays," UTEP Head Coach Dana Dimel

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CHARLES KRUPA, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Washington Commanders defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio during an NFL football game Nov. 5 in Foxborough, Massachusetts. The Commanders have fired the defensive coordinator and defensive backs coach Brent Vieselmeyer.

NFL

Commanders fire DC Del Rio

Coach Rivera dismisses defensive coordinator, Vieselmeyer after 45-10 Thanksgiving day loss

STEPHEN WHYNO
The Associated Press

Jack Del Rio is out as Washington Commanders defensive coordinator, a firing made Friday in the wake of another embarrassing loss.

Coach Ron Rivera dismissed Del Rio and defensive backs coach Brent Vieselmeyer less than 28 hours after a 45-10 Thanksgiving Day drubbing at the hands of the Dallas Cowboys.

"This was probably the thing that I felt was necessary to do to hopefully get out of this rut and get to a point where we can play to our abilities," Rivera said on a video call with reporters. "It's unfortunate, the situation and circumstances. But I did feel that a change was something that we needed to do going forward."

The decision to make Del Rio and Vieselmeyer scapegoats for the season going sideways seems

to ensure Rivera's job is not in imminent danger despite the team being 4-8. The Josh Harris-led new ownership group is expected to make significant changes in January after the season is over.

Still, something had to give now after Rivera said things "snowballed" again at Dallas, leading to an eighth loss in 10 games since opening with back-to-back victories. He called Harris early Friday to make sure his boss was aligned with the decision and got the green light.

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Flames follow Rode to victory over Charlotte

Kentuckian forward hits first-minute 3-pointer, scores 23 points to lead Liberty to a win at the Hall of Fame Series

MIKE BARBER
Richmond Times-Dispatch

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — As a kid growing up in Lexington, Kentucky, Kyle Rode dreamed of playing for Kentucky. His mother and grandfather would take him to games. They'd get there two hours before tipoff, just to watch the players warm up.

He kept a basketball autographed by Wildcats coach Tubby Smith in his bedroom.

Friday night, with Smith sitting in the stands, Rode scored 23 points to lead Liberty past Charlotte, 71-59, in the early game at the Hall of Fame Series at the Spectrum Center.

"Growing up, it's a dream for ev-

ery kid that has a basketball in the state of Kentucky," Rode, a fifth-year senior forward, said. "Then, as you get to middle school and high school, you realize there's so much value in going somewhere you're wanted. And I felt like Liberty was the right place for me."

Rode became the highest-rated recruit in Liberty's program history when he signed to play for Ritchie McKay's team before the 2019-20 season. He played in 33 games that year, starting five of them. Over the next three years, he became a fixture in the Flames' lineup, a full-time starter who has averaged just under 10 points a game in his career.

"He can really morph into

whatever you need," McKay said. "He can score 30. He can take two shots. He can be a playmaker. He can guard any position. And then his character, he's literally the best leader that I've ever coached in 35 years."

Despite his Kentucky Bluegrass pedigree, Rode said he never felt frustrated by his role as a supporting cast member for his first four years at Liberty.

"It's kind of what this program is built on," Rode said. "We place such a value on guy's playing their role. That really allows you to buy into that and then year after year you just keep stacking days and just keep getting better. We just want to contribute however the

team needs on a given night."

Friday night, he did plenty of contributing.

Rode hit a 3-pointer 37 seconds into the game to put Liberty up 3-1, and the Flames (2-0) led the rest of the way, going up by as many as 13 in the first half and going to the locker room up 35-23.

The lead ballooned to as much as 20 on another 3-pointer by Rode, this one with four minutes to play.

"We've got guys who can score and make plays, and tonight my teammates did an unbelievable job of setting me up and getting me in spots where I feel comfortable to score," Rode said. "I've been on the other side of it, when you're feeding that guy. I know how it is

and how valuable those guys are."

Guard Brody Peebles came off the bench to score 13 points for Liberty, which also got nine points from Bowling Green transfer guard Kaden Metheny and eight points each from Colin Porter and Zach Cleveland.

Charlotte (1-1) trimmed the deficit to a dozen with 6:58 to go on a short jumper in the paint by Lu'cye Patterson, but couldn't get any closer down the stretch.

Forward Igor Milicic, who transferred to Charlotte before last season, led the 49ers with 13 points and 10 rebounds.

The Flames return to action Thursday when they face Furman in the Myrtle Beach Invitational.

Liberty

From C1

were some times where we were playing to not make a mistake. I take personal responsibility for that. That's on me. There was a message in there somewhere this week that made guys play hesitant and tentative. Obviously I've got to learn from that and eliminate that. We did not play with the same conviction, intensity and desire in the first half that we needed to play with."

For Liberty defensive tackle Bryce Dixon, revamping the defense came down to a simple concept.

"We just basically got back to chasing that standard," Dixon said after tying teammate Preston Hodge with a team-leading eight tackles, including 1.5 tackles for a loss and a sack Saturday. "Swarming to the ball, running to the ball, getting off blocks, ... just effort. That's what we focused on this week. Effort."

There was perhaps no better sequence that showcased LU's dominance than one that took place late in the first quarter. LU defensive tackle Chris Boti sacked Wilson to bring up a long third down for ODU, but on the next play, Flames safety Quinton Reese intercepted a pass intended for Kelby Williams. Reese's grab gave Liberty its nation-leading 17th interception.

Salter completed 13 of 22 passes (one interception) for



PAIGE DINGLER PHOTOS, THE NEWS & ADVANCE

Liberty's Noah Frith hauls in a touchdown pass from quarterback Kaidon Salter against Old Dominion during Saturday's game at Williams Stadium.

225 yards. Daniels finished with seven catches for 137 yards, his sixth career 100-yard game and fifth of the season. And Liberty running back Quinton Cooley led the rushing attack with 85 yards, surpassing the 1,000-yard mark for 2023.

Wilson led ODU with 64 rushing yards, and a bulk of that output took place on one tote, a 32-yard gain in the second half. ODU finished with 119 rushing yards. Wilson also completed 23 of 42 passes for 161 yards.

"There were some times where we didn't make our blocks," Rahne added. "There were a couple of other times where we should or shouldn't have thrown it out there. There were others times

where [Liberty] just played it really well and defeated the blocks and made the play. All the credit in the world to them; they played very good football. We did not play our best, and they played well. That's not going to be a combination for a successful game."

Chadwell said Liberty's defensive unit lost belief in its abilities last week. The trick was to get that back, but not by holding team meetings or with fiery talks from coaches. He wanted improvement to come from within the unit. The result, he said, was "probably the best overall game for four quarters that we've played, maybe all year. ... This was our cleanest game from a defensive standpoint."

And Dixon hinted that last



Liberty quarterback Kaidon Salter passes against Old Dominion on Saturday.

week's performance had left a sour taste in the mouth of the defense. Maybe wounded its pride a little, too.

"We just had kind of a chip on our shoulder," he said. "We had to earn respect."

Notes: Liberty will play New Mexico State in the Conference USA championship game Dec. 1 at Williams Stadium. New Mexico State defeated Western Kentucky 38-29 Saturday evening to

set up the matchup. ... LU senior defensive tackle Kendy Charles suffered a lower-body injury, and Chadwell said he expects Charles will not return this season. ... LU tight end Brentley Hanshaw also exited with an injury, and Chadwell said he's hopeful Hanshaw may return by the Dec. 1 conference championship.

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Hilltoppers

From C1

quarterbacks. Third-seeded Glass (8-3) showcased its two-platoon system, with Max Calloway throwing for a career high 281 yards and completing 19 of 25 passes. Marty Kittrell added 112 yards through the air on 3-of-5 passing, giving the Hilltoppers a total of 393 passing yards (they finished with 474 yards of total offense).

Sherando QB Micah Carlson, a 6-foot junior, passed for 308 yards (18 for 32), but Glass picked him off three times as the sixth-seeded Warriors (5-6) committed four turnovers.

It also was a big night for Glass receivers. Ja'mar Smith finished with 155 receiving yards on seven catches and scored on a 36-yard pass — a beautifully placed ball by Calloway — that gave his team a 38-16 lead with 6:43 to play. Sam Treacy had 120 receiving yards on seven catches, and Jonathan Wood totaled 87 yards on four receptions.

"Passing game worked well tonight," Calloway said. "We hit them underneath and took shots over the top when we needed to, and I think we were successful."

It also was a big night for Thomas. The senior finished with 67 rushing yards, scored touchdowns on runs of 12 and 8 yards, hauled in a 4-yard TD pass from Calloway for a 10-3 lead in the second quarter and delivered that hard-hitting tackle that reverberated throughout the stadium and led to Brehm's fumble recovery.

"Just very proud of the way [Brehm] has fought back from injury," Lovelace said, "and happy to see the ball pop up in his hands. And can't forget the big hit by Mikey Thomas to jar that loose."

And it was a big night for kickers. Glass' Will Pacot hit a 33-yard field goal for a 3-0 lead on Glass' first drive and, although he missed a 29-yard attempt wide left later



PAIGE DINGLER, THE NEWS & ADVANCE

E.C. Glass' Jonathan Wood rushes past Sherando's Breiden Lowery during Friday's Region 4D quarterfinal game at City Stadium.

in the frame, hit all five of his PATs. Sherando kicker Benjamin Smith (49 receiving yards) hit field goals of 24 and 40 yards.

The Hilltoppers built a 22-point lead midway through the fourth, but Sherando scored on its last two drives of the game, touchdown throws of 16 and 7 yards by Carlson, including one just before time expired. He threw three touchdowns on the night.

But Glass' three interceptions were key to the win. Ja'mar Smith had one early in the third quarter, and it led to Thomas' 12-yard

touchdown, the score that jump-started that pivotal 16-second sequence. Smith had just missed an interception the play before, at the start of the third quarter, and had he held on to the ball, it almost certainly would've gone down as a pick-6.

"I said 'Next play,'" Smith said. "I always can make the next play. ... Our secondary [played] a key part in helping us score on offense because of the field position that we got."

Freshman defensive back Aaron Broggin and junior DB Brayden

Morgan also had interceptions for Glass.

The win sets up an anticipated rematch between the Hilltoppers and second-seeded Jefferson Forest at JF in the second round next week. The Cavaliers controlled the game the first time around, when the teams met on Oct. 13 in the Black & Blue Bowl, earning a 23-0 win.

Lovelace talked in the postgame huddle Friday about the comments he's heard and read since his team's performance against JF last month.

"It's never about me," he said after breaking from the huddle. "I'm a coach, so I think I'm used to those critics. But when there are things said about the kids, that always bothers me. The scoreboard doesn't always show how hard your kids are working, so we're just thankful to have another opportunity to prove how hard we're working against another quality team that we have a lot of respect for in JF."

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SPORTS

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2023 | newsadvance.com | SECTION B

NOTE TO READERS:

For high school football coverage, visit newsadvance.com and see Sunday's edition.



Georgia Tech at UVa
ACC FOOTBALL
Saturday, 2 p.m., The CW

Cavaliers' pass-rush execution crumbles

UVa is unable to post a sack per game as its defensive line rotates due to player injuries

MIKE BARBER
Richmond Times-Dispatch

CHARLOTTESVILLE — Virginia's defense has managed just seven sacks through eight games this season, tied with Kent State for the fewest in all of FBS football.

Last season, in a road win at Georgia Tech, the Cavaliers posted eight sacks in a single game.

"Just playing, just relentless," senior defensive end Chico Bennett said of how UVa was so effective a year ago in Atlanta. "Not thinking."

Bennett, a Georgia Tech transfer, led the charge that day, finishing with two sacks and seven tackles against his former team in the 16-9 Virginia victory. Those teams meet again Saturday and, despite returning five of the six defenders who were in on sacks in that game, UVa (2-6, 1-3 ACC) hasn't found anywhere near that level of pass-rush success this season.

The Cavaliers are the only team in the league averaging less than one sack per game. Georgia Tech (4-4, 3-2), meanwhile, is the only ACC team allowing fewer than one sack per game. The Yellow Jackets have given up just seven sacks in eight games.

"We'll have to be good as far as being able to mix fronts, mix coverages," defensive coordinator John Rudzinski said Wednesday after practice. "Pass-rush wise, there are guys who can go win one-on-ones and excited to see them go compete again."

Virginia's defensive line looked

Please see CAVALIERS, Page B4



DOUG MURRAY, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Liberty cornerback Kobe Singleton (3) celebrates intercepting a pass with cornerback Amarian Williams (26) during the game against FIU on Sept. 23 in Miami.

Liberty aims to shake off historic November blues

Undefeated Flames to battle Bulldogs in an attempt to stop trend of lackluster endings

BEN CATES
The News & Advance

Liberty enters Saturday's homecoming game against Louisiana Tech as one of eight undefeated FBS teams in the country. A win would give the Flames a 9-0 record, the best start to any season in program history. It has, in short, been an extremely successful campaign so far, one in which Liberty could soon find itself ranked in the Top 25.

For all their achievements, the Flames hope to shake aside something that has plagued them the last two years as they head into a new month of play: The November blues.

Liberty has gone 1-6 in the month of November the last two years. That includes a span last season, under former head coach Hugh Freeze, in which the Flames lost their last three games of the regular season before falling in their bowl appearance in December.

"We have talked about that," first-year head coach Jamey Chadwell said this week. "We're 1-6 the last two years in the

Please see LIBERTY, Page B4



PAIGE DINGLER, THE NEWS & ADVANCE

Liberty's CJ Daniels fights to stay on his feet against Middle Tennessee's Tyrell Raby after hauling in a pass from quarterback Kaidon Salter on Oct. 17.

Hokies' improved run game to face new challenge



MATT GENTRY, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Virginia Tech running back Bhayshul Tuten (center) scores on a 3-yard touchdown run during an 38-10 win over Syracuse on Oct. 26 in Blacksburg.

Va. Tech's sharpened offense, skilled QB to be tested by Cardinals' aggressive defensive line

DAMIEN SORDELETT
The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech's running attack took a step forward last week. The 318-yard performance against Syracuse marked the first time since the 2021 regular-season finale at Virginia that the Hokies eclipsed the 300-yard mark, and only two of the 51 designed runs against the Orange resulted in a loss of yards.

There was plenty to celebrate after the game. It even included offensive coordinator Tyler Bowen shaving his beard into a Fu Manchu after losing a bet to a reserve offensive lineman that the Hokies

wouldn't rush for more than 300 yards against Syracuse.

"Obviously we're finally putting stuff together as a whole offense. You know?" right guard Bob Schick said. "It's the whole offensive line, we're working hard. The receivers are blocking their heart out, too. The quarterback's making good reads and everything. It's just the whole unit is coming together."

Tech's run game has been rolling ever since the dreadful performance in Week 2 against Purdue, a stretch that includes a 209-yard outing at Florida State and the 318-yard showing against Syracuse.

The next opponent on the Hokies' schedule doesn't give up many rushing yards at all. Fifteenth-ranked Louisville ranks second in the ACC in rushing defense and has given up a grand total of 272 rushing yards over its last four games.

"It'll be a matchup between an improving Hokies offensive line against a dominating Cardinals defensive front led by Ashton Gillette coming off the edge.

"I'd say this, it starts with their front and they're so active. They're a problem up front and disruptive," Hokies coach Brent Pry said. "And that creates problems down the field. We've got to be able to protect Kyrion [Drones]

Please see HOKIES, Page B4

LIBERTY FOOTBALL
VS. LOUISIANA TECH
SATURDAY, NOV. 4 @ 6 P.M.
LUFOOTBALL.COM