



BREAKING: MCNEILL RELEASED

The East Carolinian

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GAME OVER

"OUR EXPECTATIONS ARE TO COMPETE FOR CHAMPIONSHIPS"

Jeff Compher, ECU Director of Athletics



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SEEGARS, RONNIE MOORE, COURTNEY TITTUS | THE EAST CAROLINIAN

McNeill ends ECU career 42-34

Adam Decker
TEC STAFF

East Carolina Athletic Director Jeff Compher has announced the firing of head coach Ruffin McNeill. The decision comes less than a week after the Pirates concluded their season at 5-7, finishing in fifth place in the American Athletic Conference East division.

"These types of decisions are never easy," Compher said. "However after observing and evaluating the program for three seasons, I came to the conclusion that our football team was not meeting competitive expectations and in my opinion the trajectory of the program was not going in the right direction."

As the news of McNeill's dismissal became public, it sent shock waves across the nation, as no one saw it coming, especially not ECU fans.

"I expected there to be an emotional reaction to this and I expected people not to be pleased with it," Compher said. "This was a decision however that was made not to be popular, not to win over a lot of fans with. This



" This is a destination job for me. Let's make that very clear. ...This is not a stepping stone.

-Ruffin McNeill, at his 2010 hiring press conference "



RUFFIN MCNEILL: PLAYERS REACT



Tyler Kelbaugh
TEC STAFF

Pirate Nation's reaction to head coach Ruffin McNeill's firing has been nothing short of visceral, with players, both former and current, unleashing support for their old mentor.

"Everybody is shocked," said senior linebacker Zeek Bigger, just hours after the news was released to the public. "Everybody loved Ruff. Ruff is what we came for. Ruff is who we played for. Ruff and his coaching staff believed in a lot of people and he believed in us and brought us here. He's changed the whole atmosphere and everybody loved him."

A quick peak on any ECU player's social media page backs that claim up. Some of the brightest stars of the McNeill era, including Shane Carden, Justin Hardy, Isaiah Jones and Lamar Ivey, all took to Twitter to express their shock and disbelief at the news.

"I'm furious," wrote Hardy, the NCAA's all-time reception leader. "If it wasn't for Ruff I wouldn't have went to ECU."

Still, for Bigger, the end of the McNeill era hits especially hard. The senior, who was part of McNeill's first recruiting class, came to ECU because he felt that McNeill believed in him more than any other coach.

"Just getting through walking off the field for the last time was tough, but me being a part of his first class and being a senior makes it really tough," said Bigger.

During his time as head coach, McNeill focused on building a program that prided itself on both mental and physical toughness. Bigger says that will, the ability to keep moving forward in the face of adversity, was the most important lesson McNeill taught him.

"He taught us how to gather in and be grown men and deal through the fight through any thing," said Bigger. "Being able to plant your feet and stand straight up and be able to say if you want some, get some."

The senior expects backlash from Compher's decision to effect more than just those who have played under McNeill. Future recruits, including

those who have already committed to ECU, will "most definitely" leave for other programs, according to Bigger.

Regardless of whom ECU chooses to succeed McNeill, explaining to current team members why the decision was made will be Compher's first priority. While he said on Friday he was going to meet with the team to explain the decision, getting players to buy into his vision instead of McNeill's will be no easy task.

"Ruff is the reason I'm still here," wrote sophomore wide-receiver Trevon Brown. "He fought for my life and kept me in school. He believed I could do it and I did it for him."

The decision to fire McNeill comes after a 5-7 season where the Pirates placed second-to-last in the AAC's east division. Still, junior wide-receiver Isaiah Jones tweeted that those seven losses were nothing compared to losing McNeill.

"By far, the great loss we've had all year," Jones wrote.

This writer can be contacted at sports@theeastcarolinian.com.

TAKING A LOOK BACK

Date of Hire:
January 22, 2010

2015 Record
5-7

Overall ECU Record
42-34-0

ECU Bowl Game Appearances

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Military Bowl
[2010 — Loss] | Beef O'Brady Bowl
[2013 — Win] |
| New Orleans Bowl
[2012 — Loss] | Birmingham Bowl
[2014 — Loss] |



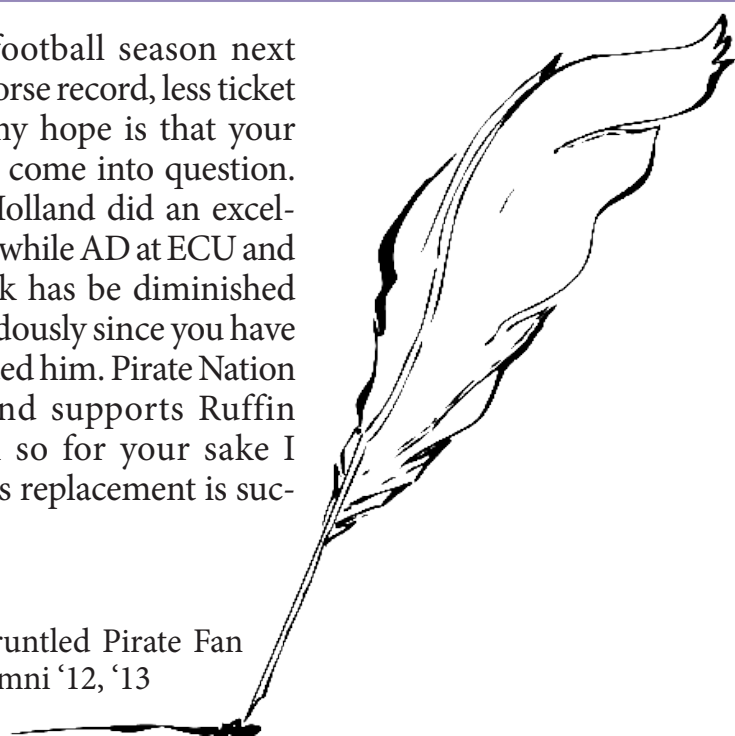
Letter to the editor | McNeill firing a huge mistake by Compher

Dear Jeff Compher,

I am saddened to see the direction that the athletic programs have taken at ECU since your hire. I am devastated after learning that Coach McNeill has been fired. Declining ticket sales and other areas of decline within our athletic programs seem to be a result of your leadership rather than that of McNeill's dedication to ECU and the ECU football team. When the decision to fire McNeill backfires due to lost recruits and an even

worse football season next year (worse record, less ticket sales) my hope is that your job will come into question. Terry Holland did an excellent job while AD at ECU and his work has been diminished tremendously since you have succeeded him. Pirate Nation loves and supports Ruffin McNeill so for your sake I hope his replacement is successful.

Thanks,
Disgruntled Pirate Fan
and Alumni '12, '13



Poll question

Do you agree with the university's decision to fire Ruffin McNeill?

Visit theeastcarolinian.com to vote.

MICHAEL SEEGARS | THE EAST CAROLINIAN

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was a decision that was made for the future of our football program.”

Compher admitted that it was his decision only and there was no outside pressure to let McNeill go. He didn't believe the program was progressing and figured that he had to terminate McNeill's contract to see improvement.

“I know that a lot of people are shocked about it, but I felt like we needed to make the decision now and not wait another year for what might be the same [result],” said Compher.

Despite a successful campaign, in which he toted a record of 42-34 (.553) while taking the Pirates to four bowl games in six years, Compher says he wants to win conference championships. And although McNeill's team battled with crucial injuries this year, Compher says there are no excuses and no matter the circumstance there has to be progress.

“This decision was difficult because of who Ruffin McNeill is as a man,” Compher said. “I am thankful for his dedication to Pirate Nation and his coaches and his staff who have worked hard for this program over the last few seasons... He's a Pirate. He will always be a Pirate.”

McNeill had the remaining two years of his contract bought out by the university, roughly totaling \$1 million.

Compher says he plans to address the team on Friday to clear the air, as it was an undoubtedly unpopular decision amongst the ECU players.

“I'm going to meet with the team later today and talk to them about my decision. I know that's not going to be an easy meeting,” Compher said. “I'm going to



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Ruffin McNeill and former offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley at the Birmingham Bowl last year. ECU lost the game to Florida.

talk to them about our future and if they want to be a part of something that helps lead to championships in our program, I want them to be a part of that.”

The Pirates will try to find a new head coach quickly, as they don't want to fall behind in their recruiting. Compher said that the search for a replacement has already begun and it is something that he has already given a lot of thought to.

“We will now begin a national search to find the next leader of the Pirate football program... I have no doubt there will be great interest in this job,” Compher

said. “I will look for our next head coach knowing how critical this decision is to our current and former members of our football team, this university, our passionate fan base, as well as this entire region.”

Compher says he has no preference and will look at both head coaches and coordinators, trying to make the perfect choice to move the program forward.

For questions or comments, contact sports@theeastcarolinian.com.