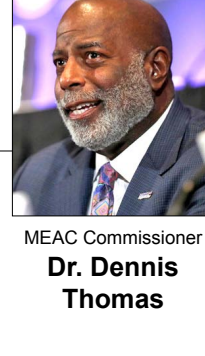
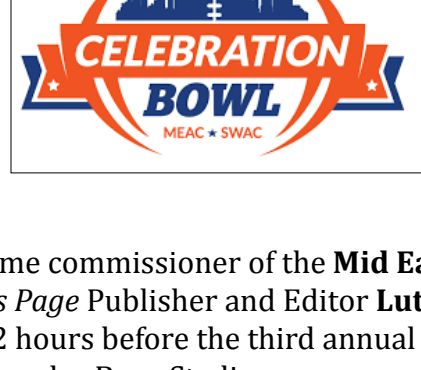


BCSP Publisher/Editor  
**Carl Lut Williams**

## An exclusive Q&A with MEAC Commissioner Dr. Dennis Thomas about *The Celebration Bowl*



MEAC Commissioner  
**Dr. Dennis Thomas**



**Dr. Dennis Thomas**, the longtime commissioner of the **Mid Eastern Athletic Conference**, talked with *Black College Sports Page* Publisher and Editor **Lut Williams** Wednesday in an exclusive Q&A session, some 72 hours before the third annual *Celebration Bowl* is to be played in Atlanta at the brand new Mercedes Benz Stadium.

In Saturday's game – the third annual bowl game pitting champions of the two HBCU Div. I conferences – undefeated (11-0) MEAC champion **North Carolina A&T State University** will take on once-defeated (12-1) **Southwestern Athletic Conference** champion **Grambling State University** in the final game of the 2017 HBCU football season that will determine this year's black college football national champion. NC A&T and Grambling State are 1-2 in everybody's HBCU rankings and polls. The *Celebration Bowl* kicks off the NCAA Bowl season.

The game, sponsored by ESPN, includes a \$1 million payout to both conferences and will air live before a national television audience, as it has since its inception, on ABC Saturday at 12 noon.

Thomas talks about the hurdles that had to be overcome to make the Celebration Bowl a reality, ESPN's role in it, and present and future plans for the event.

**LUT WILLIAMS:**  
**Good afternoon Commissioner, how are you today?**

**DENNIS THOMAS:**  
Doing absolutely great, Lut, what about yourself?

**LW:**  
**I'm doing fine commissioner. Thank you for doing this interview and I'm sure with the big season finale coming up at the Celebration Bowl Saturday, the game is on everybody's mind. First, let me give you an opportunity to say how you think things have gone for the Celebration Bowl as it enters its third year?**

**DT:** I think things are going well and I think the student/athletes and institutions are really having a great experience, a bowl experience. I think the branding and marketing has been phenomenal for the participating conferences and institutions.

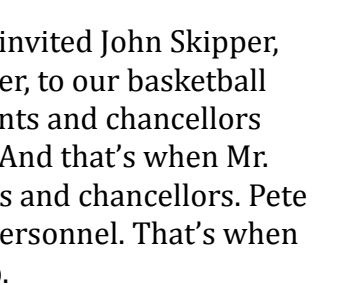
**LW:**  
**And tell me Commissioner, how did the whole concept of the Celebration Bowl come about? What was the genesis of it? Where did it start and how did it get to the point where it is now?**

**DT:** The Celebration Bowl concept started back in 2004. Pete Derzis (Senior Vice President, College Sports Programming and Events) of ESPN, **Robert Vowels**, former commissioner of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, and I met in Atlanta. We were talking about a game at the beginning of the football season, a Challenge between the champions of the SWAC and the MEAC. After we talked about a game in September on the Sunday before Labor Day (what became known as the *MEAC/SWAC Challenge*, now in its 13th year), the discussion was about to end and I asked a question. Because I had a vision of a postseason bowl game between the champion of the SWAC and the champion of the MEAC, I asked Pete if he thought a postseason bowl game would be worth investigating with ESPN televising it.



**Vowels**

Pete and Robert agreed that we needed to take it back to ESPN and see if they were interested. The bottom line is simply this, ESPN was interested. I was very excited. They submitted a proposal that I took back to my membership and they said that we were not ready for it (laughs) and were not ready to give up our AQ (Automatic Qualifying berth in the FCS playoffs to the MEAC champion). So now, I had to go back to ESPN and say, I know I'm the guy who brought this idea up but my membership is not amenable at this time. So every year after that I would bring it up and try to persuade our membership to send our champion to the postseason bowl game. But it didn't happen until maybe 10 or 11 years later in terms of our membership even entertaining the conversation.



**Derzis**

And how this really came about is when I invited John Skipper, ESPN's president and chief executive officer, to our basketball tournament and to meet with our presidents and chancellors during their meetings at the tournament. And that's when Mr. Skipper made a proposal to our presidents and chancellors. Pete Derzis was there along with other ESPN personnel. That's when we got real traction with our membership.

**LW:**  
**What year was that?**

**DT:** It was either the spring of 2014 or 2015. I'm very pleased that he (Skipper) accepted the invitation so we could meet with our presidents and chancellors and talk through some things.

**LW:**  
**Who were the hardest to get to buy in, the presidents and chancellors, ADs (athletic directors) or the football coaches?**

**DT:** All of the above! The head football coaches wanted to compete for a national championship. The ADs had the same mindset about competing for a national championship and the same with our presidents and chancellors.

**LW:**  
**Do you think it was the total package – finances, exposure, national television, etc. that was the thing that tipped it in your favor – or was it just the presence of the ESPN head honchos making that appeal?**

**DT:** Lut, let me tell you something. John Skipper was the game-changer! When he came to visit with our presidents and chancellors and made his presentation, that caught the attention of everyone. And had it not been for John Skipper, there probably would not be a Celebration Bowl.

**LW:**  
**What has been the reaction of the presidents and chancellors since the Celebration Bowl was inaugurated?**

**DT:** It's been very positive. The presidents are on board, obviously now, and it's a very good situation for the participating institutions, not only from a financial standpoint, but from a branding, marketing and student enrollment standpoint as well.

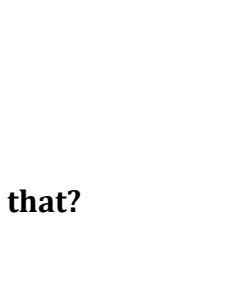
**LW:**  
**In the two years of the Celebration Bowl, in one of those years (2016) you also had a MEAC team make the FCS playoffs. The best of all possible worlds, I would assume, is you play this game and have a team from your conference in the playoffs?**

**DT:** Yes, and that was what I was communicating to our membership. We would lose our automatic qualifier and our champion would go to the bowl game but other teams could be selected at-large for the FCS playoffs if their record and strength-of-schedule dictated it. So, a lot of people, not most people, thought that since we gave up our AQ that prohibited our other institutions from competing in the FCS playoffs. And that's not true. Obviously, we had our champion go to the Celebration Bowl and North Carolina A&T went to the FCS Championship playoffs last season. All of that came to fruition to show that this can actually happen.

And Lut, let me tell you, there was a lot of stress on Dennis Thomas during this time (laughs). This wasn't a walk in the park or a day at the beach (laughs) for me.

**LW:**  
**Was ABC always a part from the beginning? How did that come about?**

**DT:** I have to commend ESPN for that, because at best, we thought we were going to be on ESPN. The powers that be at ESPN – Pete Derzis, John Skipper and others – I have to give them kudos for making ABC happen. Yes, you could say, we'd like to play on ABC, but being on ESPN is not chopped liver either. It was a great move.



**LW:**  
**How did the Celebration Bowl get its name?**

**DT:** It came from ESPN. Pete Derzis called me and said, 'Dennis, we think the name of the bowl should be a 'celebration', because it's going to be a celebration of HBCU football, its heritage and its legacy. I said to Pete, 'that's great and I think that's a perfect name, the Celebration Bowl, because we're going to celebrate all that's good from a historical perspective for African-Americans.' ESPN brought it to us and asked was that a good appellation for the bowl game, and we agreed.

**LW:**  
**Let's talk about the length of the contract with ESPN?**

**DT:** I don't want to get into the length, but it's a multi-year contract.

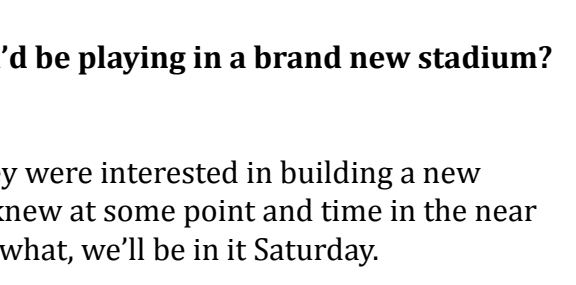
**LW:**  
**Are you already engaged in negotiating an extension or is it too early for that?**

**DT:** It's not being discussed at this point.

**LW:**  
**From a commissioner's standpoint, are you satisfied with the financial arrangements?**

**DT:** I don't want to comment on the amount of revenue, but to answer your question, I'm certainly satisfied with it. I think it's another revenue source that our conference has that it didn't have before. And we also, like most conferences, have a revenue distribution formula that we use.

**LW:**  
**What do you think about the attendance at the game (35,558 in 2015 and 31,096 in 2016) and what do you think can be done to increase it? I'm asking that question knowing that getting 30,000 for a postseason game between FCS schools is unheard of.**



**DT:** I think we have to continue to build on attendance. The 30,000-plus is a good sign, a good start. If we continue to implement strategies in a 120-mile radius of Atlanta, what I call, being a former coach, the 'ground game', it's possible. We have, between the MEAC and SWAC, alumni associations for A&T, their alumni, fans and everybody associated with it and it's tremendous for the MEAC. And to be able to showcase your team on a national platform, to me, it doesn't get any better than this.

**LW:**  
**How significant is it to be playing this game in the brand new Mercedes-Benz Stadium and was it part of your plan for this to be the kickoff to the bowl season?**



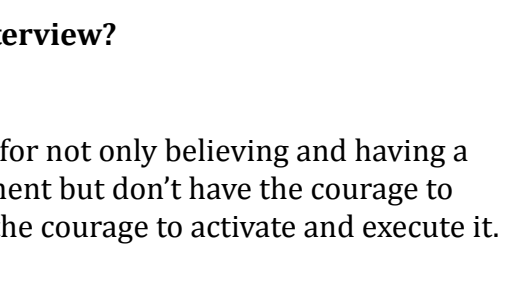
**DT:** Absolutely. We had options in terms of placement and timing for the game. We wanted it to be at the beginning rather than the middle or the end of the bowl season. I think that was a great move to have it on the first Saturday that the bowl season begins. This is the right venue, the right city and the right time in December to have our Celebration Bowl.

**LW:**  
**Did you have any idea that three years in you'd be playing in a brand new stadium?**

**DT:** Yes, because Atlanta had let the public know that they were interested in building a new stadium. I didn't know how long it would take but I knew at some point and time in the near future that it would happen. So, it's done. And guess what, we'll be in it Saturday.

**LW:**  
**How do you feel about the team you have representing your conference this year – North Carolina A&T – an undefeated team ranked in the FCS Top Ten?**

**DT:** This is history. This is historical ground for North Carolina A&T State, to be undefeated. This goes back to the 1930s when A&T was undefeated during the regular season. And then have a chance to go 12-0? This is significant. It's tremendous for A&T, their alumni, fans and everybody associated with it and it's tremendous for the MEAC. And to be able to showcase your team on a national platform, to me, it doesn't get any better than this.



**LW:**  
**Do you have any future plans, anything that you'd like to see added or become part of the game?**

**DT:** I think we need to continue to showcase the history of all the student/athletes that didn't receive this kind of marketing and branding, and make it a real celebration. That would include members of the Black College Football Hall of Fame, members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, those players that made the *Pittsburgh Courier* Black College All-American teams, that made the Mutual Black (Urban) Sports Network All-American team and others. We want to keep the focus on those student/athletes and institutions that came before us. And you have to give kudos to (former MEAC Commissioner) **Ken Free** and (former SWAC Commissioner) **Dr. James Frank** because they started the *Heritage Bowl*, a forerunner of the Celebration Bowl.



**LW:**  
**Anything you'd like to add before we close out the interview?**

**DT:** I just cannot thank John Skipper and Pete Derzis enough for not only believing and having a commitment. A lot of people believe and have a commitment but don't have the courage to activate it or execute it. Mr. Skipper and Pete Derzis had the courage to activate and execute it.

**LW:**  
**Any plans to incorporate some of the Black College Hall of Fame events into the Celebration Bowl? I know they're choosing a black college player of the year and plan other events. Any plans to include some of those things?**

**DT:** We're doing that now. In the first year as well as last year, we had BCFHOF inductees to attend the game and they were profiled, not only during the game being shown on the video board but they were also profiled before and during the broadcast.



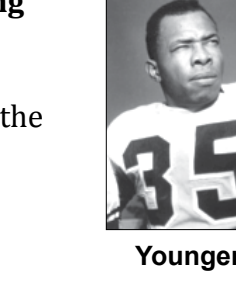
**LW:**  
**I know last year you did an NFL symposium any plans to continue with that?**

**DT:** Yes, (SWAC Commissioner) **Duer Sharp** and I approached the NFL about doing something for the Celebration Bowl and the NFL bought into it. What they do now is they bring in NFL people from different clubs, different former players and talk to the two teams in the Celebration Bowl. In addition, we have an NFL forum that invites undergraduate and graduate students to come and listen to and ask questions about the NFL and job opportunities. As you know, there are more jobs behind the camera than in front of the camera or on the playing field.



Now, we are getting students from the SWAC, the MEAC, the CIIA and the SIAC to be a part of this forum. They get an opportunity to listen to and see professionals from the NFL clubs and the NFL national office talk to them about what it's going to take and the skill-set they need to have an opportunity to work in the NFL.

**LW:**  
**It's interesting that you mentioned the CIIA and SIAC, because when you start talking about celebrating that legacy it certainly includes those institutions and players that are and were a part of those conferences. When you talk about including those conferences, that says a lot.**



**DT:** The diversity in our society in all areas of human endeavor is not there, it's simply not there. We're giving the NFL an opportunity to see that we have some very talented young people that have the abilities and skill-sets to move the needle in a positive way for their organizations. They just need to be exposed to the talent pools.

The same way you evaluate and go out running mine the (former North Carolina A&T running back now a rookie with the NFL's Chicago Bears) **Tarik Cohens**, (former North Carolina State defensive tackle now in his second year with the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers) **Javon Hargraves** and (former Howard safety and NFL veteran now with the Arizona Cardinals) **Antoine Betheas** of the world, you need to do the same thing, you need to be able to prove that it's not where you're from. If you have the ability, you can perform on anybody's level. It's not where you come from, it's where you're going.



**Cohen**

**Hargraves**

**Betheas**

**LW:**  
**And the Tarik Cohens, Javon Hargraves and Antoine Betheas are proving that?**

**DT:** And it's been proven ever since (former Grambling and NFL great and the first HBCU player in the NFL, **Paul**) **Tank Younger** did it in the 1940s.



**Younger**

**Saturday, December 16, 2017  
Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta, GA  
12 Noon EST**



VS.

