

## Conquest scrambling to replace Williams

By Mike MacAdam

**ALBANY** A few Albany River Rats took a break from cleaning out their lockers during getaway day on Thursday to toss an arenafootball2 ball around the Times Union Center turf.

There's no truth to the rumor that Albany Conquest head coach Jeff Hoffman was down there scouting the field for receivers.

He'll need someone to step up as a pass catcher tonight against Tennessee Valley after Antwun Williams was summoned to the New York Jets minicamp on Wednesday and could be gone for the rest of the season, if the Jets sign him for summer training camp.

The strong play of Williams, a

6-foot-3, 190-pound third-year player from Virginia State who led the Conquest in receiving touchdowns last year with 33, allowed the Conquest to absorb the loss of Jared Jones to an injury two weeks ago.

Now, it will be up to players like Chris Bocage and Vernard Abrams to fill the void when

Albany attempts to keep a three-game winning streak going and stay close to division leader

Wilkes-Barre/Scranton at 7 tonight against the 2-3 Vipers at the Times Union Center.

Hoffman expects Jones, the league offensive player of the week for Week 3 with 325 all-purpose yards, to be healthy soon, but by af2 rules, he isn't eligible to come off the disabled list until the Conquest play Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in two weeks. In the meantime, Hoffman is rooting for Williams, who has 26 catches for 415 yards and eight touchdowns in the last three games, including 163 yards and four scores last week against Mahoning Valley, to stick with the Jets.

"I told him I would not be mad to see him on Monday, but I hope I don't, I hope he makes it," Hoffman said. "Like I said at the beginning of the year, Antwun, in my opinion, probably shouldn't even be here, I think that highly of him. He's a good receiver, his speed is the question mark on him, but he'll make the tough catches, he's not scared. He could be a nice addition for them, especially because he runs great routes, he catches the ball, he's aggressive, he could help them out on special teams as well."

One of the primary goals of NFL minicamps is to get the quarterbacks throwing to the receivers.

This weekend's camp will also provide a structured talent evaluation session for the Jets coaches.

"I think he's a guy going into it that is kind of on their radar, but not really," Hoffman said. "He's a guy who could go in there and turn some heads and surprise some people."

"They called to ask permission, and my job is to help these guys to move on. When they called, I said are you just looking for a body to run around, or is this legit, and they said this is as legit as it gets. I'm excited for Antwun. I hope it happens for him."

Last week, Williams and quarterback Dan Cole ripped Mahoning Valley for two deep scores in the opening minutes, but the Conquest went to a ball control offense with a 20-7 lead, and the game was close.

Albany took over by scoring 27 points in the fourth quarter to win, 61-49.

It's been a week of mixed emotions for Hoffman, with the departure of Williams, and the Game 7 loss by the Rats, who share common front office management with the Conquest. Hoffman didn't want to see the Rats eliminated, but the positive side for the Conquest is that they finally get to practice on the TU Center field, instead of Center City in Schenectady.

One of the sore spots in the Mahoning Valley win was Albany's inability to punch it in for touchdowns when the Conquest got into first-and-goal situations. They've been able to work on that, and special teams, more effectively at the TU Center.

"The dual-edged sword, being a team guy, I'm naturally disappointed for coach [Tom] Rowe and the Rats, because they had a good season considering everything that's happened with them, with players going up and everything," Hoffman said. "Hats off to Tom and what he did with his young kids, helping them mature in the game of hockey. So from that point of view, I'm disappointed for them. I guess from a more selfish point of view, for my team, it allows me to get on the field. It's the first time I've really had time to actually practice with yardlines, hash marks, walls, and have a way to fine-tune what we're already doing. It's tough to expect a guy to run a 12-yard stop route and know what 12 yards is without seeing it.

"We don't have pads on the wall [at Center City]. A lot of things correlate with the timing of trying to throw the ball and try and place it between the wall and a spot, and you have a receiver who pulls up because he doesn't want to get hurt in practice going into a wall without pads. Here, they're willing to go a little further and use the pads as a cushion."

Bocage, from the University of Southern California, and Abrams, have been solid complements to Williams the last two weeks, but they'll have to do more than that tonight.

Bocage had five catches for 50 yards two weeks ago against Manchester and six for 56 yards last week. Abrams has been steady all season, with eight receptions for 112 yards in the season-opening loss and a total of 12 catches for 102 yards in the three wins.

"We had too many drops last week," Hoffman said. "We started out on fire, cooled down, and we need to be able to throw the knockout blow.

"Antwun Williams has an opportunity. From my point of view, I have my No. 1 and 2 receivers out right now. The way our guys are, they're going to pull up the bootstraps and dig in and play for each other. I don't expect any less productivity from the offense. We're in the top five in the league right now."