SWAC

Jackson State: Gorden likes his chances in '86

By ROSCOE NANCE
Special To The Review

JACKSON STATE Coach W.C. Gorden crooned a different tune heading into the 1986 football season.

Gorden -- the winningest coach in JSU history -- usually takes a low-key approach. He never talks of winning the Southwestern Athletic Conference championship or predicts how many games the Tigers will win.

But this year he flat out says JACKSON STATE (8-3) will be in the NCAA Division I-AA playoffs for the fifth time.

"Our goal this year is to compete for the national championship," Gorden says.

"With the conference having lost its automatic berth in the playoffs, the conference championship is even less significant. We can't afford to lose more than one game."

Gorden has good cause to set such lofty goals. Jackson returns 38 lettermen and 15 starters -- eight on defense and seven on offense -- from last year's squad that tied Grambling for the SWAC championship and lost to eventual national champion Georgia Southern in the playoffs.

The defense is keyed by end Leon Seals and cornerback Carl Johnson, a pair of all-SWAC performers. Johnson, who led Division I-AA with eight interceptions, set an NCAA record last year when he returned three of them for touchdowns.

The Tigers' only question defensively is at linebacker, where they lost Jackie Walker, a second-round draft choice of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

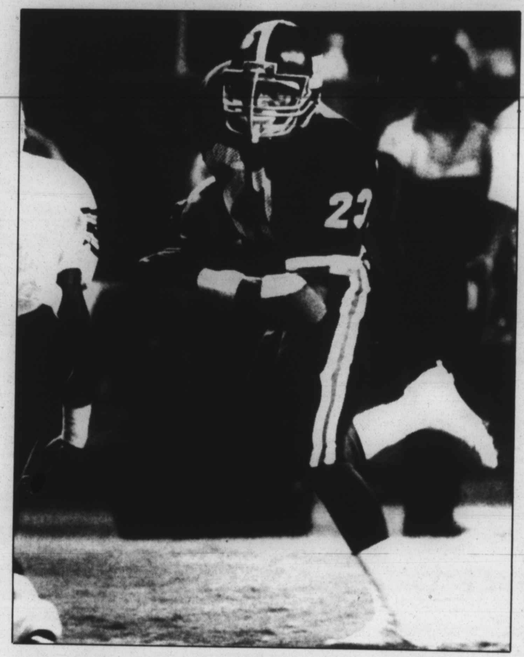
Offensively, JSU returns its line intact, anchored by all-SWAC tackle James Harvey. Quarterback Shannon Boyd, who guided the Tigers to six consecutive victories last season after they got off to a 2-2 start, will be in control from the outset.

But the big man in the Tigers' attack will likely be junior running back Lewis Tillman, the SWAC's leading rusher last season with 808 yards. But he has a history of injury problems.

"On paper, this is the best group of players I've had," says Gorden. "They compare just a notch below the '74 class of (Robert) Brazile, (Walter) Payton, (Don) Reese and (Rickey) Young."

Despite Gorden's bold talk, he realizes winning the SWAC won't be a walkover, even though the league doesn't appear to be as strong from top to bottom as in years past.

"Jackson State is by no means the lone contender," says Gorden. "The Ol'Man (Eddie Robinson) at Grambling has been a producer for more than 10 years. For anyone to eliminate him would be a mistake.



Jackson State running back Lewis Tillman (photo by Mark Gail).

"I also pick Mississippi Valley to be a contender. People tend to watch offense and judge success on those bases. But it's defense that determines. Valley returns its defense intact. That makes them a contender."

GRAMBLING (9-3) returns 45 lettermen from last year's squad that qualified for the I-AA playoffs. That's the good news. But the bad news is the Tigers are acutely inexperienced with just 11 starters returning.

"We'll be the kind of team that improves with each game," says Robinson, college football's winningest coach.

The Tigers are most glaringly inexperienced at quarterback. But Chauncey Allen, a junior, served notice that he might be ready to assume control of the offense when he completed 14 of 29 passes for 257 yards in Grambling's 29-12 season-ending victory against Southern University in the Bayou Classic.

Allen will have a couple of proven offensive weapons at his disposal in running back Wayne Hill and tight end Arthur Wells. Hill was the SWAC's second-leading rusher with 658 yards and Wells caught 27 passes for 435 yards.

Placekicker Ardashir Nabohar gives Grambling an additional scoring threat. He made 36 of 39 extra points and 14 of 22 field goals, including a conference-record 54-yarder. Wingback Patrick Scott, a starter in 1984 who was injured last season, is healthy and ready to go, which is another plus.

Tackle Sean Smith, at 6-foot-4, 250 pounds, leads a defense that will be tough as usual.

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY (8-3) won't be nearly as potent offensively as it was the past four years, when quarterback Willie Totten was running the show. But Valley Coach Archie "Gunslinger" Cooley is high on Thomas Leonard, who will work behind a line that's even bigger than the Tons of Fun that protected Totten so ably.

The defense, anchored by junior linebacker Vincent Brown and senior nose guard Paul Jones, was dealt a serious blow when Coordinator Johnny Thomas accepted an assistant's job at Alabama State.

But "we'll be all right," assures Cooley.

On paper, SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY (6-5) is always a contender for the championship. But each year the Jaguars come up short. Last year, a rash of injuries was their undoing. With its entire defense and all-purpose offensive back Ronald Scott returning, Southern looks tough once again.

The Jags have a new look on both sides of the ball thanks to new Offensive Coordinator Joe Clark and new Defensive Coordinator Greg Blanche.

ALCORN STATE (7-3) has seen its coaching staff undergo a major overhaul. Theo Danzy took over for Marino Casem, who became athletic director at Southern. Defensive Coordinator Dennis Thomas took the head coach's job at South Carolina State and took recruiter Gary Harper with him. Quarterback Coach Ken Pettiford defected to Jackson State.

Add to that the losses of quarterback Richard Myles and running back Perry Qualls to graduation, and it appears as though it will be a long year on the Reservation.

Graduation losses decimated TEXAS SOUTHERN (1-10) on both sides of the ball. Gone from the offense is quarterback Johnnie Cole, who passed for 1,964 yards. Sean Cook, who saw limited playing time, will replace Cole. What's more, the defense will be without 10 of the 13 leading tacklers from '85.

The big question mark at ALABAMA STATE (2-8) is at quarterback. Neither Antonio Smith, Leroy Davis nor Robert Days has played a down of college football and they are battling for the starting job.

The winner will have at least one standout receiver to throw to in all-SWAC tight end Darryl Pearson (50 catches, 693 yards, four touchdowns). Wide receiver Darry Sinkfield and running back Darron Jenkins also are proven offensive performers. But they won't be enough to overcome a defense that allowed 255 points last season while the offense was scoring a league-low 109 points.

This could be the year PRAIRIE VIEW (2-9) escapes the SWAC cellar. The '85 Panthers were a much-improved team and most of them return, including quarterback Ernest Brow.

Roscoe Nance writes sports for USA Today.

SIAC

Fort Valley State interim coach is on the spot

By EARNEST REESE
Special To The Review

HE MAY ONLY be serving in an interim capacity, but make no mistake about it, Gerald Walker is the man in charge of FORT VALLEY STATE'S football program, which also makes him a man on the spot.

You see, these Wildcats from Georgia, perennially one of the most successful football teams in Division II, are expected to live up to their reputation with Walker at the the helm in place of Doug Porter.

Porter, who in seven years at Fort Valley posted a 53-17-2 record and guided teams to five SIAC titles, suffered a heart attack at the tail end of last season and is not expected to return to the sideline until the '87 season.

"I've had long enough to take the bull by the horns. I ran the program through the offseason and spring, and I feel comfortable in that everyone has adjusted and responded well to my style of coaching," said Walker, who for six years was head coach at Lane College in Jackson, Tenn., before joining Porter's staff in '80.

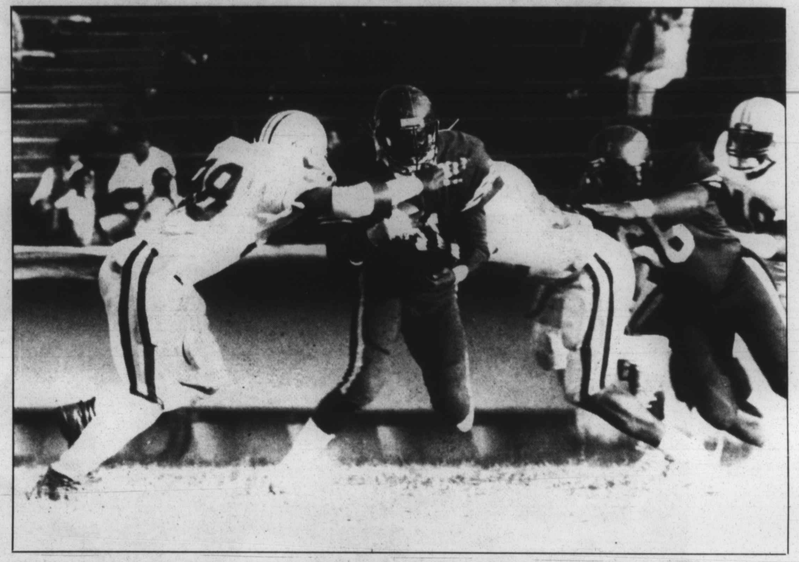
The team Walker is now coaching is favored to win the SIAC championship it shared with Albany State in '85, when Fort Valley (9-3) led NCAA Division II in almost every defensive category. Only three starters (including Eddie Anderson of the Seattle Seahawks) are gone from that unit, which is expected to be as good as it was a year ago with linebacker Greg Lloyd again emerging as its leader.

"I think, defensively, we should be about where we were last year," Walker said. "We've got some backups who, if not as good as the three guys we lost, are certainly almost there. It may be a matter of experience."

The Wildcats' offense, with junior quarterback Chris Hill (5-10, 170) in charge, should be much improved due to the presence of a receiving tandem that will likely prove to be the best in the conference. Aside from senior wideout Dale Casey, who has had 115 receptions over the past two years, sophomore Rodney Parker looks like an all-star performer at split end.

With veterans Carl Tyler back at tailback and Eric Brown at fullback, the only spots of concern are at center and left tackle. Freshman Metz Rogers is expected to man the center position, while sophomore Carlisle Davis will play tackle on the left side. Larry Sutton, last year's starter at left tackle, has been moved to the right side.

"That year of experience Chris Hill gained (148 of 301 for 1,751 yards and 13 TDs) should make him and our offense a little better," Walker said. "We should be at least as good as we were then."



Phillip Johnson handles the bulk of the tough inside running game for Morris Brown. The senior fullback was voted the Offensive MVP in last year's Atlanta Football Classic. Above, he tears downfield for hard yards against Alabama A&M (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

Defeating Clark College 15-6 the week after being shut out 27-0 by Tennessee State, the MORRIS BROWN Wolverines are now 1-0 in the battle for the Atlanta University Center's bragging rights. They face Morehouse, the third party in this triangle, on Oct. 11.

In the meantime, MBC, coached by former Wolverine quarterback Greg Thompson, has an outside chance of winning the league title. Hoping to improve on a 5-5 mark in '85 that pushed Thompson's four-year record to 24-17-2, Morris Brown has six starters back on each side of the ball.

"We expect our defense to be about as strong as it was last year," said Thompson, whose defensive unit was ranked among the top six in Division II last season. "If we get better (as the season progresses) in the offensive line, we should be a better team than 5-5."

All-SIAC linebacker James Liverpool, who at 6-0, 235 pounds, is one of the top players in the conference, provides leadership -- verbally and by action. He will get plenty of help in both of those departments from strong safety Walter Pless and free safety Johnny Barksdale.

While senior Frank Wesley and junior John Morgan continue their fight to start at quarterback, senior fullback Phillip Johnson will probably be the workhorse.

Jerome Leslie and Gene Wesley will split time at tailback.

The ALABAMA A&M Bulldogs, who over the past 10 years have had more coaches than one has fingers on one hand, will be guided by one of them who came and went and came again. Ray Greene, at the school in Huntsville as coach several years ago, will be the man trying to steer an injury-riddled, 3-7-1 team of '85 toward a more successful end.

Greene, 33-17-2 the five years he spent at A&M before, has 18 starters back from that squad that was decimated by injuries a year ago. Key players among them offensively are senior fullback Marvin Reeves and junior running back James Barnes.

The quarterback spot here, too, is critical. Eddie Hill of Akron, Ohio, who walked on and started much of last season, is one of three fighting for the No. 1 job. Terrance Brown, who hit on 23 of 61 attempts for 260 yards last season, and Tommy Allen, who completed 17 of 29 attempts for 329 in a game against Tuskegee, are the other two. Tackle Howard Ballard, a 6-6, 295-pound junior, anchors the line.

Linebacking will be a strong suit on defense for the Bulldogs. Junior Lafayette Kemp made 86 tackles last year.

Barring the kind of wholesale accumulation of injuries they suffered last year, the Bulldogs will be in the race for the conference title.

A Rams team that last season soared high enough to win nine of 11 games and grab a share of the SIAC crown for ALBANY STATE has since suffered enough losses to be considered an also-ran.

Most significantly, the 1985 Rams defense, ranked among the top five in the nation in Division II, was decimated by graduation. Only four regulars from that unit returned. That was followed by the departure of Offensive Coordinator Haney Catchings, now at Prairie View.

"It's going to be extremely hard to accomplish what we did last year,"

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