COVER STORY

Photo by Eric Miller

Jaime Hidalgo, right, a 19-year-old from Tempe, Ariz., finishes a drive at a Jackson State golf team practice.

Eddie Payton: A dreamer? No, just lofty goals

Some would call Jackson State golf Coach Eddie Payton a dreamer.

Payton, older brother of all-time NFL rushing leader Walter Payton, has his sights set on Jackson State becoming the first historically black school to win the NCAA golf championship.

That's a lofty goal, considering that no historically black school has ever competed in the NCAA golf championships and young blacks don't play golf in large numbers. But Payton is optimistic and confident the Tigers will get over the hump, sooner or later. With a team composed of seven sophomores and one senior, time appears to be on the Tigers' side.

Payton is applying the same determination and drive that helped him survive 10 seasons in the NFL as a running back and kick returner to Jackson State's quest for a national championship.

"It's just a matter of putting up the numbers," said Payton, in his third year as coach at his alma mater. "If we put up the numbers, we'll get invited."

The Tigers have a 310 team stroke average. Last year, it was 315. He thinks 300 will get them an invitation. He is confident that will come next year.

"We're on the threshold," said Payton. "We have to deal with history. There's never been a competitive golf program at a black school. You have to break into the upper echelon. If you're in the top 20, you play top 20 teams. If you're not in the top 20, you don't compete against them. If you don't compete against them, you don't get in. We're moving in the direction all quality programs traveled."

This year Jackson State has played in the Pepsi Invitational in Brandon, Miss., the New Orleans Invitational, the Baylor University Spring Break Invitational, the Houston Invitational and the National Minority Golf Championship in Cleveland.

The Tigers' opponents have included Kansas, Nebraska, Wichita State, Colorado, Wyoming, Memphis State and Tulane. Sometimes, it's been tough going.

"We're not winning and we're not losing," said Payton. "We're improving. We're in our infancy. What we're working for is consistency. We're happy with the direction we're moving. As long as you're improving, you can see light at the end of the tunnel."

Jackson State was fourth in the Southwestern Athletic Conference last season after finishing sixth the previous year.

Payton is hampered in his quest to get Jackson State to the top of the collegiate golf world by a lack of quality black high school golfers in Mississippi in particular and the United States in general.

"It's tough to find good black golfers," he said. "They're not brought up in good junior programs where they learn to understand the fundamentals. They're brought up on municipal courses around older players who are just interested in playing and winning a few dollars on the weekends. The result is you have 17-year-olds thinking like they're 30 or 35.

"There is more to being on a golf team than being a good golfer. They don't know what it means to have extra dedication. They're not willing to give up their individuality for the good of the team. Everybody has to work toward the same goal. Some feel they don't have to watch film, practice and practice." The scarcity of good young black golfers has forced Payton to make all of America his recruiting grounds.

Only one team member is from Mississippi, senior Mike Rattler. The remainder are from Tempe, Ariz., Portland, Ore., Pensacola, Fla., Miami,

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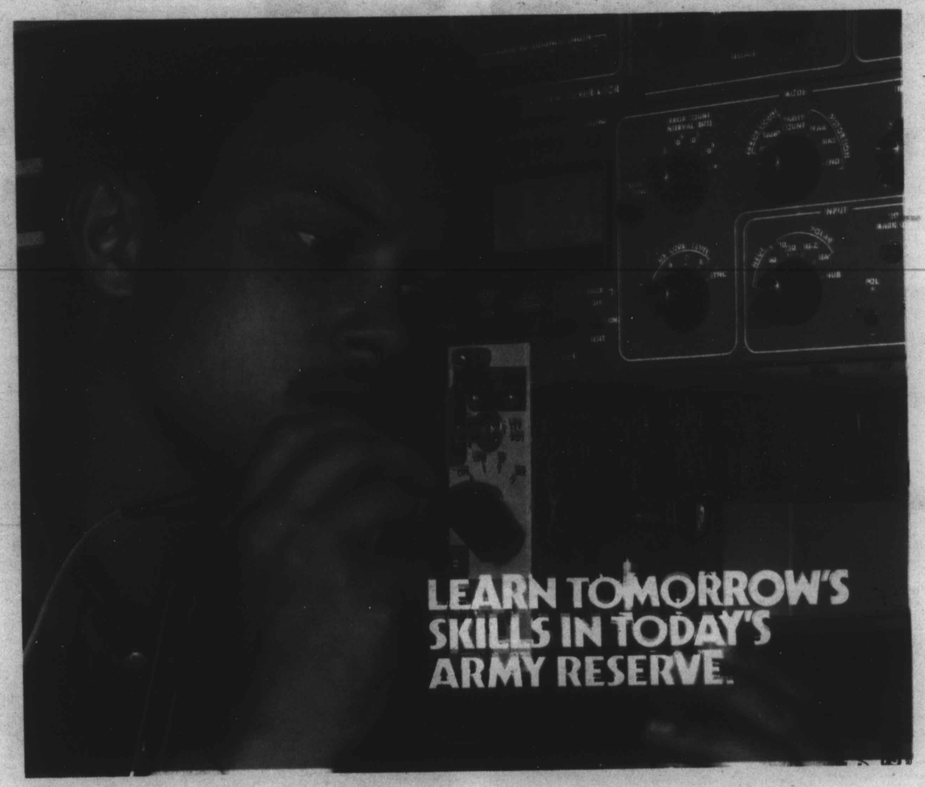

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