COACHES

MVSU's Ken Pettiford is ready to start anew

Mississippi Valley State football coach Ken Pettiford's first season was a real baptism by fire.

Pettiford, who succeeded the popular Archie "Gunslinger" Cooley, posted a 1-10 record in his inaugural season as a head coach. Under Cooley, the Delta Devils were an exciting, high-scoring offensive machine that featured outlandish formations and beat opponents by outlandish margins.

But last season, they struggled, scoring just 81 points the entire season. No Delta Devil rushed for more than 270 yards and the team's quarterbacks combined to throw 35 interceptions.

"It was kind of tough with a 1-10 record," said Pettiford. "But I was pleased with some other things that happened."

One of the things that pleased Pettiford was having seven of 13 seniors graduate. In addition, linebacker Vincent Brown and tight end Dana Whitaker were selected in the NFL Draft.

Pettiford can only take part of the credit for that because those players were Cooley's recruits. But when you're 1-10, you grasp whatever positives you can, regardless of what they are.

"I'm optimistic about the upcoming season," Pettiford said. "We weren't that far off. We needed loyalty and committment from the boys and now they know they can win."

The debacle that was the 1987 season was not entirely Pettiford's doing. He was hired on Jan. 6 last year and he immediately named two assistants. However, he didn't complete his staff until late March. Several coaches who went through spring practice were replaced before pre-season drills got underway.

"It was a disappointing season," said athletic director Chuck Prophet. "But when you realize all that happened, he did a good job putting a team on the field. What hurt was that he didn't know the personnel. He had to adjust. By the time he got that straightened out, we were in trouble. But you could see signs that we could play."

For Pettiford, probably the most frustrating part of last season was having to watch the Delta Devils struggle offensively. He was an All-America quarterback at Tennessee State and a reputable offensive assistant at Alcorn State and Jackson State.

In '87, Valley State alternated three quarterbacks and never developed offensive continuity. Pettiford hopes to avoid some of that this season by settling on J.R. Stewart as the starter coming out of spring practice.

But he is well aware that it will take more than improving his team's offense in order for him to emerge from Cooley's immense shadow. "I wish people would give me the support they gave him," the coach said. "You have people who are still loyal to him. I hope no one expected me to be him."

Cooley and Pettiford have backgrounds that are amazingly similar. Both coached under "Big John" Merritt at Tennessee State and Marino H. Casem at Alcorn State. Cooley played at Jackson State and Pettiford was an assistant there under W.C. Gorden before moving to Mississippi Valley.

Pettiford has gleaned much from the men he's worked for. He hopes that his exposure to their philosophies and work ethics will help make him a successful coach.

"Merritt taught me how to handle the public," Pettiford said. "It gets tough when they start asking questions. He taught me how to handle those situations. Casem trains you hard. He'll pour a gallon of honey on you and lock you outside, knowing a bear is out there. He trains you to be a professional. I learned to be hard-nosed in dealing with athletes from Gorden."

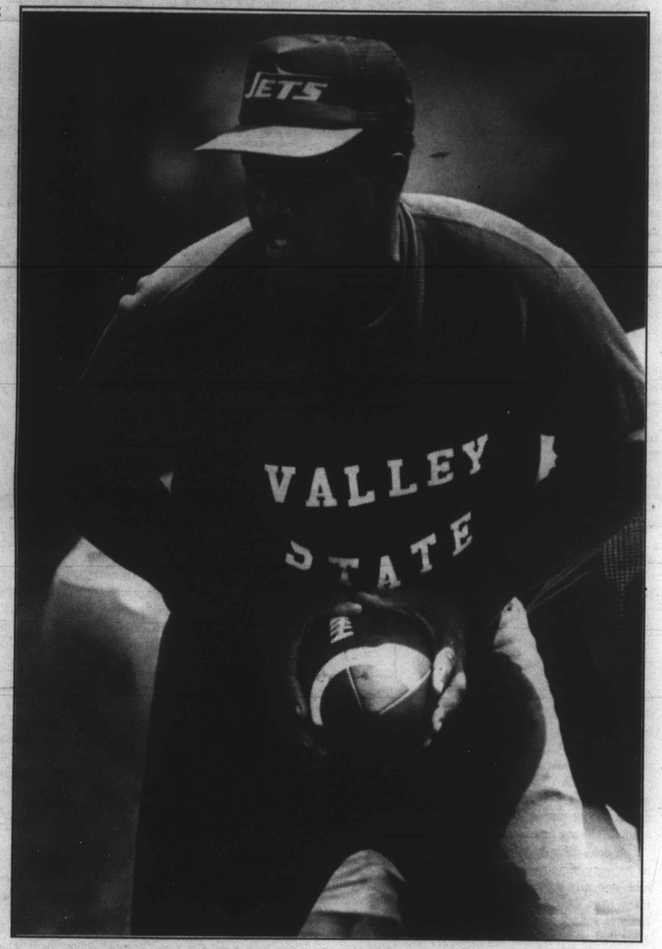

photo by J.D. Schwalm

Pettiford is looking for better things from his Delta Devils in '88.

Whether Pettiford will be as successful as any or all of his mentors remains to be seen, but Gorden says the potential is there. "He is a very energetic coach, a hard-working individual who will put in 24 hours," said Gorden. "He loves coaching, and like all young coaches, he has to go through a maturing process. He went through a tough situation. It's erroneous to judge his first year on what Archie did.

"When he took over, the program was less than credible. When you come in and try to run an honest program, you have to eliminate all the evils and start over. That takes intestinal fortitude and integrity."

Said Prophet: "Everybody has his own theory and philosophy about getting things done. This year, we hope to see more of what we expected from Ken Pettiford. This year will determine what kind of contribution he will make."

– Roscoe Nance

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