Cooley

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Cooley said. "I told them that I was Archie Cooley and that they couldn't put nothing past what I could do when it comes to football."

A miracle-worker perhaps he isn't. Yet, in five years, Cooley has shifted the Delta Devil program into high gear, going from records of 5-5 in 1980 and 4-6-1 in 1981 to 5-5 in 1982 and 7-2-1 in 1983. The team's record last season was the best ever for an MVSU football team.

A 1961 graduate of Jackson State, where he was a standout offensive center, Cooley may not be modest, but he gets results. Claiming that "everything I deal with over a length of time eventually comes to the top," he has a resume that thus far bears him out. Take, for instance, his successful high school coaching career, when he went 61-3 with four undefeated seasons and four Mississippi state championships during his reign as headmaster at Heidelburg High School.

After leaving the high school ranks, Cooley ventured to SWAC member Alcorn State in Lorman, Miss., where he served as defensive coordinator from 1971 to 1973. It was there, he said, that he was molded into a college coach.

"I must give Alcorn Coach Marino Casem credit for doing the things he's done as far as developing me as a head coach," Cooley said. "This man has done a lot for me. He's one of the greatest coaches I know when it comes to defense and he molded me. Working for him was one of the greatest experiences of my career."

Cooley left Alcorn after the 1973 season to become defensive line coach at Tennessee State. He remained there until he received the call to head the MVSU program.

At Mississippi Valley, Cooley's personality has often overshadowed his coaching skills. After less than a year on the job, he'd already gained a reputation as a flamboyant coach who dared to say whatever came to mind. Hence his now-famous nickname "Gunslinger."

"I went to J.C. Penney one day and purchased a $13 straw hat," said Cooley. "I wore it to practice that evening and a local sportscaster, Johnny Casio, saw me with it on and called me 'Gunslinger.' I've been called that ever since."

Cooley's Gunslinger image reached its height in 1981 when the Delta Devils traveled to Houston to face Prairie View A&M in a conference game. Angered by several calls during the game, Cooley bolted after the officials when the gun sounded and had to be restrained by his assistants. The SWAC responded with a heavy fine and Cooley today calls that incident the wildest and most embarrassing of his career.

"I think that really showed the thug in me," he said, "I felt they were trying to take advantage of me and I went kind of wild. That's one incident I'm ashamed of."

"I don't consider myself flamboyant. I consider myself a guy who tries to do his job and work hard. Whatever's a natural thing for me, that's what I want to do because I just want to be Cooley. Anything I do that signifies being Cooley is fine with me. If being flamboyant is part of being Cooley, then I guess you could call me flamboyant."

On other matters, though, Cooley is much less apologetic. Whether on the field, in his office or in front of the media, he says what he feels. As for those those who occasionally label him arrogant, he says he could care less.

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Years back, as a neophite SWAC coach, Cooley was quick to call the league a conference of the "Big Three" – Alcorn's Casem, Grambling's Eddie Robinson and Jackson State's W.C. Gorden. After his recent success, though, he now calls the "Big Three" the "Big Four," with himself the newest member.

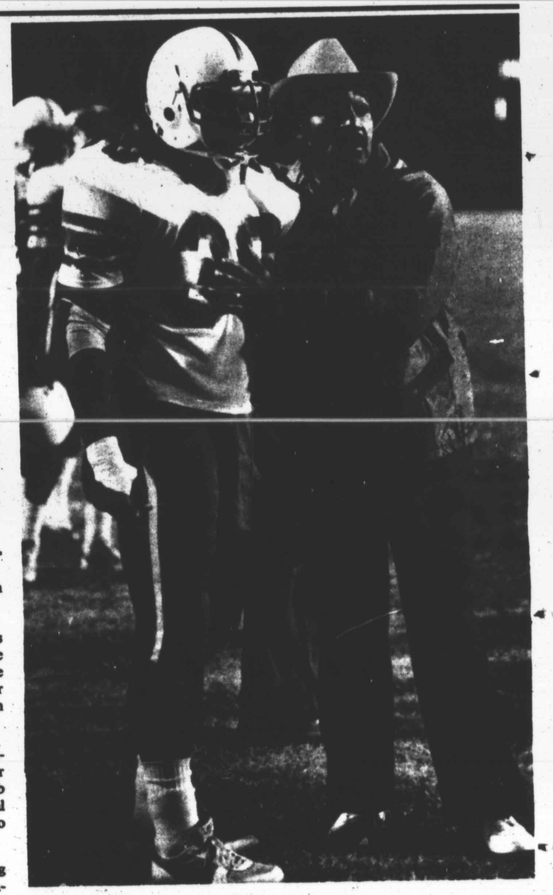
Saying that he has finally gained respect, including that of rival coaches, Cooley pointed out, "Everybody's now starting to stop and think about what they can do to stop Cooley's team. That speaks for itself. We've done a tremendous job as a coaching staff, especially my assistant head coach, Johnny Thomas, who's the backbone of our system."

What lies in the future for the "Gunslinger?" Cooley says he hopes to eventually land a job somewhere that pays more, presents fewer problems and allows him to "get what I deserve from this game of football." In the meantime, however, he looks past 1984 ahead to 1985, which he's already proclaimed as "The Year of the Delta Devil."

"If the championship comes in 1984 I'll take it, but I'm saying 1985 will be our year because we'll have 27 seniors on our ballclub," said Cooley. "But if we get it in 1984, that'll be beautiful."

Averaging some 70 points per game – nearly as many as the MVSU basketball team averaged last season – Valley could very well make 1984 its year.

And if it does, Cooley will be the first to tell you about it.



Racking Them Up

The only one who seems capable of holding Mississippi Valley's potent offense in check is a merciful Cooley. Everybody else would be advised to add a third digit to their scoreboards (photo by James Terry).