## COVER STORY

## THE CREAM OF THE CLASS OF '85

How NFL scouts rate this year's black college draft prospects

By GREGORY D. CLAY Review Staff Writer

THEY ARE, in the royal vernacular, the princes of black college football this season.

Jerry Rice, Issiac Holt and Chris Burkett have been rated by people who do that kind of thing for a living as "can't-miss" prospects.

Rice is a 6-foot-2, 197-pound wide receiver from Mississippi Valley State, Holt a 6-2, 190-pound cornerback from Alcorn State, and Burkett a 6-4, 210-pound receiver from Jackson State. The three were picked in the first round of the United States Football League's open draft on Jan. 3 - Rice first by Birmingham, Holt third by San Antonio and Burkett 14th by

Rice and Holt are two of 24 players named to Sheridan Broadcasting Network's 1984 Black College all-America Team. However, Burkett was not, which may be the biggest mystery in black college football this season.

"Burkett has every bit as much talent as Rice," says Gil Brandt, director of player personnel for the Dallas

Burkett may have been a pauper instead of a prince to Sheridan, but not to the pro scouts.

The most decorated prince is Rice. ("He's the best at what he does on any collegiate level," lauds Grambling Head Coach Eddie Robinson.) Rice is better known as "World," because, as they say, he catches everything in the

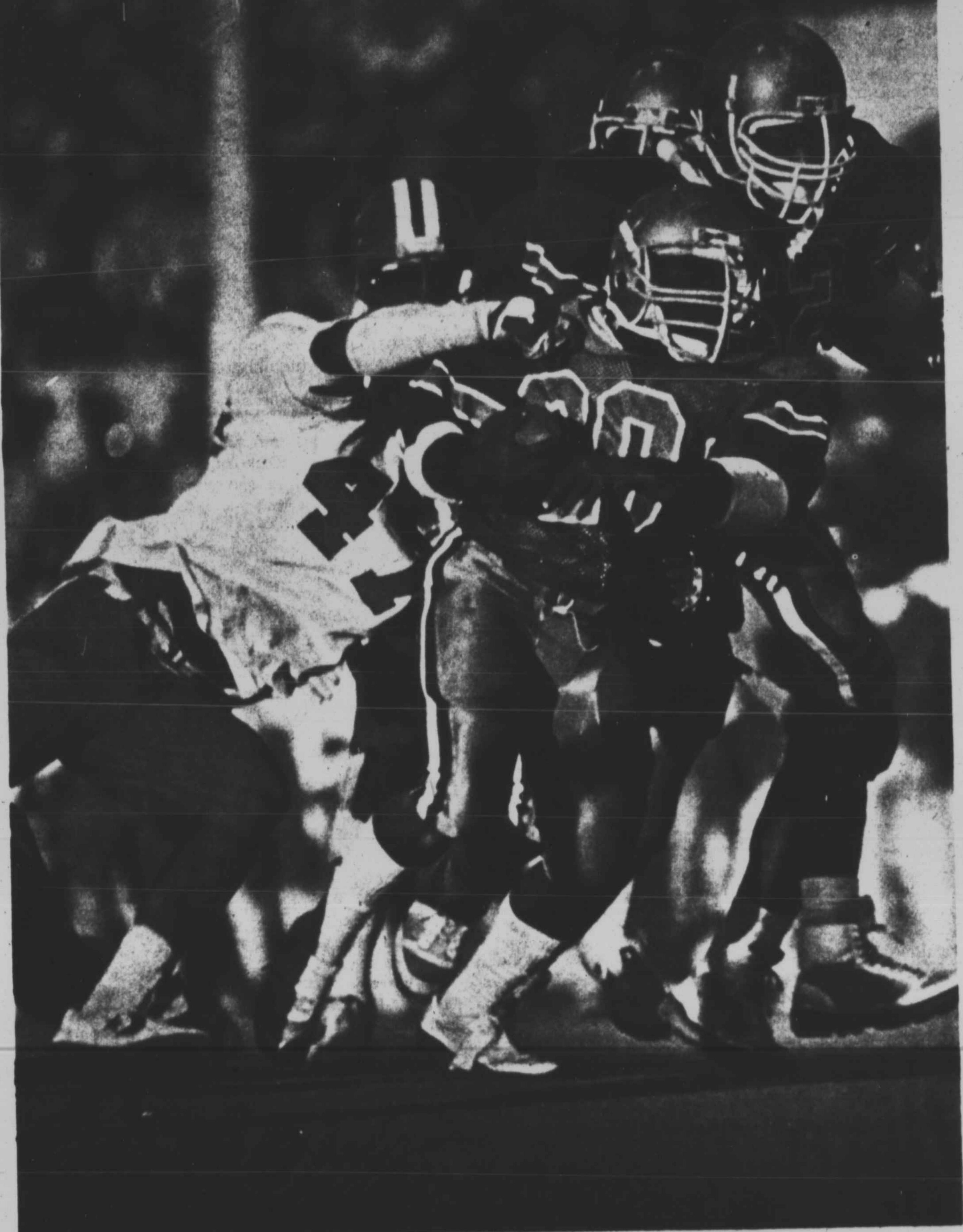
They also say he is so good that he can catch a BB in the dark.

The pros know how good he is.

"Rice is one of the four or five best athletes available in the draft," said Dick Steinberg, director of player development for the New England Patriots, from the East-West Shrine Game practices in Palo Alto, Calif.

"He's a high first-rounder. There's nothing he lacks. He has all the skills, and they're polished. And he caught so many balls.'

The senior from Crawford, Miss., caught 112 passes for 1,845 yards and 28 touchdowns in '84. He also completed seven of eight passes for 126 yards and threw four scoring passes. Rice gained 42 rushing yards on seven carries, a 6.0 average. All first-round statistics. And he returned punts and



Norfolk State's Tony Johnson (20): "I like him," says Gil Brandt of the Dallas Cowboys (photo by Michele

McDonald, The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot).

## THE CREAM OF THE CROP

kickoffs, too.

"I haven't seen him play that much, receiver," says San Diego Charger wide receiver and former Grambling star Charlie Joiner, who is the NFL's all-time reception leader.

the right team (the L.A. Rams) because ball lexicon of the '80s. you know (Coach) John Robinson will that throws 30 or 35 times game, then he'll be a star."

Jerry's Minute Rice - he provides instant offense, the newest trend in the NFL. Just watch the Miami Dolphins teams in the league.

"I'm taking it one day at a time," I'm definitely going to hold out for the league in defense in '84. NFL draft."

preclude playing this spring in the

The NFL would like that. Says Brandt: "I think he has a chance to be a star in the National

Football League." Rice, who reminds many observers Wes Chandler in style and ability, was touchdowns per game.

two touchdown passes in that game, could be another Roynell Young." one a 60-yarder.

(NFL) can play," says Archie "Gunsl- the Philadelphia Eagles in 1980. inger" Cooley, head coach at you cut it, he's a first-round draft choice; it's proven.

"He has tremendous work habits. He's a very intelligent individual, and he pays attention.

"A scout told me, 'We can't find nothing wrong with the boy.' The only way to find something wrong with him is to make up something."

Rice was the .457 Magnum in the points per game, tops on any collegiate cent interview. level. And junior Willie "Satellite" Totten was the triggerman, the Dan Marino of college football.

Rice and Wisconsin all-America Al Toon may have been the best two college wide receivers in the country last

"I think everyone thinks highly of Rice," said Dick Haley, director of

player personnel for the Pittsburgh but I think he's a great collegiate wide workouts in Mobile, Ala. "You may talk to 10 people and three or four may take Rice and three or four may take Toon. It all depends on who you like."

Each member of the Elite Trio runs "In the NFL, it depends on where at least a 4.5-second 40-yard dash, you go and what offense you're in, which is mandatory in the NFL these what system and all that. Some people days because of the sophisticated and you can predict stardom for, like (run- wide-open offenses. The old saying, ning back) Eric Dickerson. He went to "speed kills," is germane to the foot-

"In pro football these days," exrun the ball. If Jerry goes to a team plains Steinberg, "the main thing is to throw and stop the throw."

That means Holt.

Holt, Sheridan's Defensive Player of the Year, is also Alcorn State's career interception leader with 24 and was and San Francisco 49ers, the two best first in Division I-AA history going into the '84 playoffs. Holt broke the Alcorn State record held by Leslie Rice says. "I'll sign with the one Frazier, now a starting defensive back (league) that makes me the best offer. with the Chicago Bears, who led the

This past season, Holt made 12 solo Rice, an electronics major with a 3,7 tackles and had 13 assists, deflected grade-point average, said he wants to seven passes and picked off six for 75 get his degree in May, which would yards, including a 29-yard interception return for a touchdown that shut the door on Valley in Alcorn State's 42-28 win in the memborable game billed as "the SWAC-buster." Holt also went head-to-head against Rice, holding him to eight receptions for 134 yards and one touchdown. Rice had been averagof San Diego Charger wide receiver ing 12 catches for 197.3 yards and three

also the Most Valuable Player in the "He's an outstanding defensive Blue/Gray Classic on Christmas. He back," says Brandt. "And he has a had four receptions for 101 yards and chance to be an outstanding pro. He

Young, who also played at Alcorn "If he can't play, nobody up there State, was a first-round draft choice by

"Issiac has a lot of ability," says Mississippi Valley. "I don't care how Haley. "He has the tools to develop into a first-line player. We'd like to have him starting for us."

Holt admires all of the top NFL cornerbacks, such as Lester Hayes and Mike Haynes of the Los Angeles for 609 yards, a 15.6-yard per catch already known around the country, but Raiders and Ronnie Lott of the San average and four touchdowns. He also Burkett didn't get that kind of publici-Francisco 49ers. A tough and daring type, he backpedaled against some of the best while at Alcorn State.

"Trumaine Johnson, Jerry Rice and "Gunslinger's" point-a-minute, no- Chris Burkett are the best receivers I've times, lined up with Rice. Burkett good pregame week. huddle offense that averaged 64.1 ever played against," said Holt in a re-

Johnson and the Chicago Bears' Willie Gault were rated as the two best receivers in the '83 draft by Brandt. Holt held his own against both.

"Cornerbacks are important nowadays," says Steinberg, "but so are guys who can catch." Burkett can catch.

In 10 games in '84, he had 39 catches

A member of the "can't-miss" royalty in this year's class: Mississippi Valley's Jerry Rice (photo by Mark Gail).

carried the ball three times for 28 ty. The USA Network televised the yards, averaging 9.2 yards per attempt, and scored one touchdown. Burkett played in the Blue/Gray Classic and, at catch any passes, Burkett did have a all-star game.

"He's a big target," says Haley, "He has good hands and good speed. He's going to be a good one."

Burkett opted to play in the Senior Bowl instead of the Freedom Bowl All-Star Classic in Atlanta, which was probably a good move on his part because of the increased exposure. Rice, who played in the Freedom Bowl, was

Senior Bowl, where Burkett started at wide receiver. And, although he didn't

"He's a helluva football player," says Jackson State Head Coach W.C. Gorden. "He's an excellent prospect. He learns well and doesn't need a lot of repetition.

"I read a report in the paper that said the pro scouts were (unsure) if he could outrun cornerbacks and catch the deep pass. I thought that was his Please See Page 14