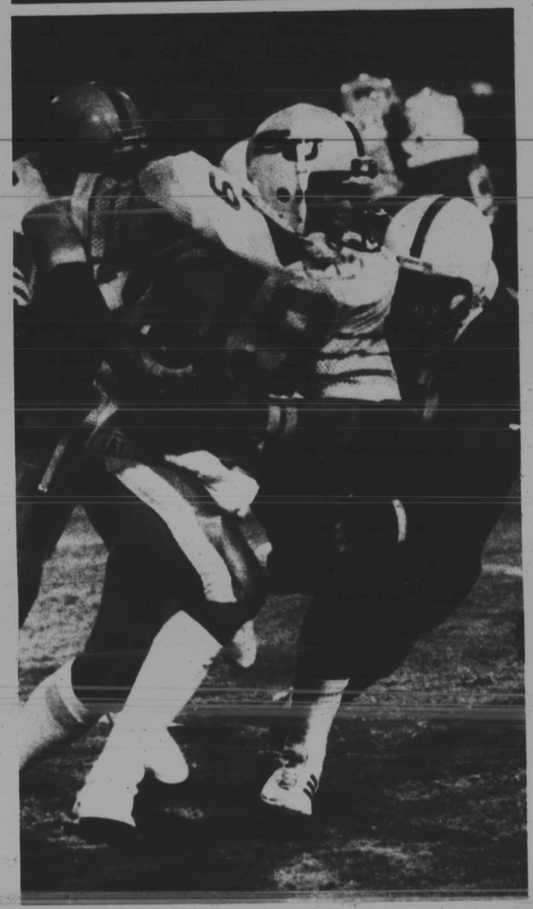
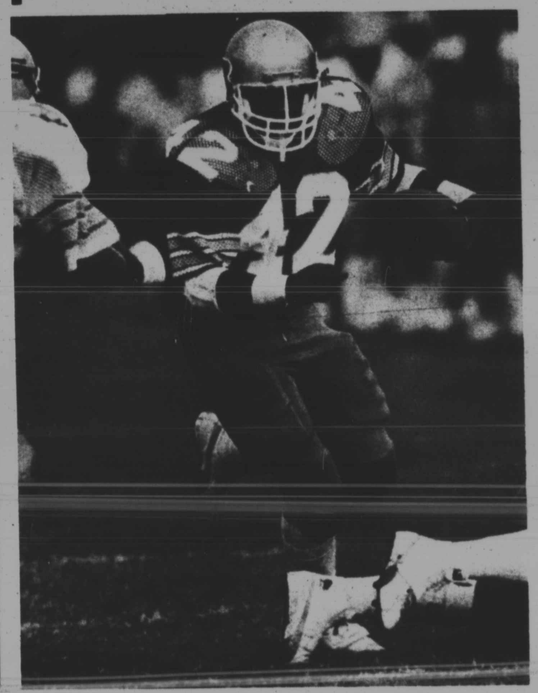
SOUTHWESTERN ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

# A crowded penthouse





Left, Southern quarterback Herman Coleman runs for his life in a season-opening loss to Mississippi Valley. Right, Alcorn blue-collar tailback Perry Qualls scoots for yardage (photos by Mark Gail).

By LONZA HARDY
Review Staff Writer

EQUILIBRIUM RUNS more rampantly in the SWAC in 1985 than it has in nearly a decade, prompting Grambling Coach Eddie Robinson to call this season perhaps "the SWAC's finest hour."

"Any team could win the championship," Robinson says, exaggerating only a little bit.

Marino Casem, coach of defending SWAC champion Alcorn State, agrees.

'I think it's going to be a very close race," Casem says. "All teams in our conference have improved, as last year indicated, and you can no longer easily distinguish the top from the bottom. Any team on any given day can beat any other team."

Still, Casem's very own Braves are the favorites to answer the SWAC's call to glory, with Grambling State and Mississippi Valley State tying for second in preseason balloting among the coaches.

It's possible, too, that all three teams could knock each other out of the championship race.

ALCORN STATE has two things in its favor: momentum and a potentially explosive offense.

The Braves, predicted to finish fifth in 1984, became the scourge of the SWAC last year as they ground their way to the school's best season since 1931, finishing 7-0 in conference play, 9-0 in regular-season action and 9-1 overall.

"I hope the impetus we gained last year will give us the momentum to make it through the rough spots this year," says Casem, whose last back-to-back league titles came in 1968 and 1969. "Our kids know what it'll take to come back and defend their championship. They're serious about what they do."

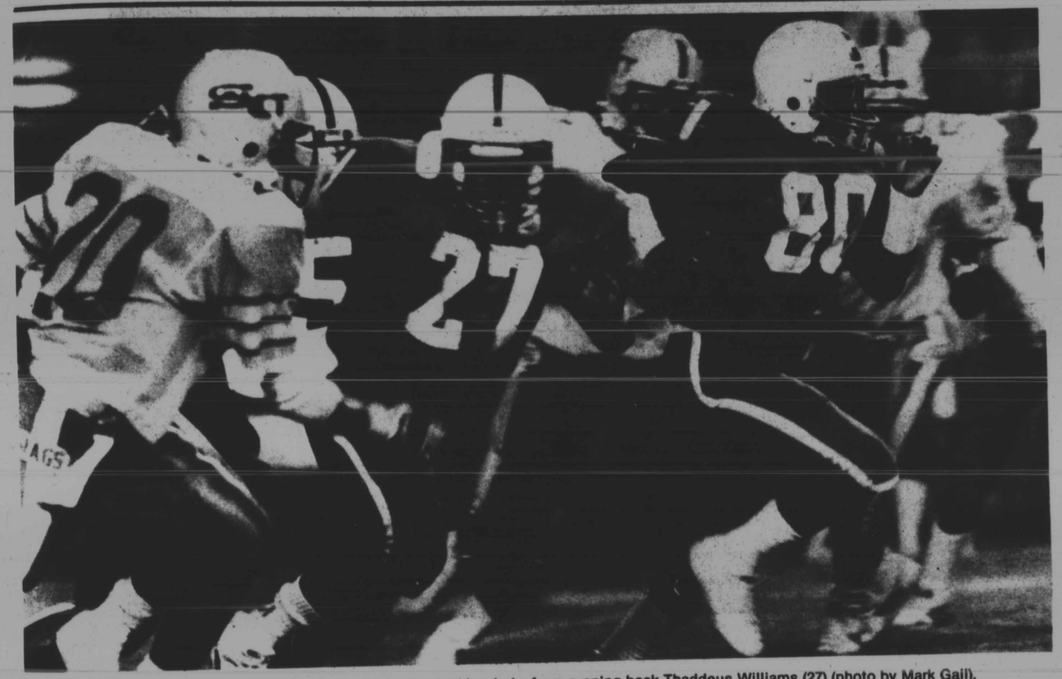
Rarely does Casem, the SWAC's dean of defense, rest his team's future in the hands of his offensive unit, but that's the case this year and not totally by choice.

The Braves' offense is loaded and may rank among Casem's best, featuring the return of eight starters and numerous key reserves. Among the team's top offensive returnees are senior quarterback Richard Myles (6-3, 190 pounds), who, with 3,446 career passing yards needs only 964 additional yards to become ASU's No. 1 all-time leading passer, and Perry Qualls (5-9,





SWAC *CONTINUED*



Mississippi Valley safety Willie Ware sniffs a score with blocking help from running back Thaddeus Williams (27) (photo by Mark Gail).

192), the school's No. 12 career rushing leader who does everything for the team, including running, occasionally passing, scoring touchdowns and punting.

On the other hand, Alcorn's vaunted "Tomahawk Defense" is nearly depleted, with the exodus of six starters and key back-ups. The biggest lost is that of all-America defensive back Issiac Holt, a second-round draftee by the Minnesota Vikings of the NFL. Holt is the all-time NCAA interception leader in Division I-AA.

Hot on the Braves' trail will be the GRAMBLING STATE Tigers, a team that has posted 25 consecutive winning seasons and won or shared 14 SWAC championships. The Tigers are, of course, coached by the legendary Eddie Robinson, who, with 320 career victories, needs only four wins to surpass the late Paul "Bear" Bryant as college football's winningest coach.

This year's Tigers are very much like this year's Braves: strong and experienced on offense -- returning nine starters, three-fourths of their backfield and the majority of their line -- and suspect on defense.

Grambling returns seven defensive starters but lost three-fourths of its secondary and the two mainstays of its line -- massive James Polk (6-11, 315 pounds) and monster Schirra Finn (6-1, 243 pounds). Yet, the Tigers may still lay claim as the most talented, most experienced and deepest team in the conference.

"In reference to our strengths, we feel that an additional year of experience at quarterback should permit added consistency from the offense," says Robinson, whose last SWAC title came in 1983. "We also have a well-balanced corps of receivers and the level of our kicking game should be maintained."

Rounding out the SWAC's high echelon is MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE, a team from little bitty Itta Bena that has a mighty big reputation.

The Delta Devils earned national attention last year with a no-huddle offense that averaged more points per game than some basketball teams (52.5) and more yards in a single game than most other football teams gain in three (638.4).

"Last season made me mad," says MVSU Head Coach Archie "Gunslinger" Cooley. "We got so close and didn't make it, so I want my players to know that it can be done. Our 9-2 record last year (6-1 in SWAC) was not bad, but we could have had it all."

Like Alcorn and Grambling, the Delta Devils have the ingredients to "have it all" in 1985, sporting a lineup that returns eight starters on offense, nine starters on defense and 47 lettermen overall.

Gone from the team is "all-World" wide receiver Jerry Rice, but returning is "all-Universe" quarterback Willie Totten, a Heisman candidate who may be the best college quarterback in America. Totten holds 50 NCAA Division I-AA records and has passed for 8,475 yards and 102 touchdowns in 30 games.

"Totten is to us like the sun is to the earth," says Cooley. "Without him we can't go."

But defense again will determine whether MVSU can win its first-ever SWAC trophy in football. More size, experience and desire in Cooley's defensive personnel could do the trick.

In the middle of the SWAC pack, four teams should prevail: Southern (No. 4), Jackson State (No. 5) and Texas Southern (No. 6).

For SOUTHERN'S Jaguars, who finished 6-5 last year (4-3 in the SWAC), nine defensive and seven offensive starters return, as well as 42 lettermen overall. Southern will field one of the most balanced teams in the conference in quest of its first league championship since 1975.

"I can never say how good a football team is going to be because I realize a few injuries can change such a prediction," says Jaguar Coach Otis Washington. "In 1983 and 1984, we had a tremendous number of injuries, especially on defense. That hurt us a lot, so what we did was put in an excellent off-season weight program so that our players will be much stronger."

Among the Jags' top returnees are leading passer Ervin Bennett (1,343 yards), second-leading receiver Connell

*Please See Page 21*