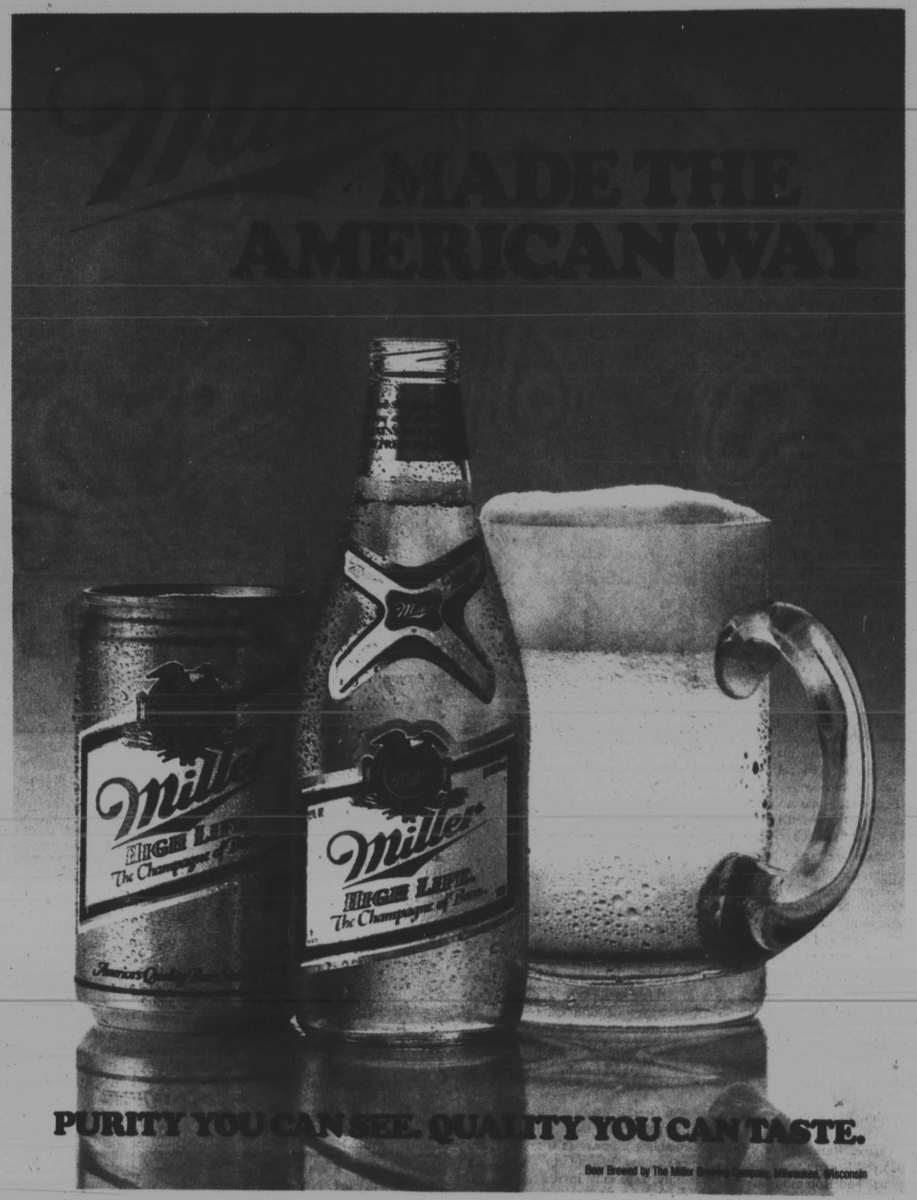

MILLER PRESENTS BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS PROFILE

As 'down-home' a legend as you'll ever meet

By BARRY COOPER
Special To The Review

He has become one of the most quoted football coaches in America, the man "Good Morning America" scrambles for, the coach a dozen major newspaper reporters want to interview. But through all the hoopla, Grambling's Eddie Robinson, who has surpassed the late Bear Bryant to become the winningest college football coach ever, has clung to basic, small-town roots.

Robinson, 66, looms much larger than the serene little town of Grambling, La., a place so small that the nearest movie theatre is five miles away in Ruston. The people of Grambling haven't complained about the paucity of theatres, though. They'd rather watch "Grambling Football Highlights" than "Star Wars."

In 43 years, Robinson has won more than 300 games at tiny, historically black Grambling. At this writing, his record stood at 324-106-15.

Robinson probably will win a few more games, too, since this year's Grambling team, stocked with more than a dozen players who weigh more than 275 pounds, may be one of his best ever in recent seasons.

Without a doubt the Tigers are the class of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, and perhaps all of black college football. But enough about the Tigers' prowess. Today's applause is reserved for Robinson.

More than 200 of his players have moved on to the National Football League, and Robinson -- somewhat reluctantly at first -- has accepted endorsement deals that swell his annual salary to around $150,000.

But he remains the same down-home Eddie Robinson, known as "Coach Rob" to his players. While other coaches sleep in their offices and maintain a win-at-all costs philosophy, Robinson remains mellow. He spends most weekday mornings helping his wife with household chores before reporting to work.

Not many coaches, whether they be laid-back or driven, have been as successful as Robinson.

Clearly, if there were a black man capable of being a successful head coach at a major college or in the NFL, it is Robinson. But Robinson has ignored all overtures, including one from the Los Angeles Rams in the 1970s. The late Carroll Rosenbloom, then the Rams' owner, had Robinson flown in for an interview. But Rosenbloom wanted Robinson to accept a job as assistant head coach, and Robinson quickly said no to that. He is certain now to remain at Grambling for four more years, until he reaches Louisiana's mandatory retirement age of 70.

Robinson on what he would do once he broke the record: "I'll cry" (photo by Mark Gail).

But those who know Robinson say his bond to Grambling is so strong that he could never pull away.

"Coach Robinson *is* Grambling University," said Doug Williams, a former Grambling and Tampa Bay Buccaneers star. "One of the most enjoyable things about my football career was playing for Coach Robinson. He is in a class by himself."

Those who know Robinson say that little things make him special. Three years ago, when Grambling threw a big party to celebrate Robinson's 300th victory, Robinson insisted that the sports editors of small black weekly newspapers be flown in for the event -- at no charge to the writers.

The weekly papers had chronicled Robinson's every move when he made Grambling a power in the '50s. They made him a hero in the black community, especially in the South, and top black players flocked to Grambling.

Today, Grambling still recruits outstanding players, though not nearly as many. Integration cut off Robinson's pipeline and led to black athletes enrolling at schools such as LSU, Alabama and Georgia. Still, Robinson remembers the way things used to be, especially the way the black press helped.

"Eddie Robinson's career spans from the day the white media didn't even look toward blacks," said Cal Adams, veteran sports editor of the black-oriented *St. Petersburg* (Fla.) *Challenger* and a follower of Grambling football for more than 30 years. "Eddie has never forgotten about the black newspapers. When *The New York Times* can't get in to see him right away because he is busy, a reporter from a little black weekly will get in for a few minutes."

The days before integration were both the best and the worse for Grambling. There was no television exposure; few major newspapers showed Robinson much respect, and Robinson constantly scrapped for money to fund his program. But he got the job done in magnificent fashion. The list of former Grambling stars includes Buck Buchanan, Ernie Ladd, Willie Davis, James Harris and Tank Younger. Most of Robinson's former pupils, including recent stars Trumaine Johnson and Everson Walls, stay in touch.

"The thing about Robinson," Adams said, "is that his players never forget him. That right there shows you what kind of man he must be. Today, guys who will have been away from Grambling for 10-20 years will call Eddie and ask his advice on something. Almost every time, they will follow that advice."

Robinson remains modest, even while others offer mountainous praise. Asked how he would react to breaking college football's winningest coach, Robinson told a national magazine:

"The same way I've reacted to every other big moment in my life: I'll cry. I'm a crier, and I am not ashamed to admit it. I think of how much I owe to so many, how much I have to be grateful for -- and I can't hold it back.

"Willie Davis told me that Vince Lombardi was that way. I'll tell you what: If you want to see the meanest coach in the history of football bawling like a baby, just stick around after we win No. 324."

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