SWAC REPORT

Jackson State's Pete: His patience paid off

By ROSCOE NANCE
Special To The Review

Pete dropping back to pass against Mississippi Valley State: He doesn't let mistakes get him down (photo by Mark Gail).

Jackson State quarterback Melvin Pete Jr. is one of those non-descript athletes who somehow manages to get the job done.

Pete, a 6-foot, 165-pound redshirt junior who is starting for the first time this season, lacks outstanding size. He doesn't possess a rocket-launcher for an arm. He won't dazzle you with his quickness. But through his patience and heady play, he became Jackson State's No. 1 signal caller during preseason practice.

Entering preseason practice, Pete's career stats read three attempts, zero completions and one interception and he was listed as the backup to sophomore Shannon Boyd. But Pete had his own ideas about who should be No. 1.

When Pete arrived at Jackson State, John McKenzie and Derek McCall were battling to be the starting quarterback. He waited and watched while McKenzie won the job and went on to set a Jackson State single-season record for total offense, pass attempts, completions and passing yardage.

"It was hard and discouraging," said Pete.

But Pete made the most of the situation. Ever a student of the game, he learned some of the more subtle aspects of being a college quarterback while watching McKenzie, and even though he came out of spring practice No. 2 on the depth chart, he knew he was ready to take charge.

"I really didn't accept being a backup," he said. "In spring practice, we had the same hold system."

"I felt, if we got new coaches (Offensive Coordinator Ralph Bishop and Quarterback Coach Ray Greene) and a new system and I jumped on that system and learned it as well as anyone else, I could become No. 1. I never lost confidence in my ability to play, even though I hadn't played."

Pete's confidence was well founded. Against Tennessee State, in just his second collegiate start, he completed 24 of 43 attempts for 393 yards and four touchdowns.

"He threw quite a bit in high school," said Greene, who is noted for his knowledge of the passing game. "You recruit talent. You can teach anything you want, but if you can't throw the ball ...."

Pete was a thrower and nothing else when he played Provine High. Problem was, the Rams were a running team. The only time Pete played was in obvious passing situations. Kenneth Breland, who now plays defensive back for Jackson State, was the starter.

"Our philosophy was to run the ball," said Provine Coach Stanley Blackmon. "We didn't exploit his talents."

Because his talents weren't exploited at Provine, or in his first three years at Jackson State, Pete is still learning the ropes. It has shown on more than one occasion, as his interception rate reflects. He threw nine in a three-week span.

Pete is still learning his receivers, too. In some instances, that has cost him. In one game tight end Victor Hall noticed a certain coverage and signaled it to Pete. However, Pete misread the coverage and threw an interception, thinking Hall was going to run his regular route.

"It's like anything else you haven't done for a while," said Pete. "You get rusty."

Even at that, Greene, who came to Jackson State from Alabama State, where he was offensive coordinator over the summer, likes the quarterback's development.

"He has a good feel for the game," said Greene. "The main thing was teaching him the system. He's still learning. Each game is a new situation for him. Like most young quarterbacks, he wants to hold the ball too long.

"You have to zero in on the guy you want to go to and then be able to come back to someone else if he's not open. That's the thing that makes (Mississippi Valley quarterback Willie) Totten so tough.

"He's able to buy time and pick up other people. Everything he's doing now is the result of four weeks of practice and getting ready for a game each week."

Pete showed he is learning in one game when he spotted Stacy Mobley, a secondary receiver running free over the middle, and hit him with a 43-yard touchdown pass.

"He's not a great athlete," said Greene. "He doesn't have a great arm. But he's a competitor. The thing I like about him is he doesn't let things bother him too much. If he throws an interception, he comes right back throwing. Even in adversity, he comes back.

"I'm impressed with him. He doesn't panic and throw the ball up for grabs. He's on schedule, considering the length of time he's played. He's a little bit better than I thought he would be."

When Pete signed with Jackson State in 1982, few eyebrows were raised. It was written off as another case of a coach's son getting a free ride. Melvin Pete Sr. is the Tigers' defensive line coach.

But the fact that Grambling and Tennessee State, a pair of schools that know a good quarterback when they see one, recruited him should have said something about Pete's ability.

He was set to cast his lot with Grambling when Jackson State recruiter Bob Hughes showed up on signing day. Because Pete wanted to be close to his mother, he went with Jackson State.

It's a decision he has not regretted, but he has been through some tense moments because he is a coach's son.

"I was a freshman," he said. "I'd walk into a room and everyone would get real quiet. That happened a couple of times. But I didn't let that bother me. I knew if I got the chance to play and show what I could do, my teammates would follow me."

Roscoe Nance covers the SWAC for The *(Jackson, Miss.)* Clarion-Ledger.

SIAC REPORT

That blur you just saw was a Maroon Tiger

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
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Morehouse running back Elvernie McGee (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

Whoooosh!

That's a typical sound coming from the Morehouse backfield as a human blur finds a slight opening in the line and dashes downfield in overdrive.

The blur is Elvernie McGee, the senior tailback for the Maroon Tigers with the high cheekbones. They call him "Cheeks." And he's known to consistently reel off 4.4s in the 40.

Last year, all McGee did was lead the team in rushing yardage despite getting his first start four games into the season. He totaled 673 yards in only 96 carries for a hefty seven-yard average. McGee was also the team's second-leading receiver.

Morehouse has no designated runner in Coach Maurice Hunt's offense. Hunt prefers "to keep fresh horses in the stable." So McGee shares the running chores.

Defenses don't get many chances to see the 5-9, 185-pounder face to face.

"I like being at tailback again. I get the ball more and get the chance to score more. I love to score. As a wide receiver you don't get the chance to run much after you've made the catch."

A bulldozer he is not. His game is speed and finesse.

And because he's equally valuable as a receiver and punt/kickoff return specialist, McGee's speed can give opponents fits.

"Cheeks" is a converted wide receiver who moved to tailback last year. He enjoyed the move, he says, because he relishes the challenge of running with the football. "I like being at tailback again," he admits. "I get the ball more and get the chance to score more. I love to score. As a wide receiver you don't get the chance to run much after you've made the catch."

McGee opted to play wide receiver when he came to Morehouse in 1982. He didn't feel he would get much playing time then because Hewritt Dixon Jr. was the resident running back (Dixon Jr. is the son of Florida A&M alumnus and Oakland Raiders great Hewritt Dixon Sr.).

Looking back on that year, Coach Hunt says it may have been a mistake to play McGee at wide receiver instead of letting him run the ball. "He did OK at wide receiver," Hunt says. "But when McGee came here, we figured he would be more productive at wide receiver because that's where he wanted to play at that time."

Despite not being a running back for two years, McGee had little trouble readjusting. Picking up a few pointers from Dixon helped make the transition easier for him.

"The ability was already there; all I had to do was just go out and do it," McGee explains. "So I watched Hewritt's techniques on how to elude defenses and avoid hard hits."

McGee's winding up at Morehouse is somewhat surprising when you consider that he was an all-state running back in Saginaw, Mich. Michigan State was interested. So were Pennsylvania and Central, Eastern and Western Michigan.

But most schools wanted to redshirt him as a freshman. "Plus they were more interested in big backs," he says. "I wanted to go where I knew I had a chance of playing my first year."

The elementary education major decided to attend Morehouse after hearing a friend always speak highly of the school. The fact that he had the opportunity to play coupled with the chance to escape Michigan's big chill made Atlanta the place for him to be.

Morehouse led the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference in team rushing last season with 1,663 yards. The Maroon Tigers figure to be even stronger this season because of more talent and depth on the offensive line.

McGee's face lights up at the thought of running behind a line that many feel will be better than last year's. Even though he won't be the team's exclusive rusher, "Cheeks'" personal goal is to gain 1,500 yards this year. He doesn't hesitate when asked about that figure. He also doesn't hesitate when he says that the Maroon Tigers should be among the top three teams in the conference by the end of this season.

But whether or not McGee reaches his personal yardage goal depends on Hunt's offensive scheme as the season progresses. "I know it sounds like a cliche," the coach points out, "but McGee is just one part of our offense because we don't highlight him."

McGee's years spent at wide receiver proved to be a great help in him becoming a more versatile performer. He caught few passes as a high school running back. So it's going to be bad dreams for opposing linebackers who will be forced to cover the blur.

Though Hunt says that McGee isn't a "featured" player, Morehouse rivals will see enough of him, as a runner, receiver and return specialist.

Those multiple talents have the pro scouts taking an interest even though he's considered small for a running back by NFL standards. In an era where little guys are playing big, it's not an unreasonable assumption that he could make some pro team.

When you combine speed with his traits, you just never know what might happen. That's what being a game-breaking roadster is all about.

Whoooosh!

Craig T. Greenlee is the editor of Sports Express *in Atlanta and a frequent contributor to the* Review.