COVER STORY

Freedom Bowl MVP almost didn't make team

By DAVID BULLA Review Staff Writer

ference is glad he did.

James Harris almost didn't get to play in the third annual Freedom Bowl The Southwestern Athletic Con-

The Grambling State linebacker failed to make the SWAC's all-league team, which is how one qualifies for the all-star game in Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. However, the man whom his fellow teammates call "Hollywood" was named an all-America, and that's exactly how he played Jan. 11 in leading the SWAC to 16-14 win over the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference. It was the SWAC's third straight win in the annual event.

Harris and his teammates held the MEAC offense to 67 total yards. The Tiger senior registered seven solo tackles, two quarterback sacks, two assists, two fumble recoveries and two deflections en route to the bowl's Most Valuable Player award. That broke Texas Southern's two-year stranglehold on the honor, won by Harold Smith in 1984 and Calvin Magee last year.

"What he did today didn't surprise me," said Grambling Coach Eddie Robinson, who was an assistant for the SWAC team. "We had to insist that he be added to the roster when he made all-America.

"In practice this week, we didn't know what to do with him since he was. Rams. a late addition to the team. So we put him on the scout defense, which meant he played against the first offense. But our first offense couldn't run anything with him in there, so we had to put him on first defense."

play of the game when he sacked would make it to the pros if I went Gilbert Renfroe, the Tennessee State there and I would get to play for footstandout, on a two-point conversion ball's greatest coach." try with 5:39 left in the game. That prevented the MEAC from completing benefited handsomely from his a startling fourth-quarter rally after

touchdown with 6:19 left, when Florida before the Freedom Bowl, Harris and (Minnesota's rookie defensive back)." A&M's Gary Shipley returned a blocked punt 41 yards for a touchdown. Virginia State's James Ward had blocked the punt by Mississippi Valley is recognitive instincts," said Paul Rice, Holt, Leon Gonzalez (Dallas), caught a 21-yard touchdown strike State's Willie Totten, holder of almost every college football passing record. Totten, playing with a bruised left wrist, was pressed into punting duty in place of the injured Perry Qualls and responded with five successful punts for a 36-yard average. But the sixth Renfroe made a nifty run for the two- about a third of the players in this

point conversion and a 16-8 SWAC

Totten, who threw touchdown passes of 25 and 21 yards, turned the ball over on a fumble 35 seconds later. Renfroe connected with Delaware State's John Taylor two plays later for a 12-yard touchdown that kept the crowd of 10,200 in their seats until the end. That set the stage for Harris to prevent Renfroe from forcing a tie.

"I was surrounded by a super group of linemen and defensive backs," the 6-foot-3, 220-pound Harris said. "Their quarterbacks didn't have a lot of time and the secondary did let them find their receivers."

Renfroe and MEAC starting quarterback Bernard Hawk of Bethune-Cookman combined to complete only nine of 28 passes for 42

If it hadn't been for a former. Grambling quarterback who happens to be Harris' namesake, the linebacker might have been playing in the Hula Bowl or East-West All-Star game, instead of the Freedom Bowl. Hollywood Harris was an all-America at Carroll High School in Monroe, La., four years ago when he had to make a choice on what college to attend. Louisiana State, UCLA and Vanderbilt were after the linebackeroffensive guard. He decided to have a little talk with James Harris, a Monroe native, former Grambling star and an ex-quarterback for the Los Angeles

"We're not related but we talk a lot," the younger Harris said. "He lives out in San Diego but owns a business in Monroe and I asked him what he thought. He said go to Grambling because I would get to play As it turned out, Harris made the for Eddie Robinson. He told me I

So far, it looks as if Harris has Robinson became football's all-time Jerry Rice (NFC Rookie of the Year pi Valley are in that group. The MEAC scored its first winningest coach. And, in practice with San Francisco) and Isiaac Holt

ching the attention of the pro scouts. to the ball. They seem to feel their way numbers will be down a bit this year. for the ball. I like what I saw in them in "I really don't think there are any practice and today's game."

punt resulted in Shipley's TD, and Los Angeles Ram star, said he expects few second- or third-rounders."



James Harris sips to his success on the sidelines (photo by James

year's Freedom Bowl to have die "Hit Man" Anderson of Fort Football League rosters.

"I thought we had more talent

game were drafted and five par- Southern University may be such a manager of the San Diego Chargers. Leonard Wingate (Los Angeles Freedom Bowl. Younger was also im-"Harris and Dillard always seem close Raiders). Younger expects both pressed with Eddie Cofield, a 6-3,

first-round picks out here this year," Younger, the former Grambling and Younger said. "But there could be a

Harris, Dillard, defensive backs Ed-

legitimate shots at making National Valley State and Robert Smothers of Texas Southern, wide receiver John Taylor of Delaware State, linebacker namesake's advice. Harris helped the overall in this game last year," Jackie Walker of Jackson State and trailing through the game's first 31/2 Tigers to a 9-2 record in 1985, when Younger said. "Of course, we had running back Carl Byrum of Mississip-Black colleges also produce their

share of sleepers and Younger thinks Alcorn State's Wayne Dillard were cat- Twenty players from last year's wide receiver Connell Swain of "The thing I look for in a linebacker ticipants made NFL rosters, including prospect. The 6-2, 190-pound Swain "Tank" Younger, assistant general Jonathon Bostic (Kansas City) and from Totten in the first quarter of the 240-pound linebacker out of Elizabeth

> Totten's other scoring strike went to Mississippi Valley teammate Joe Thomas, who dropped several passes but was playing with a sore knee. The

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jury remained out on Thomas and Totten, who completed seven of 21 passes something like the one Neil Lomax facfor 157 yards. He had three intercep- ed when he was coming out of

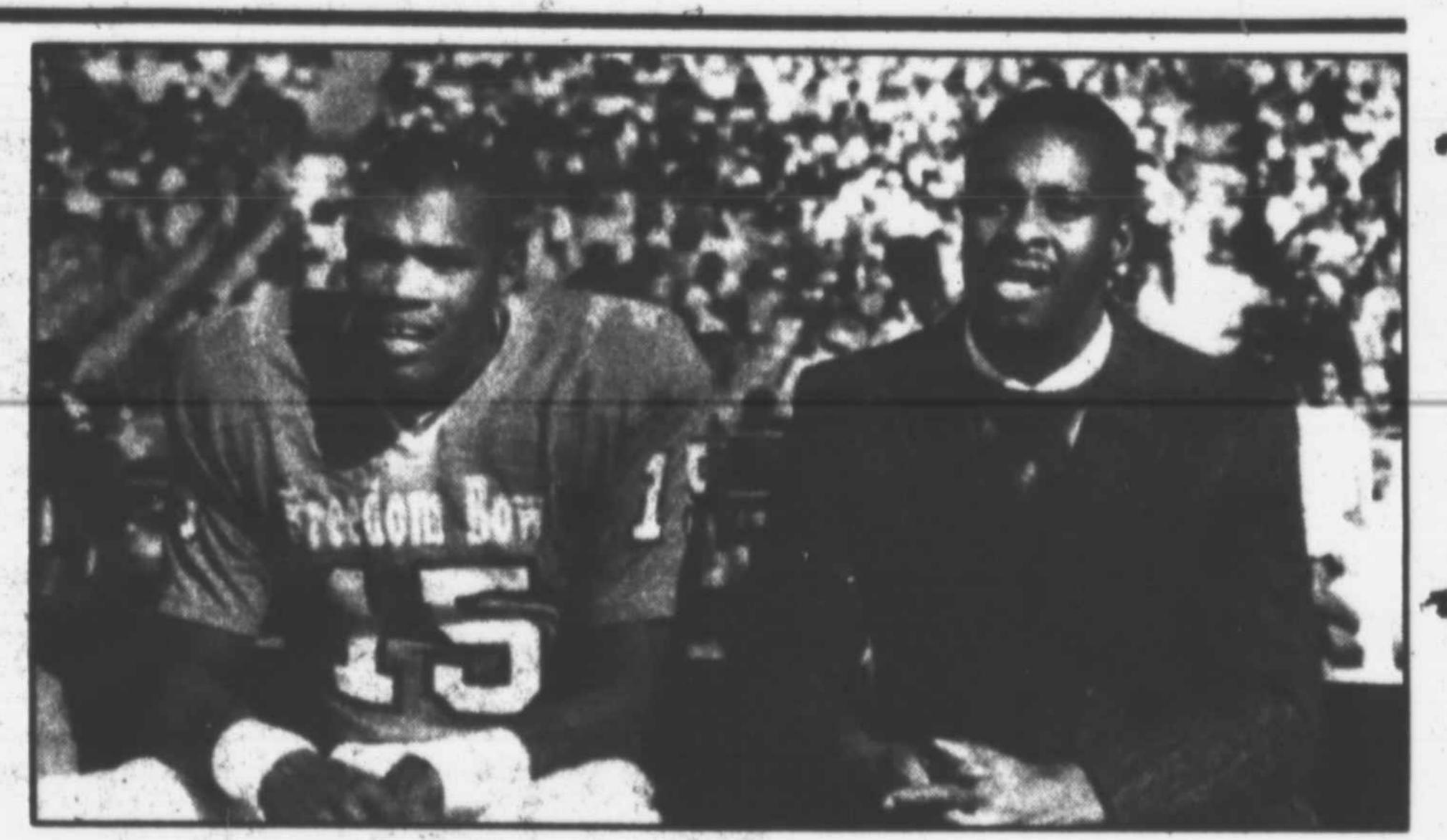
But it was a much better perfor-Christmas Day event.

"But you have to look at his release and foot movement," insisted MVSU Coach Archie "Gunslinger" Cooley. "This guy can play in the NFL. No doubt about it."

Younger said that the 6-4, 205-pound Renfroe was ahead of Totten because "Tennessee State runs a in that non-contact camp.

dropback offense. Totten's problem is Portland State. Lomax played in a runand-shoot offense in college and had to mance than the 6-2, 200-pound learn how to drop back in the pros. It quarterback had experienced in the takes awhile to learn how to read Blue-Gray game. He completed fewer defenses when you drop back. Willie's than 25 percent of his passes in the going have to go through a learning

> The season of impressing pro scouts is coming to an end. Only the Senior Bowl Jan. 18 remained for actual game situations. The Pro-Combine Camp in New Orleans Jan. 28 will have approximately 300 invitees. Many of the Freedom Bowl participants will be tested for speed, agility and flexibility



Totten and former teammate Rice: Back together again (photo by James Parker).

All-star game: Troubled present, uncertain future

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE **Review Staff Writer**

LIKE ANY new venture, the Freedom Bowl All-Star Classic has suffered growing pains in its quest to become a major national sporting

In its third year, the Classic has had its share of talented athletes. But it hasn't attracted as much attention organizers had expected. Coverage from the national media hasn't been overwhelming, and Atlanta's habitually frigid Januarys have kept many would-be spectators at home.

In 1984, when the game was first played, 14,000 came to watch. Last ball, New Orleans and Houston are year, 18,000 tickets were sold. But 10-degree weather with a wind-chill factor below zero dashed any hopes for a good turnout.

Atlanta's Peach Bowl has the same problem. Despite a national television contract, attendance is still low for that bowl and its future also is uncertain.

Dexter Joyce, events coordinator for the Freedom Bowl, feels that the bad weather and not enough Atlantans being involved make the event very dif-

ficult to promote. "Most Atlantans aren't familiar

with players from the Southwest Athletic Conference (SWAC) and Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC)," Joyce says. Therefore, the game hasn't been able to generate enough local interest.

Those circumstances, Joyce admits, make it highly possible that the Classic could move to another site. If that happens, it's likely to be played in a domed stadium, where conditions would be good for players and onlookers regardless of the weather outside.

Given the interest in SWAC footprime candidates to be the new host for the Classic.

As for the game's timing, even though the Freedom Bowl is played near Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in King's hometown, there is no connection between the two. The game played at that time because the Na- Rice, the ex-Mississippi Valley State if that will happen." tional Collegiate Athletic Association sanctioned that date.

debuted in 1984, to be an all-star contest between SWAC and MEAC seniors. The next year, the format was changed to include the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC) Association (CIAA). The idea was to enhance the game's appeal in Atlanta, which is home for three SIAC schools and within hailing distance of several other SIAC schools. CIAA schools aren't that far from Atlanta, either.

In 1986, the game further expanded to involve black schools that aren't affiliated with conferences. That way, the pro scouts get another look at th best talent from all predominantly black colleges.

But whether or not the Classic stays in Atlanta hinged on attendance 1986, Joyce said before the game. Joyce's projection was 20,000.

The Freedom Bowl is worthy of surviving and thriving. Last year, Jerry pass-catching star and the National originally designed the game, which play in Atlanta. This year, Rice's old Atlanta.

pass-and-catch mate, Willie Totten, played, as did Bernard Hawk of > Bethune-Cookman and Gilbert Renfroe of Tennessee State. With that type of talent committed to the game, the and Central Intercollegiate Athletic Classic could succeed in a big way at some point.

Exactly how it will succeed is

While black colleges across the nation are now represented in the Freedom Bowl, Grambling legend Eddie Robinson says the Classic should also include predominately white

Adding white schools, in Robinson's opinion, would make the game easier to sell and put more people in the

The chances of that taking place are very unlikely, according to Joyce. "The game was designed for blackcollege players who don't have the chance to play in other all-star games," Joyce says, "so I doubt very seriously

Football Conference Rookie of the Craig T. Greenlee is executive editor of MEAC Commissioner Ken Free Year, turned down the Senior Bowl to American Illustrated Magazine in

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"He was an excellent player," Gaither said. "He was smart and he picked up things so quickly."

Now the question is whether Riley can pick things up from the sidelines. FAMU is in the critical situation having to win in order to support itself. When the Rattlers are not playing well, attendance slips.

Eight years ago, when FAMU was putting the finishing touches on backto-back national championships, crowds of 20,000 or more were com- bard, in a throwback to his days as an will know what he has gotten himself mon for its games. This year, atten- assistant to Ohio State Coach Woody into. After all, FAMU finished just 4-7

for most games.

"In the next two or three years, we should be competitive against anybody," Riley said. "I know it is going to be a struggle initially, and some people are going to be looking for immediate results. I'm going to be looking for immediate results. All I ask for is support."

Riley has already promised to make dance slipped, hovering around 7,000 Hayes, preferred to run the ball. Riley last year, did not beat a single Division dicated columnist.

would rather do the opposite.

said. "I like the two-back set, the one-back. back set, a balanced attack with more emphasis on passing. I like the wideopen offense."

For now, Riley and FAMU are on their honeymoon. The real tests will come this fall, when FAMU must hit the road to play teams like Jackson

I-AA team and was woefully weak in "We will have a pro offense," he several key areas, including quarter-

> Riley may need a magic wand, but he remains confident.

"This is an upturn," he said. "Everybody is looking for a new beginning. This is not to demean + Coach Hubbard, because I think he has done an excellent job. At the same the Rattlers' offense exciting. Hub- State and Tennessee State. Then Riley time, we must go on. We will go on."

Barry Cooper is a nationally syn-