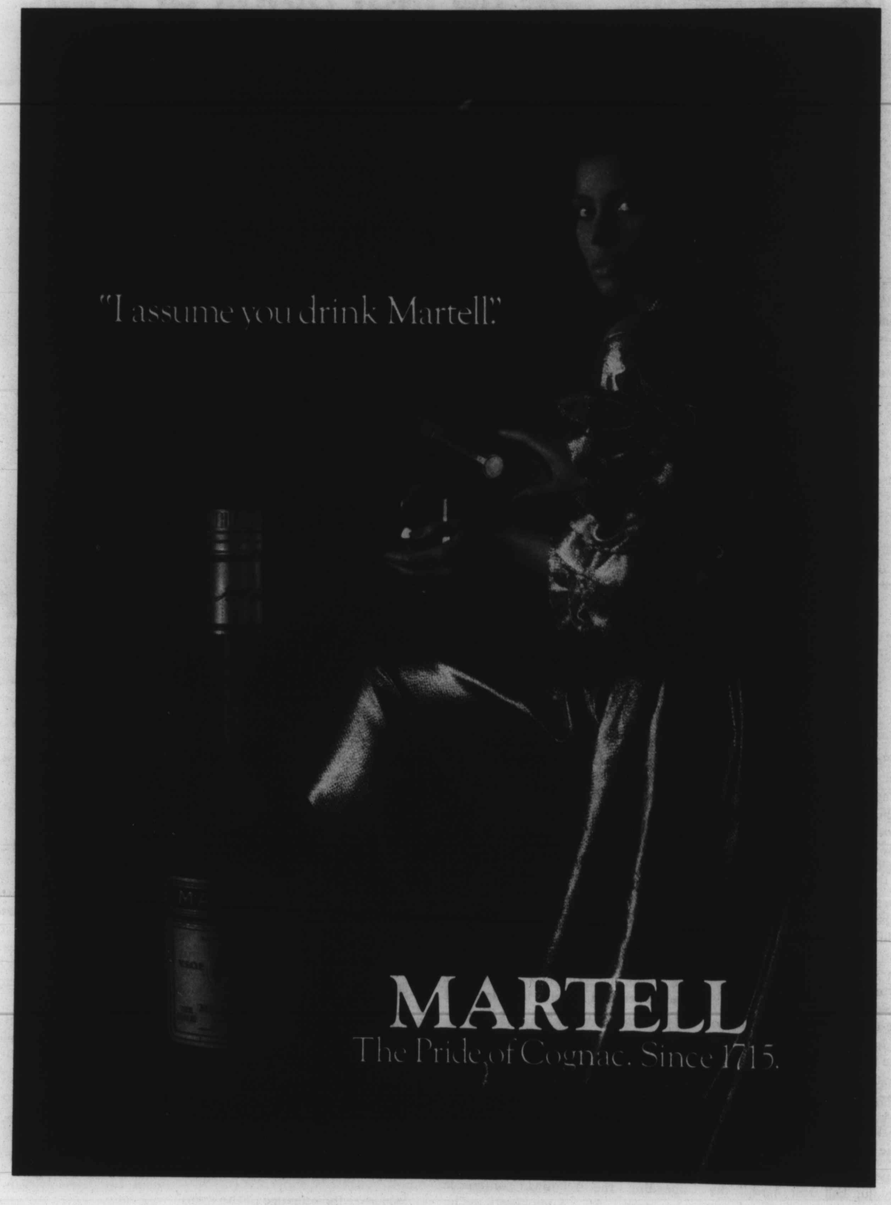

DEFENSE

'Blue Death' is alive and kicking this year

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

FORT VALLEY STATE'S "Blue Death" was the rage of Division II last season, leading the nation in almost every defensive category en route to the playoffs.

But then the proud unit lost some key people because of graduation, and there were questions about this season. How could one reasonably expect the same level of play after the loss of an all-America and two first-team all-conference players? Could the Wildcats still be the autumn terrorists they were the year before?

Certainly. Fort Valley has a rich history in producing outstanding defensive teams. Wildcat followers have come to expect no less, and Defensive Coordinator Alphonso Varner has been happy to oblige.

"It's a tradition that started when I came to Fort Valley 30 years ago," says Varner. "We have always worked to mold a strong defensive team, and it just mushroomed. Each year we get new players in, and they catch on to what we're doing. The tradition, morale and *esprit de corps* are just really good.

"I wouldn't want to compare this year's 'Blue Death' with last year's," Varner continues. "We lost three tremendous players in Eddie Anderson (now with the Seattle Seahawks), Rodney Norwood and DuVaal Callaway. Yet, this year's team is getting some early shutouts, and we love those goose eggs."

The "Blue Death" approach hasn't changed this year; there are just a few new faces.

The prime enforcers on the '86 edition are two seniors, Greg Lloyd and Darryl Holmes. Both are bona fide all-America contenders and good bets to get serious shots in the professional ranks.

Lloyd, who mans the outside linebacker post at 6-2 and 220, has a disdain for quarterbacks and runners. A superb one-on-one tackler, he is especially dangerous on blitzes (16 sacks last year).

As for sweeps to his side, forget it. Blockers rarely get to his legs, and he's as agile as any running back.

Lloyd is like a carpenter: He'll either saw 'em in half or nail 'em to the turf.

"Nobody can beat you when you work hard," Lloyd says when asked about the success of his fellow defenders. "That's why we're able to do what we do."

The Wildcats' defense is so prominent that it tends to overshadow the offense. Early indications are that it will take a lot of "Blue Death" towing the line until the offense gets untracked this year.

Says Lloyd: "We'll have to carry the offense until they start jelling. That's the way it's been in the past. They depend on us a lot, and we're not going to let them down."

In the secondary, Holmes is taking up the slack created by the departure of Anderson and Callaway. He has all the tools that pro scouts look for in cornerbacks at 6-4 and 190 with 4.5 speed.

His specialty is man-to-man coverage, and he relishes the challenge. Holmes will let his man run his pattern but closes fast once the ball is in the air. Blessed with exceptional quickness, Holmes shadows any receiver he faces and loves to play cat burglar, as he demonstrated as a junior with seven interceptions.

This year, however -- at least during the early going -- teams are limiting the passes they throw to his side, paying the ultimate respect any cornerback can receive from an offense.

Against the run, Holmes isn't shy either. He reads sweeps extremely well and doesn't mind slamming his helmet into a running back as a reminder of what awaits on his side.

The "Blue Death" design, Holmes says, mandates a man-to-man defense.

"There's no other way to play except

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After diagnosing a screen pass, Fort Valley State linebacker Greg Lloyd sets his sights on an unsuspecting running back (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).