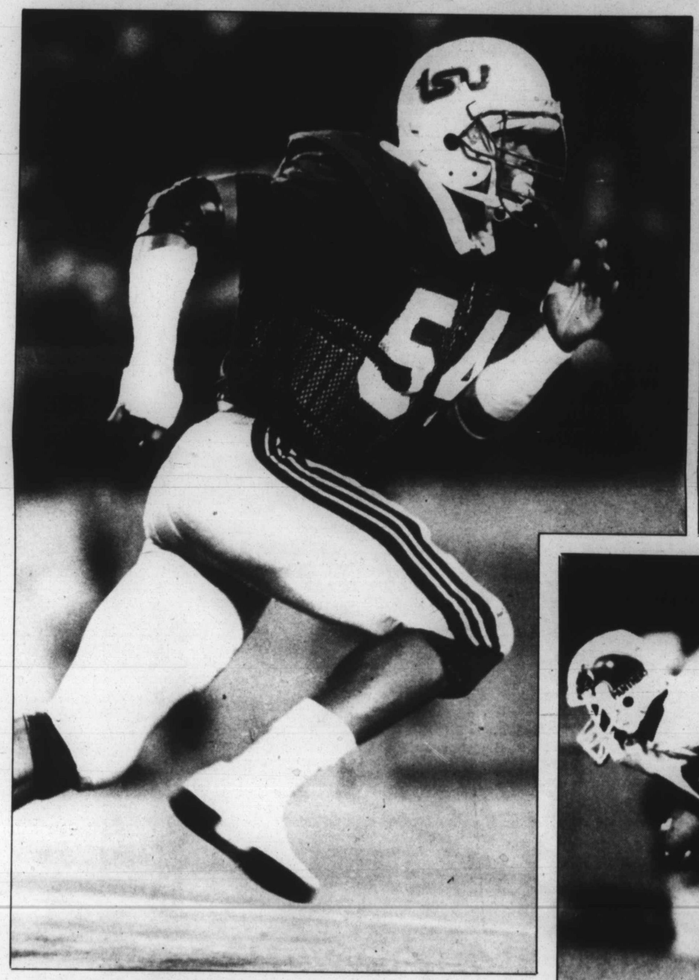
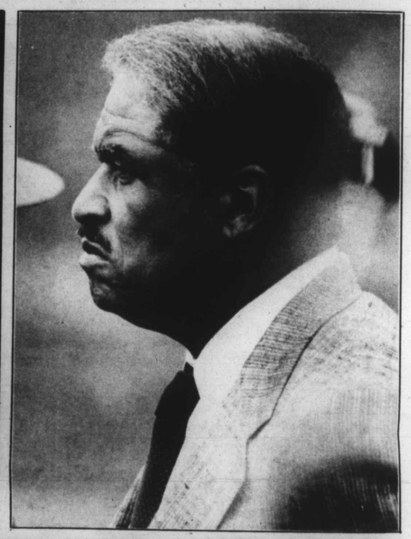
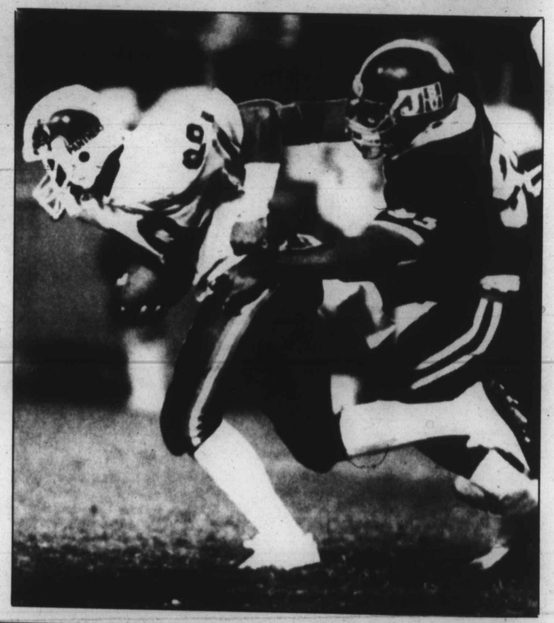
COVER STORY

UPSIDE-DOWN

Black college football: Anything but predictable in '86







YOU FIGURE IT OUT

Tennessee State has won with its defense, led by all-America linebacker Onzy Elam, not a rifle-armed quarterback; Grambling Coach Eddie Robinson suffered a historic losing streak; Prairie View enjoyed a historic winning streak (photos by Mark Lyons and Mark Gail).

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

THE 1986 football season has been an upside-down, topsy-turvy affair in which the unexpected seems to happen every Saturday -- especially among the black colleges.

What's fair has become foul and what's foul has become fair.

"You used to be able to go by preseason predictions," said Howard Coach Willie Jeffries. "Now coaching is getting better and, on a given day, you can have an upset."

But what we've been witnessing goes beyond mere upsets. We might just be seeing a changing of the order.

Prairie View, the scourge of the Southwestern Athletic Conference in the '60s and a doormat in the '70s and '80s, won three consecutive games for the Panthers' longest winning streak since 1976 and most victories in a season since 1978.

Along the way, Prairie View defeated Grambling for the first time since 1965.

At the other end of the spectrum, 4-4 Grambling -- a legitimate, card-carrying member of the college football aristocracy – lost four straight games, its longest losing streak since the school began keeping records.

That sort of wackiness has not been limited to the SWAC. In the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference South Carolina State was picked to finish near the bottom. But, after eight games, the Bulldogs were in third place at 5-3 and had been a legitimate contender before losing to Delaware State.

There's more.

Howard, a perennial MEAC doormat, manhandled untied and undefeated North Carolina A&T, then No. 14 in Division I-AA, to the tune of 42-10.

It's been one surprise after another.

One week Jackson State beats undefeated Delaware State. The next week, the Tigers lose to a Southwest Missouri State squad that has done nothing before or since to distinguish itself.

Will somebody please tell us what's going on around here?

"It's parity all over the country now," says first-year South Carolina State Coach Dennis Thomas. "That's reflective in those giants being upset and lesser people playing well. I guess the media and fans and supporters are surprised. They don't know the specifics and inner workings of the NCAA and the effect the 30-scholarship limit and Proposition 48 have.

"As coaches, we know the wealth of talent is even. I saw it coming. It's structured that way. Limit the number of scholarships and the number of athletes available with Proposition 48, and then people you normally get go to other places."

Southern wide receiver Farrington Johnson: The Jaguars narrowly fell to Delaware State, then tied powerful Tennessee State (photo by James Terry).

And people you usually beat begin beating you.

"The wheel turns," said Howard's Jeffries. "You can't go out and pick all the best athletes. Recruiting is a gamble. You don't know how a kid is going to do until he gets on campus. It's the theory of probability."

That is to say if you flip a coin 25 times, it will fall on heads 13 times and tails 12 times. In football talk, if you play an opponent 25 times, neither team will dominate.

The very first weekend of the season should have given us some hint as to what was ahead. North Carolina Central passed for 550 yards against Jackson State and still lost.

That sort of productivity begetting such results was unthinkable in other years. But in '86, it has been standard operating procedure.

Texas Southern is among the highest scoring teams in I-AA, averaging more than 35 points a game. But all those points don't show up in the Tigers' record. They lost six straight games after a season-opening victory against Prairie View.

Alcorn State quarterback Jerome Vigne completed a Division I-AA-record 18 consecutive passes against Florida A&M and gained 210 yards. Naturally, the Braves lost.

Alabama State gained 426 total yards against Jackson State and lost.

That's not the way it's supposed to work. If you're able to run the ball, you should be able to control the game, And if you control the game, you should win it. That might have been true in other years, but not in '86.

"Everybody has good defense but nobody has shown consistent offenses," says Jackson State Coach W.C. Gorden. "It's one of those years. The teams that are winning are the ones whose offenses aren't making mistakes that cause defenses to lose. It's topsy-turvy. You don't know what to expect."

Strangely enough, Tennessee State seems to have come through all this craziness better than most. In what everybody projected would be a down year for the Tigers after last season's 7-4 record, Coach Bill Thomas' team was undefeated in its first nine games (the Tigers tied 17-17 Nov. 1 with 4-4-1 Southern in another surprise).

Still, it has been an unusual season. Tennessee State in the past has given us quarterbacks like Eldridge Dickey, Joe Gilliam, Joe "747" Adams, Brian Ransom and Gilbert Renfroe and has long been noted for its passing game.

But this year the Tigers' passing game has been virtually non-existent. They've been getting it done with defense. Opponents average eight points against them and no one has scored more than two touchdowns against TSU.

"Black schools aren't showing the outstanding offenses," said Gorden. "Maybe it was supposed to be that way after the highly successful Mississippi Valley era. I wouldn't say this is a bad year. It's an unusual year."

Southern University Athletic Director Marino H. Casem thinks all this parity is hitting black schools where it hurts most -- in the pocketbook.

"That's the trend pretty much all over the country," said Casem. "The money crunch. Everybody's feeling it. Even the big boys who're spending a lot are trying to economize. The little people who were trying to do their best with what they had are cutting back. It's evening up. It's more equalization among the various tiers of competition.

"I said all the time we're going to lose a little of the flair we've had over the years when you make it impossible to get some of the people. I said all along it was going to hurt. The glitter is not as bright. That's going to hurt everybody. If your program isn't bringing in the dollars and entertaining the people, you've got problems. You do that by having quality people, exciting people. I'm not opposed to parity if it's equalling itself on an upward level. But if parity is at the bottom, I'm not for that. I want us to rise to a higher level of parity. I think the good teams are coming down to a lower level."

That's probably true, too.

But that has combined with other factors to make 1986 a wonderfully

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