

THE PROS

## The Rice Man cometh -- and goeth -- for 49ers

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE Review Staff Writer

THE RICE MAN cometh and goeth with much ado these days.

Sportswriters give Jerry "World" Rice as much attention in the San Francisco locker room as opposing defensive backs give him on the field.

The 1985 NFC Rookie of the Year and erstwhile Mississippi Valley State star is a nightmare in cleats for rival secondaries. At midseason, he led the NFL in touchdown receptions (nine) and receiving yardage (830). At that pace, Rice will get 1,660 receiving yards, one of the finest seasons ever for a pass-catcher, and rub shoulders with very select company. Hall of Fame receiver Lance Alworth, formerly of San Diego, is second on the all-time single-season list (1,602 receiving yards in 1965).

And if Rice can increase his 103.7 yards-a-game average by a little more than six yards for the rest of the year, he'll pass first-place Charlie Hennigan of Houston (1,746 yards, set in 1961).

In Rice, 'Frisco has a serious deep threat the caliber of Wesley Walker, Willie Gault, Stanley Morgan and the Marks Brothers (Duper and Clayton). That's a bit surprising if you take full stock in the pro scouting services. When he entered the league, the pundits agreed that Rice possessed all of the tools for stardom except blazing

Granted, at a sleek and lanky 6-2, 200 pounds, Rice doesn't appear laserfast. But defensive backs around the league have seen enough of No. 80's heels to know better.

So how is it that a man who reportedly has only 4.5 speed at best gets open so often on deep pass pat-

"He's a long-striding guy who's extremely explosive," answers Dennis Green, the 49ers' receivers coach. "He's unique in that he's tall and very quick. How many guys who are his height in this league have his quickness? There are some who have his speed, but it takes them a while to get going. Jerry can hit top speed in two or three steps and that enables him to go deep on defensive backs. He eats up the yardage, gets into their cushion, and the next thing you know, he's right on top of them before they know it.

In four of the season's first eight or more yards in receptions and had caught at least one TD pass in five of those, the longest a 66-yarder in a 16-13 win over the Los Angeles Rams.

Some observers feel that Rice has emerged as Frisco's long-ball weapon ball out there."

because of the back injury that sidelined all-pro QB Joe Montana. Jeff season has raised a few eyebrows. But ing, you don't want to lose. Once you Kemp, Montana's backup, has a Green, who returned to the 'Niners as get the taste of winning, you really howitzer-type arm that's well-suited an assistant coach after head coaching wnat to give that extra effort." for throwing the bomb.

reputation on mastering the short- and intermediate-range passing game.

Montana, they contend, built his

When asked about the difference

Rice's performance so far this Rice explains: "When you're winnfive seasons at Northwestern, isn't sur-

Besides his ability to go deep, the prised. He got his first close-up look at former Delta Devil is a reliable receiver Rice during the 49ers' pre-season mini- blessed with Julius Erving hands. His camps and was very impressed with style is reminiscent of Paul Warfield, "World's" diligence in refining his Lynn Swann and John Stallworth. He has Warfield's graceful moves, Swann's and Stallworth's aggressiveness in going after passes as if they were rebounds off a basketball rim. Combining the traits of those three should make Rice an all-pro for a long time, barring injury.

As a rookie, Rice went through growing pains in learning Head Coach Bill Walsh's multiple offensive sets. At times, it seemed as though he was thinking so much about what to do that his concentration on catching footballs wasn't what it normally is. As a result, he dropped some passes early in the season. But as the year progressed, Rice showed the form that produced 18 NCAA Division I-AA pass catching records along with 4,693 passreceiving yards as a collegian.

Additionally, Rice set a San Francisco single-game record as a rookie with 10 catches for 229 yards versus the Rams. His 49 receptions for 729 yards are a team record for rookies.

In '86, Jerry Rice is a marked man. Defenses are employing a variety of approaches in an effort to nullify his

However, Rice believes those ploys won't work consistently.

"I really don't think anyone can stop me," he says matter-of-factly. "In our offense, it's very hard to double-cover one receiver. If I'm doubled, we'll go to Dwight Clark, Roger Craig or Russ Francis."

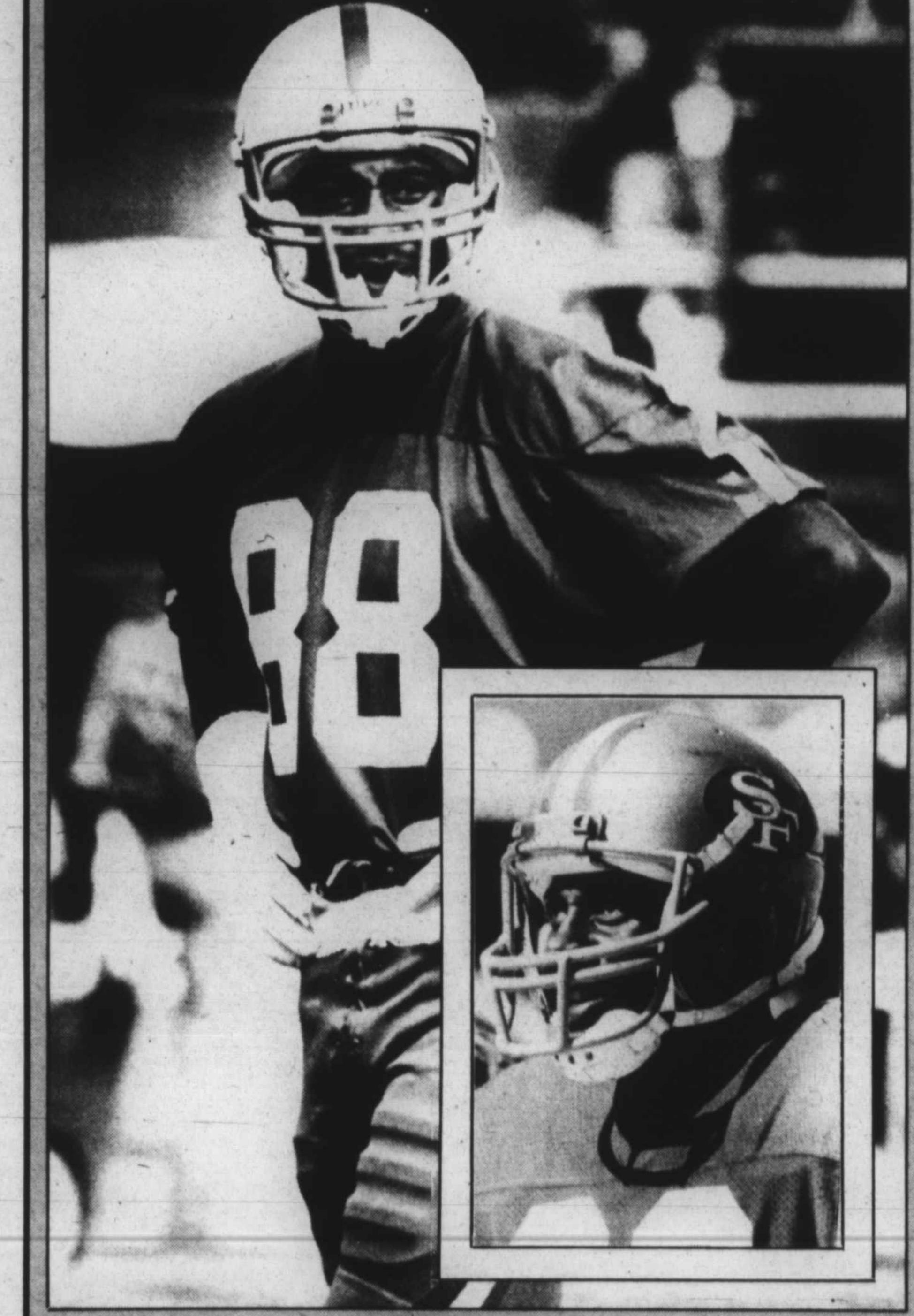
The Atlanta Falcons used a combination zone and man coverage against Rice in a game that ended deadlocked 10-10 in overtime. "They put a man on me in bump-and-run and I'd get by with him trailing me." Rice explains, "Then I'd see a safety come over and it was obvious that he was keying on me."

Strangely, the 'Niners never countered by using their receiving options. They were totally out of sync that day.

"It seems as though every time we got rolling, something would happen to stop us," Rice says. "We were never "I felt right then that Jerry wanted able to come up with the big play. It to make a move on being the best wasn't one of my better games. But all "Kemp can really put the ball out receiver in the league," Green says. that means is that we'll work more on there and it gives me the chance to run "He has the necessary work habits. taking what a defense gives us and go

"I know we'll have days like that." Please See Page 17. 

A SMOOTH OPERATOR



between the two, Rice assumes the role already-considerable skills. games, the Rice Man had totaled 100 of diplomat, insisting that a comparison is difficult.

> the ball down," Rice says. "But Joe The one thing that separates him from from there. has a fine arm too and can also put the the others is his desire to reach that top