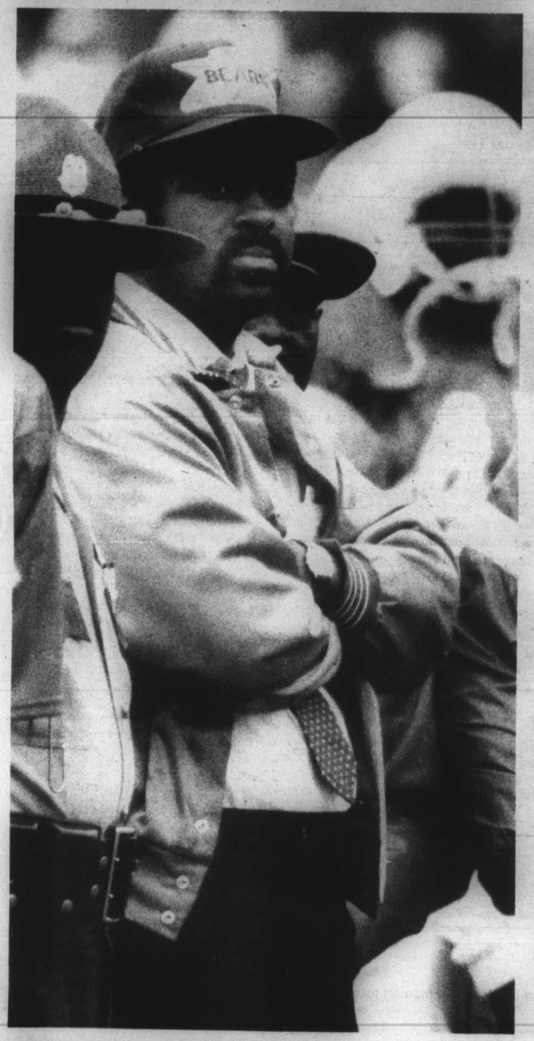
More challenges ahead for Thomas and the Tigers



Facing The Challenge

In addition to playing their OVC schedule, TSU Head Coach Bill Thomas says the Tigers will maintain their traditional rivalries with Florida A&M, Grambling, Jackson State and Southern (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

Difficult challenges continue to confront Bill Thomas, head football coach and athletic director at Tennessee State.

He has apparently gotten past his first major hurdle in gaining the respect of Big Blue followers. Thomas took over for the legendary Big John Merritt, who died in 1983.

In three seasons, under three different presidents and three different athletic directors, he has quieted the nay-sayers. He's 28-6-1 as the Tigers' head coach. Detractors have had to zip their lips.

On another front, he's facing a very formidable test as athletic director, a position he accepted last November. Thomas has the Herculean task of maintaining a winning athletic program in the face of dwindling funds and recruiting from an increasingly shrinking crop of quality athletes who can handle college academics.

And because TSU will be a full-fledged member of the football-crazy Ohio Valley Conference in 1988, Thomas is working to ensure that the Tigers will stay winners. It's very likely that Tennessee State may be the only black college to belong to a conference composed of predominantly white schools. Tapping additional sources of revenue will be the key for Tennessee State's surviving in the OVC, Thomas says.

A tough mission? Certainly. "Yes," Thomas says, "there is great pressure to produce additional revenues, and that will be a tough challenge. But it's a challenge that can be met."

Two areas are of prime concern to Thomas when you ask him about generating funds -- gate receipts and financial contributions from boosters and interested parties.

Don't misunderstand. Tennessee State has done quite well at the ticket windows. The school is ranked third nationally in attendance among Division 1-AA colleges. They also have the winningest 1-AA football program, boasting a 79.2 winning percentage on the all-time listings.

But that doesn't go far enough, Thomas says. TSU gets a hefty income from certain games on their schedule, but that has more to do with who they play. They'll sell out against Southern or Grambling. But when it comes to other schools in the OVC (such as Youngstown State or Murray State), fans don't turn out in sufficient numbers to make dent on how much income TSU athletics generates.

"We have to increase our attendance numbers past the two or three big games we have that people are always going to come see," Thomas says. "That means getting more fans to those games and also to our away games.

While the Tigers belong to the OVC, they won't abandon black college teams that have become traditional foes. "We'll play our conference schedule," Thomas says, "but we will keep our traditional rivalries with Florida A&M, Grambling, Southern and Jackson State."

Another area that may be even more critical than gate receipts is contributions from alumni and other organizations, he continues.

The more successful black college football programs do very well at the gate. But when you look at contributions and fund-raising, the picture isn't quite as alluring.

White schools in Division 1-AA, Thomas says, don't draw that well at the gate. But they compensate by garnering enough funds through private sources to more than make up the difference.

If black colleges like TSU are to continue to be competitive athletically, funds must be available to make things happen, Thomas says.

"There has to be a change in attitude," he says. "For a program to prosper, people must put in their fair share. And that means former athletes of the school, administrators, alumni. Without that kind of financial support, we're looking at some rocky roads ahead. And what I mean is either gifts-in-kind or financial donations.

The 39-year-old Thomas is not unaccustomed to tackling the uncertain. He uses his linebacker philosophy to make the best of an unfavorable situation.

Before he was handed the reins of TSU football, Merritt had fashioned the program into the major happening in Nashville for 21 years. Losing was, and still is, a cardinal sin. With gifted passers like Eldridge Dickery, "Jefferson Street" Joe Gilliam, Joe "747" Adams and Gilbert "The Rifle" Renfroe, the Tigers never had a losing season under Merritt. In six of those seasons, TSU was unbeaten, and in 12 other campaigns, they never lost more than two games. Merritt's 238-67-11 coaching record placed him among the top 10 winningest coaches in college football history.

To add more fuel to the fires of controversy on Thomas' hiring as head coach, Merritt's longtime and trusted assistant, Joe Gilliam Sr., was overlooked as the successor.

Gilliam Sr. is the father of "Jefferson Street Joe," who starred at TSU from '68 to '71 and won 33 games as quarterback. Gilliam Jr. later played for the Pittsburgh Steelers and made instrumental contributions when they won the Super Bowl in 1975.

For three years before to Merritt's death, Gilliam Sr. was the interim head coach and guided the Tigers to a 24-4-2 showing. In almost everyone's mind, he was the logical replacement.

So when Thomas was hired, the voices of dissent made their feelings known. Sure, Thomas knew the program, having been an

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COACHES

New Alabama Coach Houston Markham has little time

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

Simply put, Alabama State football Coach Houston Markham has a long way to go and a short time to get there.

Markham was named the Hornets' coach on July 23, replacing Jim Parker, who was asked to resign in May. That gives him less than two months to put together a staff, meet his squad, install his system and prepare for the Sept. 12 season opener with Southern University.

Those are only a few of the obstacles Markham faces. The Hornets are arguably the worst team in the Southwestern Athletic Conference. They haven't had a winning record since 1981. They are 8-30-1 in the SWAC since becoming a member in 1980, and the NCAA has put them on probation twice in the last three years.

It makes one wonder why Markham, 44 -- seemingly of sound mind -- would leave an established program like Jackson State where he was an assistant for 12 years for a perennial cellar-dweller.

"When I look at Alabama State, I see a vision of a big challenge," said Markham. "I see a big hill. I'm a climber, and I'm determined to climb that hill. They've predicted us to be the worst team in the league this year, and they were probably the worst team in the league last year. I know the challenge is a great one."

Markham, a 1965 Alcorn State graduate, has had hills to climb before. He was head coach -- a rarity for blacks -- in Vicksburg when Mississippi high schools were first integrated in the '60s and compiled a 66-16-3 in his eight seasons.

"That was a hot potato," said Southern Coach Marino Casem, who coached Markham at Alcorn. "He handled it. He'll be all right at Alabama State."

Markham isn't deluding himself into thinking he won't have another "hot potato" on his hands on and off the field when he gets to Montgomery, Ala.

Besides having to rebuild the football program, Markham will have to win over skeptical alumni who see him as an outsider who got the job over Clemson assistant Woodrow McCorvey and Hornet defensive backfield Coach Jerome Harper, two Alabama State graduates.

"I had that problem at Jackson State," said Markham. "I fought off being an Alcornite in Jackson for 12 years. If you don't beat around the bush, you'll win people over. If you put up a few Ws, people will get behind you."

Markham doesn't profess to know of any miraculous ways to "put up Ws." So he says he'll try to build the Hornets step by step.

"No.1, I want to build for tomorrow," he said. "I don't want to fly by night, win six or seven games this year and then the bottom falls out next year. I want discipline and morale and a good staff, it's going to take a couple of years. I'll take the blows if they'll let me do it my way. I know the wolves are waiting. I'm an outsider, but I'm going to make it work."

One of the main things Markham has to do is make the Hornets' offense more productive. They have not averaged 17 points a game in any of the last six seasons.

While he was Jackson State's offensive coordinator, Markham helped the Tigers install the Wishbone in the late '70s. The Tigers went on to become the No.1 rushing team in NCAA Division I-AA for the next several years.

But Markham says he won't necessarily bring a run-oriented offense with him to Alabama State, even though the Hornets have in Brad Baxter one of the top running backs in the nation.

Baxter, the SWAC offensive player of the year, rushed for 1,705 yards and scored 13 touchdowns.

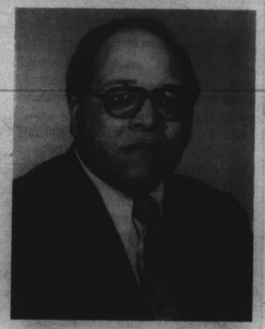
"I like a wide open, multiple offense ... throw the ball around," said Markham.

"But you have to run the ball. What I envision is balance. But you have to have the personnel. I know you have to get the ball to a guy like Baxter."

This is Markham's first head coaching job on the college level. He says he has been preparing for it since his sophomore year at Alcorn. But he was still surprised when it came along.

"After a while, I just put becoming a head coach out of my mind," he said. "I was comfortable. Not being a person with a big ego, I was happy being an assistant. It caught me off guard when Alabama State approached me. Some other positions had been open, but I didn't apply. I didn't want a job where I had to politic to get it. The ball got rolling and it kept rolling. They convinced me I am the person they wanted."

Jackson State Coach W.C. Gorden is convinced Markham is the right man for Alabama State. He should know. He has known Markham since day one of his coaching career.



Markham: "A vision of a big challenge" at Alabama State.

The two first met when Markham was at Alcorn and doing his student teaching at Eva Gordon High in Magnolia, Miss., where Gorden was head coach. When Markham graduated, Gorden hired him as his offensive line coach.

"His strongest point is his dedication to working," said Gorden. "He can come to work at 7 a.m. and stay until 1 a.m. or 2 a.m., long after everybody else is gone. I have no doubt he will be successful. He has the intelligence, dedication and discipline to do so."

Roscoe Nance is a sportswriter for USA Today *and a* Review *columnist.*

A Changing Of The Guard

Jackson State, not Grambling, dominates the SWAC

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

A changing of the guard has taken place in the Southwestern Athletic Conference in recent years.

No longer is Grambling the conference's dominant football team. Jackson State has usurped that title.

The Tigers have won five SWAC titles -- three outright and two co-championships -- in the decade of the '80s while posting a 37-9 record in conference play and going unbeaten against SWAC opponents twice.

Still, when talk turns to SWAC football, Grambling is the school that leads off the conversation.

"Grambling is kind of like Notre Dame," said Jackson State sports information direction Sam Jefferson. "No matter what their record, when people think of Notre Dame, they think of winning. It's the same with Grambling. As long as Eddie (Robinson) is there, it's going to be a legendary school."

The Grambling mystique has been built over more than four decades with Robinson -- the winningest coach in college history -- prowling the sidelines. But all the while, Jackson State has been gaining on the G-Men.

"Jackson has been overshadowed because of Eddie's quest for the record," said Southern University coach and athletic director Marino H. Casem. "You have to understand White America recognized that quest. But the vast majority don't recognize the level of play within the conference.

"They think it's a three-ring circus. Even if they don't respect our play, they say to win that many games and surpass an individual of Bear Bryant's status is an accomplishment on any level."

Jackson State's accomplishments are noteworthy, even though they have not been achieved over a long period of time. The Tigers have made five appearances in the I-AA playoffs. Only Eastern Kentucky, with seven, has more. Nevada-Reno also has been in the playoffs five times. That's pretty fast company when you consider all the schools that are in I-AA.

Even more noteworthy is the fact that Jackson State is among the I-AA attendance leaders year in and year out.

"People who really watch football realize we're the team of the '80s in the SWAC," said Coach W.C. Gorden. "We've accomplished quite a bit as a football power. It doesn't bother me that we are not recognized to the same degree as Grambling. Our motivation comes from within."

Casem qualifies as something of an expert on how and why Jackson State's stock has risen. He was the Tigers' No.1 intrastate rival for more than 20 years as coach at Alcorn.

"Jackson's a helluva place to recruit," he said. "It's the hub of a state that's a rural state. Everything that's happening in Mississippi is happening in Jackson. Mississippi has a lot of outstanding black talent in every role. Jackson is like a magnet for that talent. They pull in more good talent by accident than a lot can get on purpose."

Attracting talent is only half the battle. Jackson State also knows how to develop that talent. Recent NFL drafts bear that out. In an era when athletes from black schools are a rarity in the draft, Jackson State still makes its presence felt.

The Buffalo Bills chose Chris Burkett on the second round in 1985 and selected defensive end Leon Seals on the fourth round this year. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers chose linebacker Jackie Walker on the second round in 1986.

"We are still able to get five or six blue-chippers who have kept our program competitive," said Gorden.

Black coaches seldom if ever are credited with being superior when it comes to teaching fundamentals and plotting strategy. But given Jackson State's success, its staff must be doing *something* right.

"The strength of our team is the coaching staff," said Gorden. "We're proving that with the guys who have been hired away from us and who have been getting inquiries."