ALUMNI PROFILE

Rice, former SWAC standout, laments missing big one

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

Third-year San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Jerry Rice had the kind of season most players only dream about.

The Mississippi Valley product was the Schick player of the year, the first receiver in NFL history to win that honor, selected first-team All Pro and set a fistful of records.

So Why is he disappointed?

"We didn't go all the way," said Rice.

" The records and trophies are a big reward, but I didn't get the cream of the crop. I didn't get to the Super Bowl. That's the main thing... the ring on my finger."

That the 49ers missed the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is not Rice's fault.

He caught 65 passes for 1,078 yards and set an NFL record with 22 touchdown receptions and touchdown catches in 13 consecutive games.

Next season, he wants to be even better.

"Right now, that's behind me," he said.

"To me, I played OK. I don't want to get to a certain point and not go any further. There are always little things you can do better like blocking.

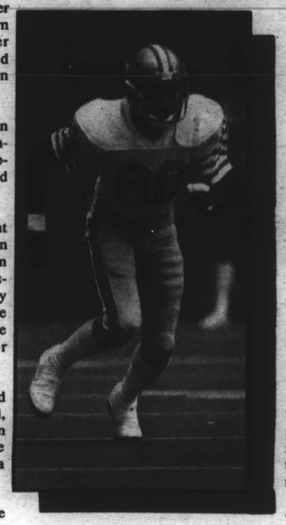
"I don't look at my stats. I don't think about how many touchdowns I've scored or the success I've had. To me, what really is important is if the fun is still there. I'm like a kid. When the fun isn't there, you won't have that drive to be the best."

Rice's emergence as a top flight NFL receiver has come faster than even he anticipated.

"I thought it would come around my fourth year," he said. "Everybody felt so.

Around my fourth year, I expected I would start playing Jerry Rice football. It's happening to me early.

"Now, I have to get better each season. I have to keep the same work ethics... work on the little things, be a more consistent receiver. I want to be able to catch the ball anytime it's thrown in my direction. I want to be known as the man who comes up with the big play, but also as a receiver who never drops the ball."



Rice never has been known as a receiver who dropped balls, not even in college.

But early in his rookie season, that problem cropped up.

Balls that he sucked in like a vacuum cleaner at Mississippi Valley suddenly were falling to the ground for incompletions.

Confused and frustrated, he broke down and cried on the bench during a game.

"The offense was so complex," he said.

"I was concentrating on my patterns, not on catching the ball. I didn't understand what was going on. But after mastering the offense, I felt at home."

Rice came out of his funk vs. the Rams last in the season. He caught seven passes for 241 yards and two touchdowns. The rest is history.

"After that game, I was playing my football," he said.

"I just went out with the attitude I was going to concentrate on catching the ball. If I ran the wrong route, I'd just work on that later.

"I had proven in the Blue Gray game (he was most valuable player) that I could play with guys from the big schools. There was no pressure to prove myself. I wanted to contribute so much. I bit off more than I could chew."

Now, it's defensive backs around the NFL who are having a hard time digesting.

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Rice doing the Cabbage Patch in the end zone is an all too familiar sight for them.

"When I started to training camp I started to prepare myself for this season," he said.

"I worked hard and it paid off. I keep my work ethics. That's something I learned at Mississippi Valley. If you work hard, it'll pay off for you."

Rice developed his desire to excel while growing up in Crawford, Miss., working with his father laying bricks.

"I wanted more out of life than that,' he said.

"I couldn't see myself doing that for a living. Mississippi Valley gave me an opportunity. (Coach) Archie Cooley would work us so hard. That prepared me for the pros."

No matter how hard Cooley worked the Delta Devils, it wasn't too hard for Rice.

He was always staying after practice working on pass patterns.

It was that dedication, in part, that prompted Cooley to proclaim Rice a No.1 draft pick and the best receiver ever to play in the Southwestern Athletic Conference as early as his freshman season.

But even after Rice began setting NCAA receiving records that still stand, he had doubts.

"I didn't think I was going to get drafted until my senior year," he said.

'I felt it was a possible chance. I always had self doubt in my mind. when I came to Valley as a freshman, I knew I had some qualities.

"I was surrounded by players who wanted to be the best. The overtime we put in after practice paid off. In my mind, I knew what it would take to make the pros...hard work. The scouts were coming, but not so many because it was a small school and the type of offense we ran, they thought I might not be able to play."

Rice has proven anyone with those thoughts wrong a hundred times over.

Eagles rule Southern Division with win over Rams

to strike. Suddenly, Fred Bennett slipped a neat pass by Cromartie on the base line and into Leak. Not believing his good fortune, Leak grimaced as he laid the ball in, expecting to be hammered by the Rams' 6-8, 230-pound giant. Instead, Cromartie simply watched the ball fall through the net and his team's one-point lead disappear into a one-point deficit.

"I was expecting him to foul me," said Leak of what proved to be the winning points. "I couldn't believe I didn't get fouled."

Cromartie, who was responsible for covering Leak on the play, said he thought of hammering Leak too late.

"That came to me after the ball had left his hand," said a dejected Cromartie. "But by then , it would've been even worse.

"It was just a terrible mistake. They hadn't gotten the ball inside that much all night. And then on that last play, I just took my eye off him for an instant. It was a nightmare shot. It'll stay with me for a while."

For Leak, it was the answer to a prayer.

"Thank God I didn't have to go to the free throw line," he said. "I'm glad we practice those layups a lot. I'll take a layup over two trips to the line any day."

As it turned out, the hypnotic lay-up cost the Rams any chance of upsetting the hottest men's basketball team anywhere.

With a crowd of some 6,000 on their feet, the Rams were down 49-48 and had six seconds to mend their costly errors. WSSU had trouble getting the ball inbounds as Central stuck to the Rams like a gum wad on loafers, but Hood came down with the ball and called time-out. The play cost the Rams three seconds.

WSSU got it in quickly to Lesane in the corner, but his desperation 20-footer was smothered by Bennett at the buzzer and the house indeed belonged to the Eagles.

Though the win by no means etched an Eagle into the Southern Division trophy, it did put Central in the driver's seat for their first title since names like Sam Jones and John McClendon were in the marquee in Durham.

Bernard was grateful to simply escape with a win in the backyard of the legendary Gaines.

"I'm not going to worry too much about how we did it," said an elated Bernard after the issue had been settled. "Heck, whether you win by 25 or by one, they still count the same."

Besides keeping their unbeaten record intact and number one ranking unblemished, the win put the Eagles a hefty leg up on their Southern Division counterparts. The Eagles, 8-0 in the CIAA and 6-0 in the Southern Division, put themselves two games up on Saint Augustine's (4-2) and the Rams (3-2).

"Our guys love being number one and all," said Bernard. "But the main thing is to win the Southern Division. That's all you can point to right now, and that's why this was such a big win for us."

A week later, though, the win took on a greater significance -- it all but stymied WSSU's chances of repeating as Southern Division champs. St. Augustine's, which had knocked off the Rams in their encounter in early January, swiped a 76-74 road victory in the rematch and moved into sole possession of second place.

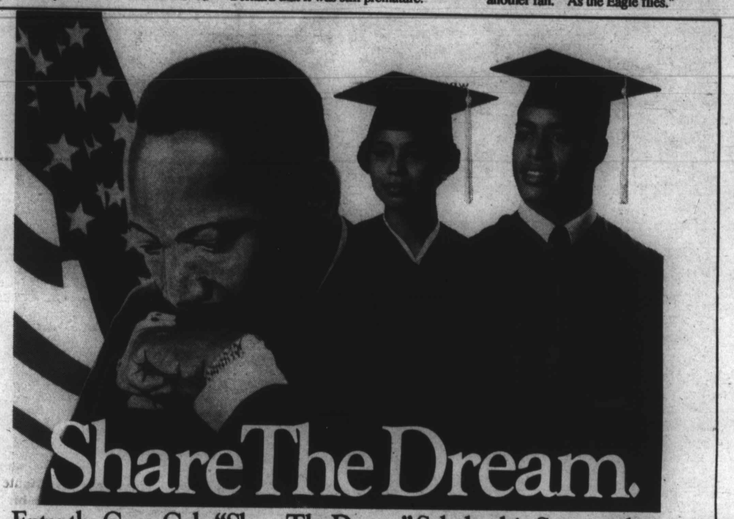
"This could turn out to be an enormously important win for us," said Bernard. "But with this league, it's still way too early to start packing any bags."

Gaines said Central's victory over his team was important, but agreed with Bernard that it was still premature.

"This helps them," Gaines said. "But I'm not so sure they'll win. They still have to go to Saint Augustine's."

But as one CIAA tournament-bound fan asked, "How far is it from Winston-Salem to Norfolk?"

"About a six-hour drive," joked another fan. "As the Eagle flies."



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8. Each winner or assignee of a scholarship must deplete the scholarship fund within four years from date of beginning use.

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