SWAC

Photo by Mark Gail

If the Braves can find some consistency in their receiving corps, quarterback Joe Vigne will shred the league's defenses with a very potent air game.

Jackson is favored, but beware of Alcorn

Traditionally, being picked to win the Southwestern Athletic Conference football championship is the kiss of death.

The team picked as the one to beat in the pre-season, is usually beaten during the regular season. But that hasn't been true for three-time defending SWAC champ **Jackson State.**

Head Coach W.C. Gorden hopes the pattern will continue in 1988.

"Being picked No. 1 carries a lot of responsibility," Gorden said. "It inspires us."

Jackson State has been SWAC's team of the decade, winning four conference titles outright and sharing two others. The Tigers also been in the Division I-AA playoffs five times during the 80s. They enter the season with an 18-game conference winning streak.

The Tigers, though, will have to fill some gaping holes -- most noticeably at quarterback -- if they are to continue on their roll. They lost 12 starters, five on offense, seven on defense and 22 seniors from last year's 8-3-1 squad.

But they do have 40 lettermen back.

Tailback Lewis Tillman, the Tigers' 1988 Heisman Trophy candidate who broke Walter Payton's single season rushing record last year with 1,474 yards, will be the main man on offense.

Two-time All-America senior free safety Kevin Dent and 6-4, 297 lb. senior lineman Charles Jackson will anchor the defense. All three are expected to be high NFL Draft picks in '89.

"Jackson State doesn't reload; they stay loaded," said Mississippi Valley State coach Ken Pettiford.

But unless Beverly Bishop, Shawn Gregory or Anthony Smith steps forward in a bid as the replacement for Shannon Boyd at QB, the Tigers could end up firing blanks.

Alcorn State is coming off back-to-back second place finishes. This could be the year the Braves get over the hump. In a word, they are loaded. Twenty starters and 57 lettermen return.

But Head Coach Theo Danzy is approaching the season cautiously.

"You like to have experience, but experience can also be very dangerous," said Danzy. "If you don't have something to push it, you can get into trouble. I don't want to be too optimistic, but we want to be a little optimistic with that many people coming back."

The Braves' strength is on defense -- No. 4 overall in 1-AA last season -- is the secondary. Cornerback Michael Andrews and safety Jack Phillips, two all-SWAC performers are the leaders.

Quarterbacks Jerome Vigne and Larry Brown give Alcorn the conference's most potent passing game if the Braves can find some more consistent receivers.

Alabama State was the surprise in the conference last season, posting an 8-3 record even though Head Coach Houston Markham took over just 50 days before the season began.

The loss of 14 starters will make duplicating last year's record difficult. But Markham is aiming high.

"We don't accept second place as long as first place is available," said Markham. "We have to feel like we can win the title. We have to reach for the sky. Your reach must be beyond your grasp."

If running back Brad Baxter maintains his form, there is no telling what height the Hornets will reach. The 6-1, 232 lb. senior who runs a 4.65 in the 40, has rushed for 2,900 yards in the last two seasons. The Hornets lost five offensive linemen from last year's squad and Baxter could be in for a rough time.

Marino Casem's get tough philosophy in his first year at **Southern** produced a 7-4 record last season. The Jaguars are hoping for even more success in '88.

"I still have the same goals as always," said Casem. "As the lights go out in the stadium, and as the people leave, I want them to say, 'damn, Casem's team won again.'"

The loss of 11 starters -- seven on defense -- could make that wish a pipe dream. The **Jaguars** return only 29 lettermen and 11 starters.

Grambling State is in the unfamiliar position of having to bounce back from a losing season. The Tigers' 5-6 record last year ended the longest streak of consecutive winning seasons (28) in 1-AA. It also gives the Tigers incentive for this upcoming season.

"We had the talent, but we didn't execute," said GSU coach Eddie Robinson, the winningest coach in college football with 341 victories. "If we execute, we'll be in the race. We have the talent. The burden of proof is on the coaches."

Grambling returns 27 lettermen on offense with at least two at each position. Junior Clemente Gordon, who has been groomed to take over at quarterback the last two seasons, will be the starter. The Tigers boast their biggest and fastest running backs in recent years in Brian Tobey (6-1, 230), Calvin Cooper (5-11, 210), Tony Kirkling (6-2, 225), Ken Lear (5-11, 220), Cleveland Smith (6-2, 230), and Clarence Spottsville (6-0, 225).

Twenty-two lettermen return on defense and two key position changes have been made. Tommy Johnson (6-6, 285) has switched from end to tackle, and Darryl Wilburn (6-5, 235) has moved from tight end to tackle.

Texas Southern (5-6), was another vastly improved squad last season. The Tigers' five victories matched their highest total this decade (5-5-1 in '81 and 5-6 in '84). They were one of the conference's more explosive teams, scoring 30 or more points four times.

The top four receivers, Davis Smith (55 catches, 642 yards); Gilbert Ramirez (22 catches, 301 yards); Curtis Neil (20 catches, 181 yards); and Brian Wiggins (19 catches, 281 yards) return. But sixth-year coach Lionel Taylor must replace quarterback Sean Cook. Junior Clinton Brewster has inherited the job.

Defense is still a major Tiger minus. They allowed 258 points last season.

Haney Catchings begins his first full season at **Prairie View** after replacing Conway Hayman four games into the 1987 campaign.

Even though their record doesn't reflect it, the Panthers have made dramatic improvement over the last several seasons.

"I want people to be good," said Catchings, who was 3-4 in his stint as interim head coach. "I want people to expect us to win."

The Panthers return 36 lettermen and 13 starters. They have a pair of solid running backs in Victor Pegram (846 yards) and Lynn Bradford (633 yards). Kevin Bray, Jeff Crawford and Kelvin Phillips will battle for the quarterback job.

Second-year coach Ken Pettiford must find a way to rejuvenate **Mississippi Valley State's** offense if the Delta Devils are to improve their 1-10 record. Valley State was shutout four times last season and didn't score more than two TDs in any game. Seventeen points was their highest total of the season.

--Roscoe Nance

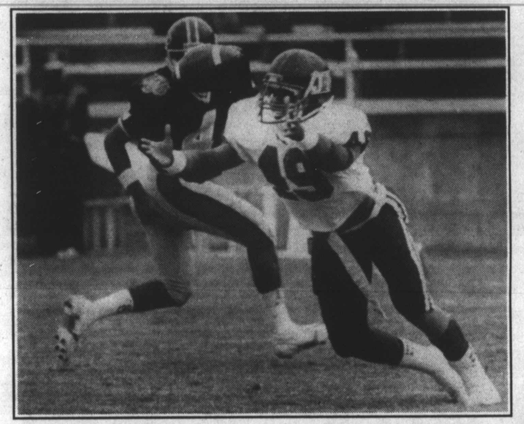

Photo by Mark Gail

Kevin Dent, the Jackson State free safety, is always around the football. The two-time All-American is viewed by pro scouts as a prize NFL prospect.

NOTES ... QUOTES ... AND TALES OF WOE

By

ROSCOE NANCE

Academic ineligibility is threatening the future of the **University of the District of Columbia** football and basketball teams.

Seven of nine basketball players scheduled to return for the 1988-89 season are in jeopardy of being ineligible. The football program is in a similar predicament.

UDC Athletic Director Lee McElroy has said that the school will field a basketball team even if they have to use walk-ons. Earlier, the university reassigned basketball coach Wil Jones after nine seasons because of the team's poor academic performance. The Firebirds forfeited several games last season after being nationally ranked because it used an ineligible player.

McElroy has set an Aug. 15 deadline for determining if the football program will be suspended for the upcoming season .....

Howard Davis

Howard Davis is the new athletic director at Jackson State. Davis was athletic director at Tuskegee University for 16 years and succeeds Walter Reed who became the AD at Florida A & M. Davis was also head of Tuskegee's Health and Physical Education Department in addition to being the commissioner of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference....

On Aug. 1, the SIAC appointed **James E. Hawkins** as the interim commissioner to replace Davis. He will serve in that capacity until February '89 when the conference conducts its winter meetings. Hawkins was the conference service bureau director from 1947-1987.

William "the Refrigerator" Perry isn't the only NFL player with a weight problem. Tampa Bay Bucaneers tight end **Calvin Magee,** a product of Southern University, is also a member of pro football's superheavyweight division.

Magee announced his retirement after being fined $25 a day for every pound he was overweight. The Bucs raised Magee's weight requirement from 240 lbs. to 255. Magee reported at 279. The last time he weighed, he was at 274 and had been fined $475.....

Former Florida A & M coach **Ajac Triplett** has been named the new basketball coach at Morris Brown College. Tripplett replaces Harold Merritt, who took an assistant coaching position with the University of Northern Arizona in June.....

The Windy City Classic, which was to have featured Jackson State and Albany State on Sept. 4 in Chicago, has been called off because the game's promoter failed to meet the July 31st deadline he was given to fulfill his obligations to the schools.....

Eddie Robinson

Grambling State football coach **Eddie Robinson** says that reports stating he was considering retirement following the Tigers 5-6 record last season were the result of miscommunication.

"They (reporters) decided that," said Robinson. "I don't know how they arrived at it. But I couldn't say I didn't say it. We had just lost a tough game (to Southern in the Bayou Classic). I thought we had the right preparation.

"It causes one to search himself. I had to search Eddie Robinson to see where we go from here. But I'm not planning to retire. I've been into thinking about retirement for a few years. You have to plan your retirement, but I'm not looking forward to retirement (right now)."

Robinson, 68, begins his 46th season as Grambling's football coach when the Tigers open against Alcorn State on Sept. 3 in Shreveport, La.