

By DAVID BULLA
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A LARGE PART of the college experience is learning to adjust to change.

Derrick Beasley has had to make three major adjustments since he arrived at Winston-Salem State three years ago.

First, the Detroit native had to adapt to a small Southern city. Second, he had to accept attending a small, NCAA Division II college, instead of one of the many big Division I schools that recruited him. Third, he had to learn to hit more judiciously on the football field.

Beasley has learned to adjust quite well, thank you. The strong safety has grown accustomed to Winston-Salem and a small college with one of the most successful Division II programs in the land. And, this past season, he showed that he had learned his trade as well as anyone in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association. Indeed, Beasley was named the CIAA's Defensive Player of the Year.

While he's learned to deal with change, coaches have frequently had to change their thinking to suit Beasley's athletic talent.

"Derrick made remarkable progress this season," said Pete Richardson, WSSU's defensive coordinator and a former defensive back with the Buffalo Bills. "Derrick's bigger and stronger, and he acquired more knowledge of the game. Many of our defensive schemes are built around his assets."

Chief of which is his ability to play rough-and-tumble football.

"Derrick is a hitter," Ram Coach

"All my best friends went to big schools. But I didn't want to go to a big school and just be a number. I wanted to put an emphasis on my education because I knew I could play football. Karlton (Watson) told me Winston-Salem State had a good football program and there would be no distractions to keep me from my books."

Bill Hayes said. "In fact, his one weakness as a safety is he likes to hit too much. He reacts to the run quickly and commits himself too quickly sometimes. There are times when he's not in position on the pass.

"But he's improved in that area. This season, he was wiser about when to hit and not hit. You have to like his size (6-2, 205) and speed for a defensive back."

Indeed, when Beasley becomes eligible for the National Football League draft in 1987, it is unlikely the NFL people will be able to overlook him.

Beasley turned in an amazing junior season, leading the Rams in tackles (97) and solo hits (55). The defensive back also had four interceptions, two of which he returned for 38- and



Beasley on the sideline against Hampton in the CIAA Championship Game: He's not at all shy about hitting (photo by James Parker).

54-yard touchdowns.

Beasley is a relative newcomer to football. He only began playing the sport as a junior at Detroit's Cody High School. His favorite sport had been basketball and his style of play earned him the respect of Cody football Coach Richard Carter.

"He's the type of fellow who can dunk backwards and make you look

bad with his size," Carter said of Beasley. "He teamed with a fellow named Vernon Carr, who now plays at basketball at Michigan State. They had quite a team here."

But Carter was confident Beasley's talents were better suited for football.

"He came to all the basketball games," Beasley said of Carter. "He liked my aggressiveness, so he asked me to play football."

"I was hesitant at first because it's a cold sport and I didn't like it outdoors. At home it's cold most of the time."

When Beasley decided to go out for the varsity his junior year at Cody, the football coach made him the centerpiece of his defense.

"He put me at middle linebacker and changed the whole defense to suit

me," Beasley said. "He told me things would work out better for me in football."

Beasley proved to be a "bone-crushing hitter," according to the Cody coach. He had nearly 200 solo tackles in two years. His senior season, he was in on more than 150 tackles and had four interceptions.

"He's the only all-stater I've had in 10 years here," Carter said. "We've had some pretty good talent, too."

Donald Anderson was an outstanding defensive back before Beasley. Anderson attended Purdue and now plays for the NFL's Indianapolis Colts.

"Derrick did whatever he wanted to," Carter said. "He was all over the field. That's desire, because he wants to make the hit."

The change of sports worked so well that Beasley found himself being recruited by every Big Ten school, "even though I was the smallest linebacker in the state."

Beasley wasn't sure a big school was right for him. So he listened closely when fellow Detroit native Karlton Watson, then a quarterback for the Rams, told him about the little liberal arts school in the South that had outstanding football and intimate classroom settings. Watson, a Chadsey High product who now plays in the Canadian Football League, would be a star for WSSU in 1983, when Beasley was a 190-pound freshman.

"All my best friends went to big

schools," said Beasley, a physical education major. "But I didn't want to go to a big school and just be a number. I wanted to put an emphasis on my education because I knew I could play football. Karlton told me Winston-Salem State had a good football program and there would be no distractions to keep me from my books."

Although Beasley should prove good enough to make a career of football, he's not counting on being a professional.

"I want to get my degree first," he said. "If I become a pro later, that's great."

"But having talked to Jack Cameron (former WSSU defensive back who played one year for the Chicago Bears), I know pro football can be a very short career. It can be a bitter dead end if you don't get your degree. So you have to be prepared for what comes after. That's what I'm doing now."

Beasley credits his brothers, Steve Beasley and Wendell Wood, with inspiring his athletic career. Wood played football at Tennessee State and Steve Beasley played basketball at Eastern Michigan.

"They got lots of clippings and I wanted to be like them," the WSSU junior said. "I wanted to go to college."

"But I think when my playing days are over, I'll go back home to Detroit. It's wild and it's hard there, but it's where I belong."