

Porter's raring to go at Fort Valley State

For the past two football seasons, the Ft. Valley State football program has produced sub-par seasons. Sub-par because the proud Wildcats have always been a top contender in the SIAC and the NCAA Division II under head coach Doug Porter.

There are more than a few colleges that wouldn't mind having .500 seasons like Ft. Valley has had. During Porter's nine year tenure, folks around the Georgia town have come to expect the best. The Wildcats are

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63-27-2 in the Porter era.

Only three years ago, Ft. Valley was the terror of the league. They took no prisoners and played the kind of give no ground defense that had opponents cringing before the opening kickoff.

In '85, the Wildcats were ranked as high as No. 2 in Division II. Their only loss being a seven point defeat at the hands of No. 1 ranked Central State.

Valley State's "Blue Death" defense led the nation in a wagon load of categories and that unit helped the team to make the NCAA playoffs. No other SIAC team has received a bid to post-season play since then.

But then something nearly catastrophic happened.

Porter suffered a heart attack and was forced to take an extended leave of absence in order to recuperate sufficiently. He was gone for a year.

In the meantime, assistant coach Gerald Walker took over and Ft. Valley finished at 7-3. Still, Wildcats football was not the same without Porter's presence.

At one point, it wasn't clear when or if Porter would ever return to coaching. Physicians felt it was best to take a wait and see approach, while carefully monitoring his recovery.

The time off was not easy for Porter. He had always been involved in football both as player as coach. Removing himself from the game, though very necessary, was still not an easy adjustment to make.

"It was a tremendous adjustment for me to make," Porter said. "It was my first time as an adult that I hadn't been associated with a football team either as a player or as a coach. Saturdays during the season were particularly difficult for me. Things worked out for me during my recuperation period and I was able to come back. If the doctors had told me that it wouldn't be wise for me to come back, I would have taken their advice.

"In looking back on it now, I can see where being out only emphasized my desire to return, even after being out for a year."

Porter returned to his passion in '87, but the results for his teams weren't the same as Wildcats' fans had come to expect. To begin with, Ft. Valley had more youthful faces on both sides of the ball, especially on defense. Then 30-year coaching veteran Alphonso

sive people are more comfortable in what they're supposed to do and that should make a big difference for us."

Porter confessed that his health was always a lingering thought when he returned even though he had full medical clearance.

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aren't already doing that," he said. "But, in order to make the playoffs, you have to do more of that. For this conference, that means playing teams in the Gulf South and the CIAA, for instance."

The Wildcats' coach points out that playing the better schools in other conferences serves as a reference point for the folks that are members of the playoff selec-

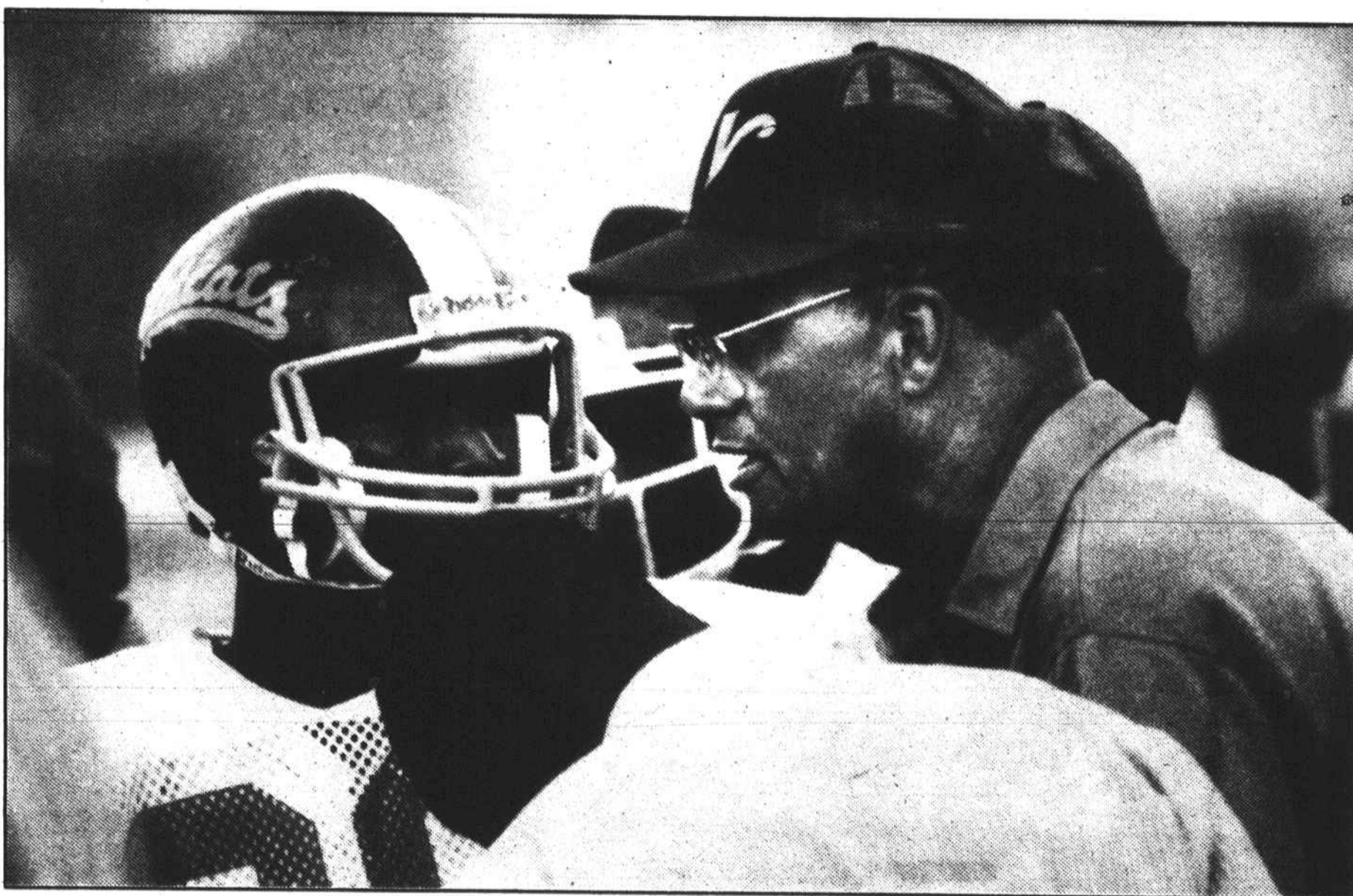


Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Varner retired.

Varner was the architect of the "Blue Death" defense, the units that year after year, pounded opponents into submission with fierce and relentless abandon. His departure created a void that was difficult to compensate for.

At that point, Walker was called on to take over. And it was transition all the way. Walker, well-schooled in offensive strategies, had to take charge and become familiar with his personnel and vice versa.

"We had a lot of inexperienced people on defense," Porter added. "We didn't uphold our tradition for defense. We couldn't stop people in crucial situations during games -- especially against the good teams -- and that hurt us."

But after two years, Walker has become more comfortable in his role. Porter has also become more at ease in his ability to handle being the head coach for a football program that is expected to win year in and year out.

"We should be a better this team this season," Porter said. "We're more experienced, particularly on defense. Our defen-

the back of my mind. But this year, things are going well and I'll be totally involved again."

Being totally involved, he explains, means doing more of the things that he is accustomed to doing as the team's head mentor. Visits to the players' dormitories and more time spent in breaking down and analyzing game films are a major part of that.

In addition, he's reduced his teaching load and some of his responsibilities as the school's athletic director. There's also more authority being delegated among the members of the Ft. Valley coaching staff and the coach feels very much at ease with that arrangement.

As the last SIAC coach to take his team to the NCAA playoffs, Porter has some solid insights into why his home conference has been nixed of playoff appearances since his team made the playoffs three seasons ago.

Porter asserts that teams have to increase their efforts to schedule inter-conference games in order to enhance their chances to play in post-season contests.

"It's not that teams in our conference

tion committees. People tend to choose teams they already know about it. So even if a team is 9-1 and hasn't played any team that committee members aren't familiar with, that team's chances of making the playoffs are reduced.

"People on those committees use that as a measuring stick," he continued. "You have to do well in inter-conference play, but you don't always have to win to guarantee yourself a playoff spot. The team may lose, but if that team is competitive against a good team that committee people know about, it helps you out all the more."

Porter uses the year his team made the playoffs as a prime example. The Wildcats played No. 1 Central State, but lost by seven points. Because the Marauders are a known commodity and Valley played them tough, playoff committee members felt they were a team of high caliber that deserved to be in the playoffs.

They got the bid.

Doug Porter is back and he's raring to go.

-Darryl Zimmerman