

PROMOTIONS/MARKETING

Houston promoter attempts Freedom Bowl rescue

Lionel Day, a sports promoter based in Houston, is attempting to revive the Freedom Bowl All-Star Classic football game after a one-year hiatus.

Day is planning to stage the game Jan. 13 -- during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend -- at the Astrodome in Houston. The game will feature athletes from the 47 predominantly black colleges. Eddie Robinson of Grambling State and Willie Jeffries of South Carolina State have already committed to participate as coaches.

The Freedom Bowl, last played Dec. 12, 1987 in Winston-Salem, N.C., was first held in Atlanta in 1983. It moved to Washington after two years.

Past games were plagued by bad weather, poor attendance and poor promotions.

Day, a former lineman under Chuck Fairbanks at the University of Oklahoma, has devoted the past 18 months to reviving the Freedom Bowl. He is confident it can be a success.

"I think I have a better understanding of what it takes to make it successful," said Day, a former agent who at one time represented Greg Pruitt, Dexter Bussey, Aaron Kyle and James White among others. "In the past, it was done the old fashioned way. Houston has to embrace the game. It has to be promoted. The key is getting corporate decision-makers involved."

Day says he wants to make the game a national event, not just a local activity for Houstonians.

"The mere fact that the SWAC is back in it is an indication that we think we can be successful," said Dr. James Frank, commissioner of the Southwestern Athletic Conference.

The SWAC pulled out when its Council of Presidents decided the financial risks were too high and it required too much of Frank's time. Under Day's proposed budget, the SWAC and MEAC will not undertake any financial risk. They will receive an initial grant of \$100,000 -- \$50,000 by July 1 -- and 20 percent of the profits will go to charities.

Day says the Martin Luther King Foundation of Detroit has committed \$400,000 to sponsor the game.

"I just hope they will be able to put on a good, first-class game," said Mississippi Valley State athletic director Chuck Prophet. "There have been so many shysters involved in games like these over the years."

Previous Freedom Bowls have produced such NFL players as Jerry Rice, Sylvester Stamps and Robert Clark. But Day says the level of competition needs to be elevated. That's why he plans to involve athletes from schools which aren't predominantly black (about 10-15 per 50-man squad).

"That's a twist, not a change," he said.

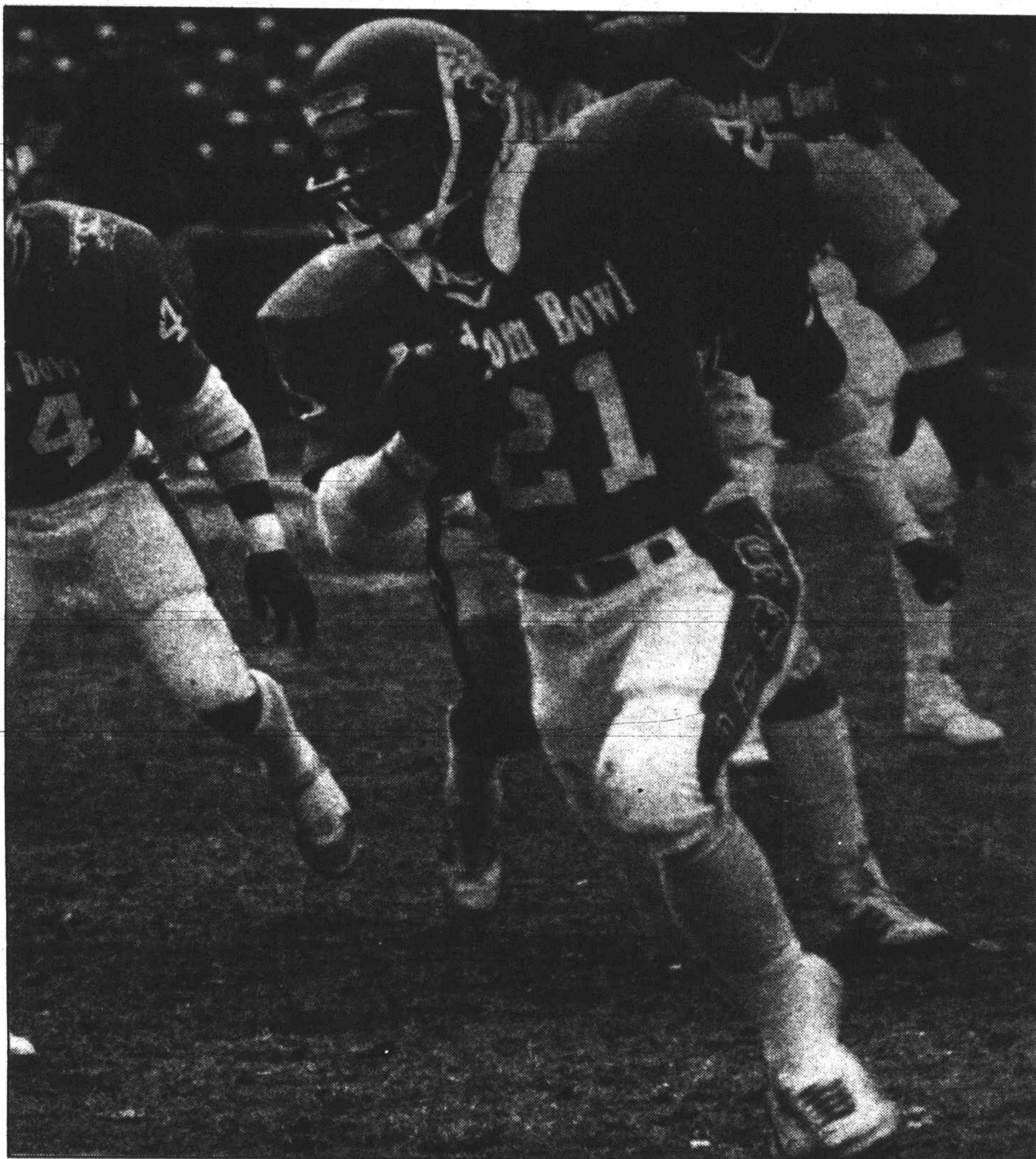


Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

The Freedom Bowl has been a God-send to black college gridiron talent seeking opportunities to play in the pros.

"The original concept was to showcase kids who don't get an opportunity. They'll still get their chance. We're trying to enhance the product."

Day's "twist" already has its opponents. "I'm not being selfish," said Savannah State head football coach Bill Davis. "But other athletes get opportunities that our athletes don't get. We need to showcase our athletes and not dilute the game. Maybe it would be all right to use athletes from some of the smaller schools."

Another problem could be the date.

The game will be played the same weekend as the NFC and AFC championship games -- the two contests that determine who will appear in Super Bowl XXIV.

Previous games were played the week before the Super Bowl. That was more convenient for NFL personnel. But Day doesn't think that playing the game a week earlier will keep scouts away.

"They'll have people here," he said.

If the Houston Oilers are involved in the AFC title match-up, there could be a major dilemma since they play their home

games at the Astrodome.

"We'll have to look at a contingency date," said Frank. "We were told they were reserving it for the Oilers, but that it was very tentative."

Day says the game can be a success and show a profit in its initial year. But he isn't deluding himself into thinking he doesn't face a lot of work.

"There's a lot of work to be done," he said. "But if I can make them like it once, I can make them like it again."

-Roscoe Nance