

GUNSLINGER VOWS TO "SLING" THE BALL

He took the stage proudly, dressed in a gray and black blazer that made you look at it. Not that the jacket was loud or a fashion faux pas, but Archie Cooley seems to want you to look at him anyway. This was not a bad thing. Cooley said a few words, and when you thought about it, he really hadn't said much of anything. But that was about as much as Cooley, Norfolk State's new football coach, wanted you to know about his team anyway.

This was not a bad thing, either.

"I'll tell you this much," he announced, between cracking jokes, to a crowd of about 100 gathered for the CIAA's annual coaches luncheon in Durham. "when we're at your goal line, we'll line up with three receivers on one side and two receivers on the other. The only person that will be in the backfield is the quarterback." He started to leave, while the crowd laughed at what he said. Did he mean that? Is that really what the man folks call the Gunslinger intends to do? Who really knows.

But that's the way he wanted it. Who really knew? You listened to him talk for 20 minutes, but you knew about as much about his team and what he intends to do with it as you did about President Clinton's new budget plan when he was done. But before he left, Cooley tugged on the lapels of his black and gray coat like a man proud of an accomplishment, and he looked around at the other 10 CIAA football coaches seated on either side of him. "Coaches," he said, "that's our goal line offense, think about that on your way home."

For several years now, Norfolk State's football program has won more games than it lost. It was as simple as that. Fans were happy, players were happy. Then 1992 happened. Norfolk State lost seven games and won three. This was not the plan, and the Spartans alumni grumbled mightily. Norfolk State president Harrison Wilson knew that it was time to bring in someone who could change the Spartans football program. And he went out and got himself a legend.

Cooley achieved his fame and nickname at Mississippi Valley State in the '80s, using an offense he called the "Satellite Express." He threw the ball on almost every occasion and his team's scored lots of points. Now, he's charged with getting Norfolk's offense scoring. Last year, the Spartan offense averaged just 272 yards per game and the defense, meanwhile, gave up 440.

"I don't want to get into comparing last year with what we'll do this year," said Cooley, who has a 68-40-5 record in 11 years of coaching. "But what we're going to do is run Cooley's offense and Cooley's defense. We'll do things like no huddle, no backs, five receivers, according to whatever they (opponents) let us do. "My philosophy is that the offense dictates the defense. We will find a weakness and exploit it."

Cooley said that the reason he is in Norfolk right now is because he believes that this is a program that can win, not only this year, but every year. "The key thing was when I met Dr. Wilson," he said. "When I met him and listened to what he had to say, I knew they wanted to win and they were willing to make the necessary sacrifices. I believe the administration dictates what a coach is going to be, and after getting here and seeing how supportive everyone in the administration has been, I feel like the luckiest coach in the world. With the support I've received from the athletic director (Dick Price) and the president, I can't see anything but success here."

Well, offensively, at least, the Spartans have the makings of a successful unit. Cooley will have two experienced quarterbacks to try his gunslinging offensive style with. Sophomore Aaron Sparrow finished as the No. 3-rated passer in the CIAA last year, and senior Kermit Buggs can throw and he's got some experience. Receiver James Roe had 850 yards on 46 catches and was the CIAA's freshman of the year. Now, on defense, Cooley will probably have to remake the unit completely. There are no returning starters, and last year's unit gave up more than 2,500 yards altogether.

"Look," Cooley said, "I want us to be respectable every year, not an up year one year and a down year the next. I want Norfolk State to always be the team to beat—make room at the top for Norfolk State University. Not that the teams in the past here haven't been traditionally tough and well-coached, but under my direction, make room at the top for Norfolk State." He emphasized this point when he talked to the coaches at the media luncheon. Make room at the top. Maybe he really does know something that the rest of us don't. Maybe he's got an Emmitt Smith hiding in Norfolk somewhere. But on the surface, at least, what the facts tell us is that rebuilding Norfolk State will be a tall order.

"Every time you take a team to another level, people expect you to win a national championship," Cooley said. "But that's my chosen profession. When I was at Mississippi Valley, we hadn't beaten Jackson State in 29 years. We finally beat them two years in a row, and from then on we were supposed to beat them every year." There's a message in that statement. Cooley's not here for the short term.

The Gunslinger, he says, is here to stay.

"If someone questions whether I work hard enough, my question to them is 'Have you done all you could do?' — whether you're an alumnus, a fan or whatever. I love that pressure. If we were to have a game this week, then come to the office and see what a workaholic I am when it comes to football. I love to put on the cowboy boots and cowboy hat, go out on the sidelines and see if you can outsmart me."

— By Langston Wertz Jr.



Archie Cooley

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