

COMMENTARY

Totten has every right to tell NFL where to go

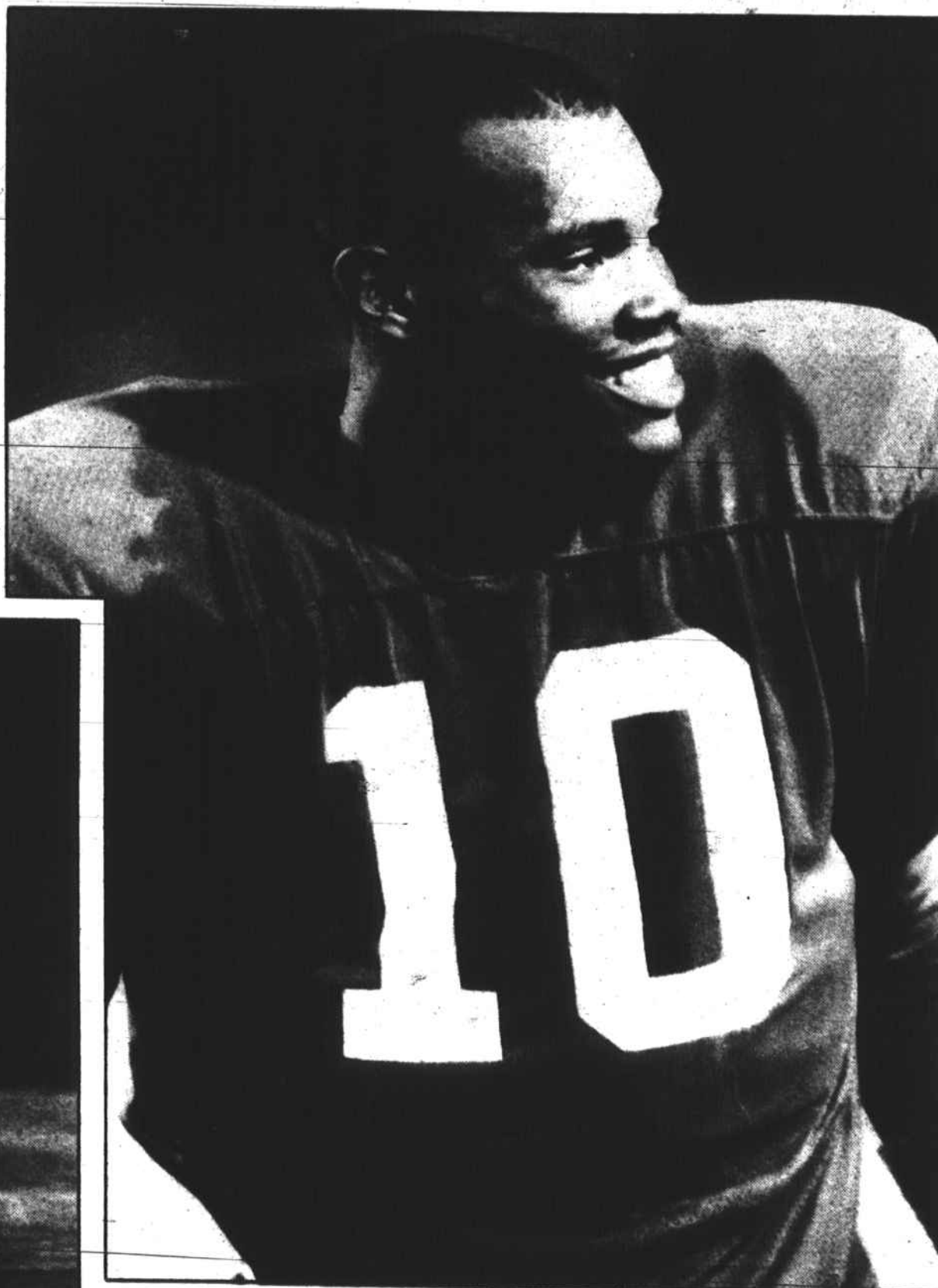
By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Columnist

WHOEVER SAID the more things change the more they remain the same must have had an eye on Draft Day '86 in the National Football League.

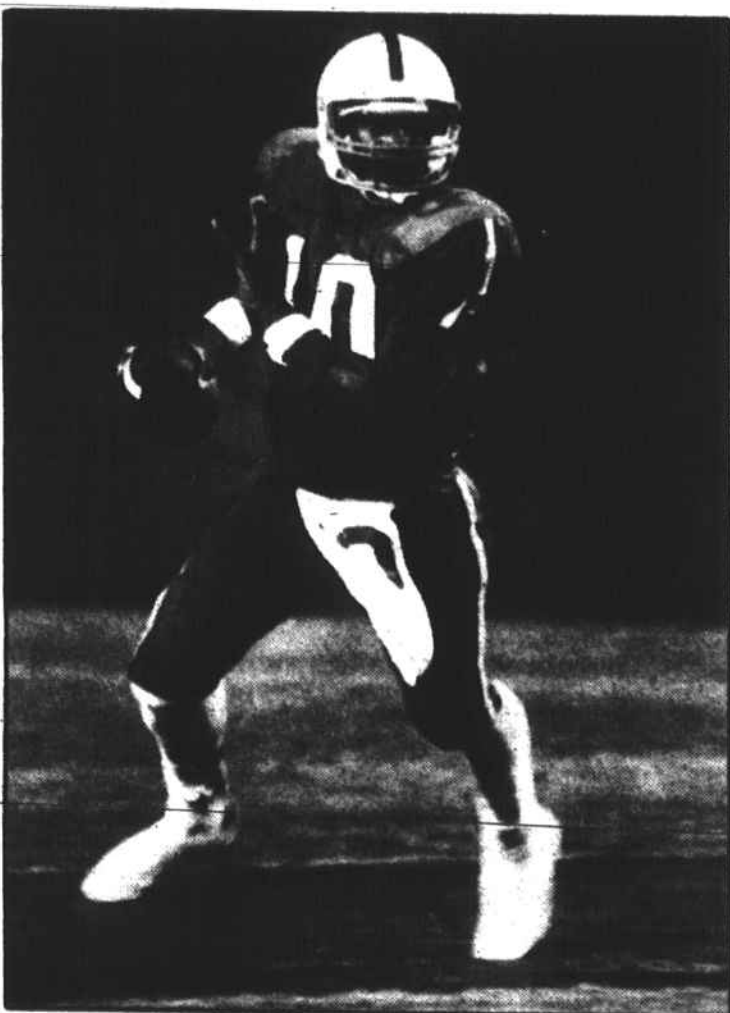
The NFL has had a long history of shunning black quarterbacks. It did it once again this year, bypassing Mississippi Valley's Willie Totten.

It was a crime against nature.

If Totten's records were laid end to end, they would stretch from the Mississippi Valley campus in Itta Bena to Commissioner Pete Rozelle's office in the heart of New York. At 6-2 and 200 pounds, he has the size the pros covet, and he played in a pass-oriented offense.



Willie Totten: That he was not drafted, period, is inexplicable (photos by Mark Gail).



So why did everybody look the other way on draft day?

"It's amazing," said Mississippi Valley Athletic Director Chuck Prophet. "Everybody said he wouldn't be a first-round pick. I could understand that; I thought he'd be a fifth- or sixth-round pick."

That it didn't happen that way is incredible.

"I'm not an authority to say who the NFL should draft," said Valley Coach Archie "Gunslinger" Cooley. "But any time an individual owns all the records, Division I-AA or what, there's something good about him. For him not to be drafted is a slap in the face."

No, coach. It's more like a blow below the belt. But it's nothing new. It seems to always happen to quarterbacks from historically black schools. They are either not drafted, drafted

and put at another position or brought to camp and forgotten.

You won't get any of the NFL's 28 teams to say Totten was shafted. They'll tell you it was purely a coincidence that he's a black quarterback from a historically black school.

If you fall for that, maybe you'd like to buy a bridge for sale out in San Francisco. There's no way there were 333 college football players better than Totten.

No matter what the NFL highbrows say, they still see the quarterback position as the front of the bus, and blacks are not wanted there. For the few who have been allowed up front, it's been a whirlwind ride.

Ask Doug Williams.

Even though he led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers out of obscurity to the brink of the Super Bowl, they saw fit

not to sign him when he became a free agent. And even though everybody and his brother in the NFL seems to be in need of an experienced quarterback, no one has given him a call.

Then there was James Harris. He led the league in passing with the Los Angeles Rams, only to lose his job to hometown hero Pat Haden. And what about Joe Gilliam, who led the Pittsburgh Steelers to a 6-0-1 record and was benched?

The list goes on and on. Now you can add the name of Willie Horace Totten.

"I'm prejudiced in my thinking," said Cooley, "but there has to be something good about him. When things like this happen, it makes you wonder if all the things they've said are true. They say my system is not a great system and my quarterback is not a

great quarterback. Why were we so successful?

"If nothing is right with us, what's wrong with the people we're playing? Again, I'm not an authority. People draft what they need. There's got to be something wrong."

What's wrong is that the people who count still have their heads in the wrong place. They have yet to accept the fact that blacks from small schools can play quarterback in the big time.

"Quarterbacks from small black schools are looked on different," said Cooley. "They can never satisfy the parties. They always find something wrong."

Totten does have flaws. What player coming out of college doesn't? But his are the kind that can be corrected through coaching. If it's perfection they want, why even bother with the draft?

Some scouts knocked Totten because of his throwing motion. They say he throws sidearmed instead of over the top and that, in effect, makes him shorter than 6-2 when he tries to get the ball over the outstretched arms of defensive linemen.

Let's not quibble about style. Y.A. Tittle didn't throw over the top, and he won for the New York Giants. Pat Sullivan would wind up like a baseball pitcher, but he won a Heisman Trophy and was a No. 1 draft pick.

But then, Tittle and Sullivan weren't black.

Results, not style or race, should be the issue.

Some scouts questioned Totten's arm and wondered if he could throw deep.

Totten's arm strength should be above question. He averaged 40 passes a game in his college career, practiced twice a day and never had a sore arm.

As for throwing deep, there was no need for him to do it. Valley's offense was predicated on timing and precision passing, not the bomb.

Besides, other than the Los Angeles Raiders, how many NFL teams throw deep?

That's a cop-out.

It appears that a predraft smear campaign might have hurt Totten. A couple of weeks before the draft, word that Totten had given Cooley some problems started making the rounds. No one knows from where the rumor emanated, and there's no way to determine how much damage it did.

But it's safe to say that being labeled a bad actor didn't help.

"He's not the kind of kid to argue with a coach," said Cooley. "His mannerism is not that. He is not fiery. That

Please See Page 15