

COACHES

New Alabama Coach Houston Markham has little time

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

Simply put, Alabama State football Coach Houston Markham has a long way to go and a short time to get there.

Markham was named the Hornets' coach on July 23, replacing Jim Parker, who was asked to resign in May. That gives him less than two months to put together a staff, meet his squad, install his system and prepare for the Sept. 12 season opener with Southern University.

Those are only a few of the obstacles Markham faces. The Hornets are arguably the worst team in the Southwestern Athletic Conference. They haven't had a winning record since 1981. They are 8-30-1 in the SWAC since becoming a member in 1980, and the NCAA has put them on probation twice in the last three years.

It makes one wonder why Markham, 44 -- seemingly of sound mind -- would leave an established program like Jackson State where he was an assistant for 12 years for a perennial cellar-dweller.

"When I look at Alabama State, I see a vision of a big challenge," said Markham. "I see a big hill. I'm a climber, and I'm determined to climb that hill. They've predicted us to be the worst team in the league this year, and they were probably the worst team in the league last year. I know the challenge is a great one."

Markham, a 1965 Alcorn State graduate, has had hills to climb before. He was head coach -- a rarity for blacks -- in Vicksburg when Mississippi high schools were first integrated in the '60s and compiled a

A Changing Of The Guard

Jackson State, not Grambling, dominates the SWAC

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A changing of the guard has taken place in the Southwestern Athletic Conference in recent years.

No longer is Grambling the conference's dominant football team. Jackson State has usurped that title.

The Tigers have won five SWAC titles -- three outright and two co-championships -- in the decade of the '80s while posting a 37-9 record in conference play and going unbeaten against SWAC opponents twice.

Still, when talk turns to SWAC football, Grambling is the school that leads off the conversation.

"Grambling is kind of like Notre Dame," said Jackson State sports information director Sam Jefferson. "No matter what their record, when people think of Notre Dame, they think of winning. It's the same with Grambling. As long as Eddie (Robinson) is there, it's going to be a legendary school."

The Grambling mystique has been built

66-16-3 in his eight seasons.

"That was a hot potato," said Southern Coach Marino Casem, who coached Markham at Alcorn. "He handled it. He'll be all right at Alabama State."

Markham isn't deluding himself into thinking he won't have another "hot potato" on his hands on and off the field when he gets to Montgomery, Ala.

Besides having to rebuild the football program, Markham will have to win over skeptical alumni who see him as an outsider who got the job over Clemson assistant Woodrow McCorvey and Hornet defensive backfield Coach Jerome Harper, two Alabama State graduates.

"I had that problem at Jackson State," said Markham. "I fought off being an Alcornite in Jackson for 12 years. If you don't beat around the bush, you'll win people over. If you put up a few Ws, people will get behind you."

Markham doesn't profess to know of any miraculous ways to "put up Ws." So he says he'll try to build the Hornets step by step.

"No.1, I want to build for tomorrow," he said. "I don't want to fly by night, win six or seven games this year and then the bottom falls out next year. I want discipline and morale and a good staff. It's going to take a couple of years. I'll take the blows if they'll let me do it my way. I know the wolves are waiting. I'm an outsider, but I'm going to make it work."

One of the main things Markham has to do is make the Hornets' offense more productive. They have not averaged 17 points a game in any of the last six seasons.

While he was Jackson State's offensive coordinator, Markham helped the Tigers install the Wishbone in the late '70s. The Tigers went on to become the No.1 rushing team in NCAA Division I-AA for the next several years.

But Markham says he won't necessarily bring a run-oriented offense with him to Alabama State, even though the Hornets have in Brad Baxter one of the top running backs in the nation.

Baxter, the SWAC offensive player of the year, rushed for 1,705 yards and scored 13 touchdowns.

"I like a wide open, multiple offense ... throw the ball around," said Markham.

"But you have to run the ball. What I envision is balance. But you have to have the personnel. I know you have to get the ball to a guy like Baxter."

This is Markham's first head coaching job on the college level. He says he has been preparing for it since his sophomore year at Alcorn. But he was still surprised when it came along.

"After a while, I just put becoming a head coach out of my mind," he said. "I was comfortable. Not being a person with a big ego, I was happy being an assistant. It caught me off guard when Alabama State approached me. Some other positions had been open, but I didn't apply. I didn't want a job where I had to politic to get it. The ball got rolling and it kept rolling. They convinced me I am the person they wanted."

Jackson State Coach W.C. Gorden is convinced Markham is the right man for Alabama State. He should know. He has known Markham since day one of his

that are in I-AA.

Even more noteworthy is the fact that Jackson State is among the I-AA attendance leaders year in and year out.

"People who really watch football realize we're the team of the '80s in the SWAC," said Coach W.C. Gorden. "We've accomplished quite a bit as a football power. It doesn't bother me that we are not recognized to the same degree as Grambling. Our motivation comes from within."

Casem qualifies as something of an expert on how and why Jackson State's stock has risen. He was the Tigers' No.1 intrastate rival for more than 20 years as coach at Alcorn.

"Jackson's a helluva place to recruit," he said. "It's the hub of a state that's a rural state. Everything that's happening in Mississippi is happening in Jackson. Mississippi has a lot of outstanding black talent in every role. Jackson is like a magnet for that talent. They pull in more good talent by accident than a lot can get on purpose."

Attracting talent is only half the battle.



Markham: "A vision of a big challenge" at Alabama State.

coaching career.

The two first met when Markham was at Alcorn and doing his student teaching at Eva Gordon High in Magnolia, Miss., where Gordon was head coach. When Markham graduated, Gordon hired him as his offensive line coach.

"His strongest point is his dedication to working," said Gordon. "He can come to work at 7 a.m. and stay until 1 a.m. or 2 a.m., long after everybody else is gone. I have no doubt he will be successful. He has the intelligence, dedication and discipline to do so."

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Jackson State also knows how to develop that talent. Recent NFL drafts bear that out. In an era when athletes from black schools are a rarity in the draft, Jackson State still makes its presence felt.

The Buffalo Bills chose Chris Burkett on the second round in 1985 and selected defensive end Leon Seals on the fourth round this year. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers chose linebacker Jackie Walker on the second round in 1986.

"We are still able to get five or six blue-chippers who have kept our program competitive," said Gorden.

Black coaches seldom if ever are credited with being superior when it comes to teaching fundamentals and plotting strategy. But given Jackson State's success, its staff must be doing something right.

"The strength of our team is the coaching staff," said Gorden. "We're proving that with the guys who have been hired away from us and who have been getting inquiries."