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Furman athletics

Walking the talk

Louis Ivory, Division I-AA's top offensive player, blends confidence, talent and toughness into an explosive, record-setting package.

By Vince Moore

Louis Ivory may be a lot of things, but quietly confident isn't one of them.

Confident, yes. But he's still working on the quiet part.

Before the 2000 football season began, the Furman running back stated publicly that he and his offensive line had a goal of 1,800 rushing yards, even though it was an incredibly optimistic figure.

When Furman had looked anything but sharp in the weeks leading up to its game with top-ranked Georgia Southern in November, Ivory predicted that the Eagles would see what kind of team the Paladins could be when they put everything together.

And in his greatest display of confidence, Ivory offered readers of *The Greenville News* a preview of the speech he planned to give after receiving the Walter Payton Award as the top offensive football player in NCAA Division I-AA. This came a full day before the announcement was made and Ivory knew he was the winner.

Tim Sorrells, Furman's offensive coordinator, just shakes his head when reminded of Ivory's bold predictions. "We see those things in the paper and ask, 'Louis, what in the world were you thinking?'" Sorrells says. "But he can't seem to help it."

"The reporters kind of bait me — and sometimes I take the bait a little too much — but you have to be confident about what you do," says Ivory, displaying a smile that generates as much favorable publicity as his running ability. "You hope those predictions come true, but I'm usually just trying to have some fun."

Of course, Ivory didn't have to apologize for any of his pronouncements. **The 1,800 yards turned out to be a modest prediction, as he gained a spectacular 2,079 yards during the regular season and became the first player in Southern Conference history to break the 2,000 mark.**

He also did his part in Furman's thoroughly dominating 45-10 victory over Georgia Southern, the eventual national champion, by rushing for a school-record 301 yards and three touchdowns.

And he did indeed go to New York, with his parents and Paladin head coach Bobby

Johnson, and win the Walter Payton Award — which was the only time all year that he wasn't so sure of his step.

"I was pretty nervous when my name was called," he says. "The carpet was kind of slick and I had on fairly new shoes and there were steps leading up to the podium. So I said to myself, 'OK, there's a lot of people here, so please don't trip on your way up there.'"

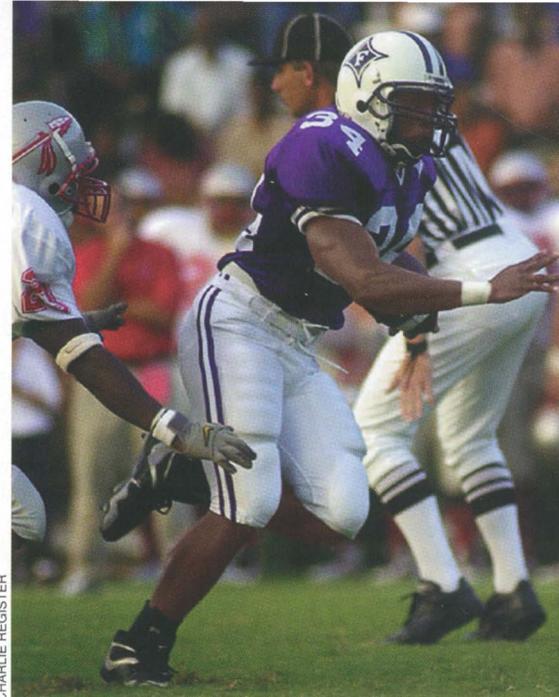
But Ivory didn't fall down, and from all reports his acceptance speech was in the same class as his 2000 season, which is to say it was sublime. **Furman has had some great running backs — Stanford Jennings, Robbie Gardner and Carl Tremble come to mind — but none came close to the kind of season Ivory had last fall.**

His rushing total easily surpassed Tremble's single-season record of 1,555. He had five games over 200 yards and scored 16 touchdowns, five of which covered 50 or more yards. And he carried the ball a Herculean 286 times for an average of 7.3 yards per carry. His performance was all the more impressive considering that Furman's passing game didn't give opposing defenses much cause for concern and they were able to focus on stopping the run.

Ivory's banner year propelled the Paladins to a 9-2 record, a No. 4 final regular-season ranking and a home game against Hofstra in the first round of the Division I-AA playoffs. Although Furman's season ended with a 31-24 loss to the Pride (despite Ivory's 172 yards and two touchdowns), it did nothing to detract from his accomplishments.

"What Louis did was incredible," says quarterback coach Bobby Lamb. "We've had some great, great backs here, but none of them were able to put together that kind of season."

Lamb and his fellow coaches wish they could say they knew all along that Ivory had a 2,000-yard season in him and that three years ago they had waged a strategic recruiting battle for his services, but it wouldn't be true. In fact, Ivory serves as proof that the recruiting process owes as much to chance as to science.



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Although he enjoyed a successful four years as a fullback at Peach County High School in Fort Valley, Ga., few colleges believed he could play at the next level. Because of his size (5-9, 190 pounds), Division I-A schools weren't interested. Some I-AA programs looked, but not too seriously. Carson-Newman and a couple of other Division II schools offered scholarships, but that was it — except for Furman.

Clay Hendrix, Furman's offensive line coach who is responsible for recruiting in south central Georgia, got involved when Ivory's coach, Rodney Walker, called and suggested that he look at his fullback. Hendrix liked what he saw on film and had a good feeling about Ivory's desire. But there was still the question of size.

"You couldn't help but like him, especially when he gave you that smile," Hendrix says. "But you also couldn't help but wish he was a little bigger."

Walker was Ivory's biggest fan, though, and the Furman staff was finally sold when Walker said they would be making the greatest mistake of their professional lives if they didn't sign Ivory. Hendrix says he's accustomed to high school coaches overstating a player's case, but this was no ordinary sales pitch.

"I've coached high school football for 33 years and never had another player like Louis Ivory," says Walker, who has sent players to major colleges and to the National Football League. "He has the work habits a coach dreams of. He had a huge impact on how we played, and I knew he would have the same impact on a college team."

Walker was willing to share his message with the world, but only Furman listened. "I told the coaches to leave their tape measures and their scales at home



Louis Ivory with the men who helped him to his outstanding season. From left, front row: tackle Josh Moore, center Chris Stewart and tackle Donnie Littlejohn. Second row: guard Trevor Kruger, guard Marty Priore, tight end Trent Sansbury. Back: fullback Derek Russell.

when they came to look at Louis, because there was no way they could measure what's inside of him," he says. "To Furman's credit, they were the only school that did."

And soon after Ivory reported to the Furman campus in August of 1998, the Paladin coaches realized that he was no ordinary player.

"After the first two or three days in pads, you could tell that he was something special," Sorrells says. "It was like when Stanford Jennings joined the team when I was playing and we all went, 'Whoa, this guy is pretty good.' It was the same feeling."

Ivory was good enough to start at fullback as a freshman. He even rushed for 161 yards and two touchdowns against South Carolina State in the season's second game, but he sprained an ankle the next week and was never fully healthy again. He started just two more games and ended the year with 406 yards rushing.

But the coaches had seen enough.

"Louis was obviously our best runner and we knew he was capable of producing the big play," Sorrells says. "But we also knew we couldn't get him involved enough in the offense from the fullback position."

So they moved him to tailback for his sophomore season, and he blossomed in a way that nobody, including Rodney Walker, could have envisioned, rushing for 1,519 yards and 14 touchdowns. Combine those figures with Ivory's 2000 statistics and you have an average of 163.5 yards per game

for the last two seasons. In 19 of his last 24 games, he has rushed for at least 100 yards. His 4,176 career yards put him just 570 behind Tremble's school record which, barring injury, he is certain to obliterate.

The numbers are pretty impressive for a guy who isn't particularly big and supposedly isn't exceptionally fast. So how does he do it? It doesn't hurt that he has spent two years behind an outstanding offensive line, but there are other factors.

"Louis has tremendous balance, the best balance of any running back I've seen," Lamb says. "It sets him apart. He gets in the hole and gets hit, then slides off and keeps going."

Hendrix adds, "Anybody can run through a big hole, but Louis can make something when there's nothing there. He has a toughness you don't see in many tailbacks. I think playing fullback all those years helped him develop a different mentality."

Sorrells agrees, but emphasizes Ivory's work ethic. "He just loves to play, loves to practice," he says. "Our tailbacks take a beating on Saturdays, and they're usually not ready to go again right away. We'll ask Louis if he wants to take a Monday off and rest and he'll say no, he wants to practice."

Ivory has his own ideas. His main thought, he says, is always to move forward. "I'm focusing on one thing, and that is getting up field," he says. "I don't do a lot of east and west running."

Nor is he one for complacency. **"The biggest thing that drives me is that I'm afraid people will think I've got the big head," he says. "I don't want it ever to be said that, well, he had some success last year and now he's slacked off and isn't working as hard. That's what keeps me going. I'm never satisfied."**

Finally, Ivory thinks he is faster than people think. "They say I'm fast for a fullback but not a tailback," he says with a smile. "But I'm the third fastest guy on the team. That ought to count for something."

So what can a player who rushes for 2,000-plus yards, is named All-America and is honored as Division I-AA's Player of the Year do for an encore? Ivory isn't sure, but he can't wait to find out.

"My No. 1 goal is to help the team win a national championship," he says. "Secondly, I'd like to rush for at least 1,800 yards. I'm not going to say I can reach 2,000 again, because I need to keep my goals realistic." Then he smiles. "But, you know, I think 2,000 yards might really be more realistic than it was last year. We lose only one offensive lineman [Josh Moore], and those guys up front are the key to my success. So let's say our goal is 1,800-2,000 yards, and we'll take anything in between."

Like we said, he's still working on the quiet part.