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10/12/1983 - Linebackers And Success

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Panther Sports News

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHARLESTON, IL--There's a direct correlation between Eastern Illinois University's recent football success and its assembly-line production of talented middle linebackers.

The current No. 1 inside linebacker, Tyrone Covington (Chicago-Morgan Park), has more than filled the vacated shoes of his most immediate predecessors, Alonzo Lee and Bill Mines.

A 5-11, 210 junior, Covington, who also calls defensive signals, will likely finish the '83 season as an all-conference choice and leading tackler for one of the nation's best defenses.

This group will be tested Saturday (October 15) when Northern Iowa's explosive pass oriented outfit comes to town for a 1:30 kickoff at O'Brien Stadium. It also marks the return of Darrell Mudra who coached Covington and Co. the past few years.

However, Covington attaches no special significance to Mudra's return other than "they're trying to beat us, and we're trying to beat them. When we play up there in the UNI-Dome we seem to be jinxed so we all remember that and feel we should beat'em here. If we were up there again, it might be a different feeling."

In Covington's case, it's back into the lineup after missing the last game and half with an elbow and arm injury. He'll also likely regain his status as the team's top tackler. He's been in on 48 with three QB sacks, two tackles for loss and a pass interception.

Covington's duties also include calling defensive signals, a job that might appear difficult but one he says is not that taxing. "That part is really simple . . . once you practice it everyday you get a feel for it and can quickly recognize what the opponent will do when he comes out of the huddle.

"Because of Robert Williams's (free safety) position on the field, he sometimes sees it before me and says something so a lot of people are talking out there . . . you just expect to make adjustments when necessary."

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Still, calling defensive signals for a I-AA playoff challenging team is a long way from Chicago's inner city Morgan Park High School where Covington was a two way performer, graduating in 1981.

"When I played we only won about a game a year . . . we were usually destroyed . . . just blown out," he says. Consequently college recruiters didn't knock down his door.

Eastern was the only team to recruit him, and Covington realizes his team's performance affected his notice. "My coach thought I could play Big Ten. But I'm not sorry. Eastern's been good for me."

By his own admission, though, the transformation from high school to college was anything but easy. "When I got here I started real slow . . . out of shape . . . not used to working. I thought it would be like high school . . . but it sure wasn't."

However by midseason of his frosh year he had "locked up the second team spot behind Mines" and that made a prominent impression upon his work habits.

"Fergy (Dave Fergurson) and I both had been behind Mines but they moved him outside so once I was legitimately a second teamer I started working a lot harder. The coaches gradually started noticing . . . one thing led to another and I played more."

Covington broke into the starting lineup midway through last season when the Panthers employed a four linebacker scheme, and finished the year with 54 tackles. Against Jackson State in the I-AA playoffs, he led with 11 tackles.

Quickness, says Covington, is the bottom line for a linebacker. "Nothing compares to quickness . . . especially when you're covering a 4.5 receiver man-to-man.

"I'm about 4.64 in the 40 but I'd rather improve my quickness than speed. I can do that by running short sprints, one-on-one drills . . . things that make the feet quicker while at the same time losing some excess weight."

While Covington is satisfied with his technique, he also admits the better it becomes the quicker he can get to where the play develops.

And 'getting to the play' is the name of the game for the Panther defense. "Overall our personnel is extremely tough. You take 11 people . . . 11 tough people . . . get coached tough, then let'em do the rest."