

Andrews returns to Falcons' backfield

By ED SHEARER
AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA—He isn't as good as he once was and probably never will be, but he's competing again in the NFL. Even that is quite an accomplishment for William Andrews of the Atlanta Falcons.

Andrews had established himself as one of the NFL's top running backs during the first five years of his career, twice topping the 2,000 mark in combined rushing and receiving yardage.

He hasn't played a down in a regular-season NFL game since 1983, having missed the last two years after severely injuring his left knee in practice on Aug. 21, 1984.

Andrews underwent surgery to correct cartilage and ligament damage.

There was a fear that his peroneal nerve might have been severed or torn, either of which would have ended his career.

Dr. John Garrett, the team's orthopedic surgeon, said after performing the operation: "We are very happy to report that the nerve is in continuity. It is bruised, but the ends are quite together, which makes us quite optimistic."

The rehabilitation was a slow process. It was known he would miss one season, then it stretched to two.

Andrews did get back to practice during the last month of the 1985 campaign, and then reported to training camp this year anxious to play again.

He has seen spot duty in three preseason games, rushing for 93 yards on 24 carries.

He entered the final week of training camp working at a new position—H back, primarily a blocker in Atlanta's offensive system.

Blocking isn't new to Andrews. He made his mark as a blocker during his college career at Auburn.

"I'll do whatever it takes to help the team," Andrews said of the move. "I don't mind if it's running back or H back or whatever."

Coach Dan Henning said he wanted Andrews to play H back to enhance his value to the team. It also would enhance the 30-year-old five-time Pro Bowl performer's chances of considerable playing time.

"William is still not where he was two years ago at the end of the season," Henning said.

"However, he is a long way from where he was six weeks ago when we

began training camp," Henning said.

"He has made consistent progress and seems to get a little better and more instinctive each day."

The NFL's leading rusher last year, Gerald Riggs, appeared to have the running back slot sewed up, but Riggs has been in a contract dispute and hasn't reported to camp.

The starting job thus will go to Cliff Austin, who has a career total of 28 carries for 133 yards during his rookie year with the New Orleans Saints and the last two years with the Falcons.

"I told him I have no problem with that," Andrews said after Henning told him Austin would start.

His totals for five years include 5,772 yards rushing on 1,263 attempts and 2,610 yards on 271 pass receptions.

"I feel like I'm making progress,"

Andrews said. "A lot of the things I've had to re-learn, but now I'm starting to do things again without thinking."

Andrews said the move to H back doesn't mean he'll forget what the running back has to do.

"I'm looking at it basically as a move to do whatever I can to help the team."

He anticipates no problem adjusting to the new position, saying he's seen enough of it on film when he's studied the things he has to do as a runner.

One problem Andrews doesn't face is one of financial security, even if his comeback attempt fails.

One month before the practice field injury, Andrews signed an insured contract worth \$8 million — about \$200,000 annually for 42 years.

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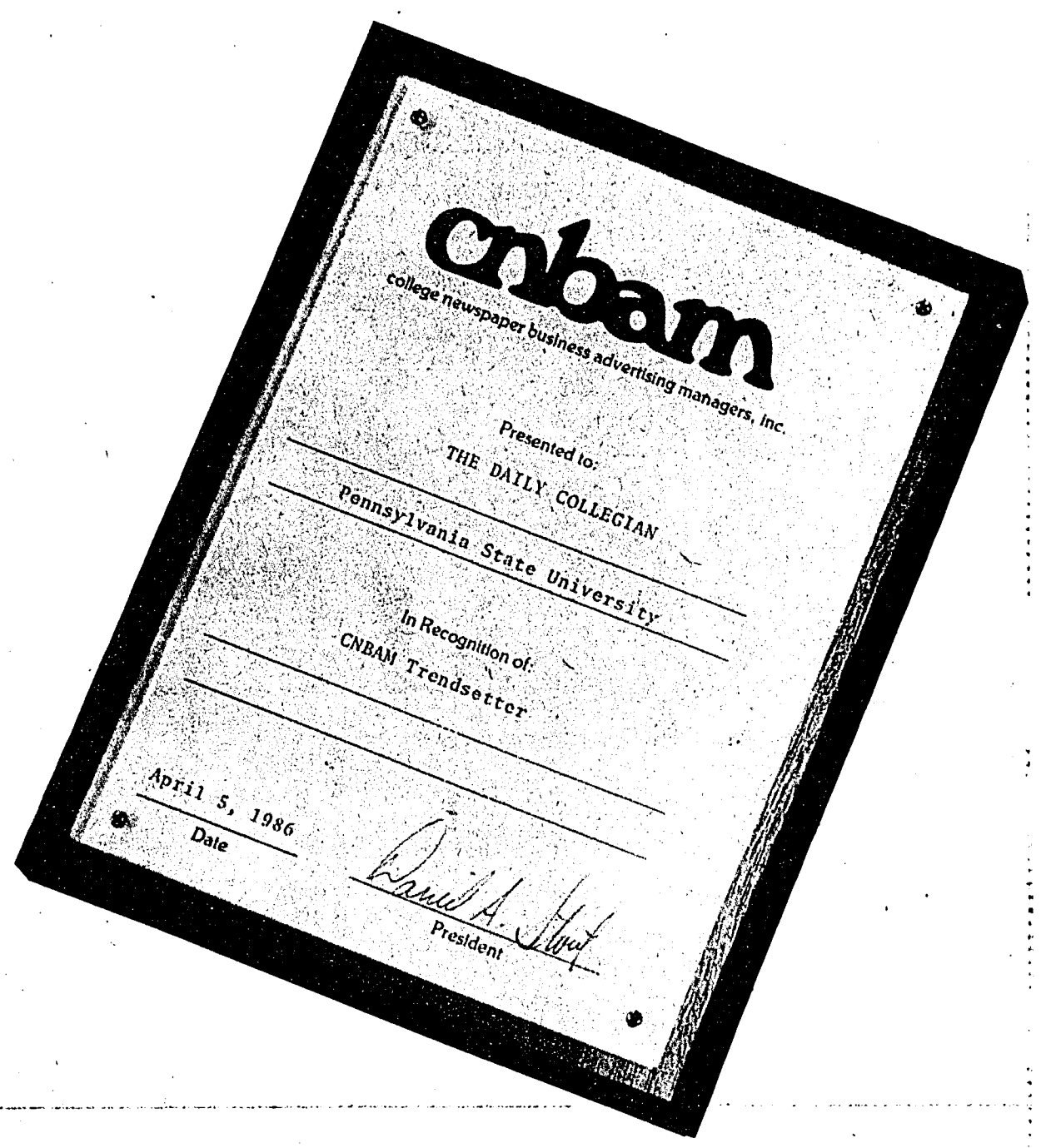
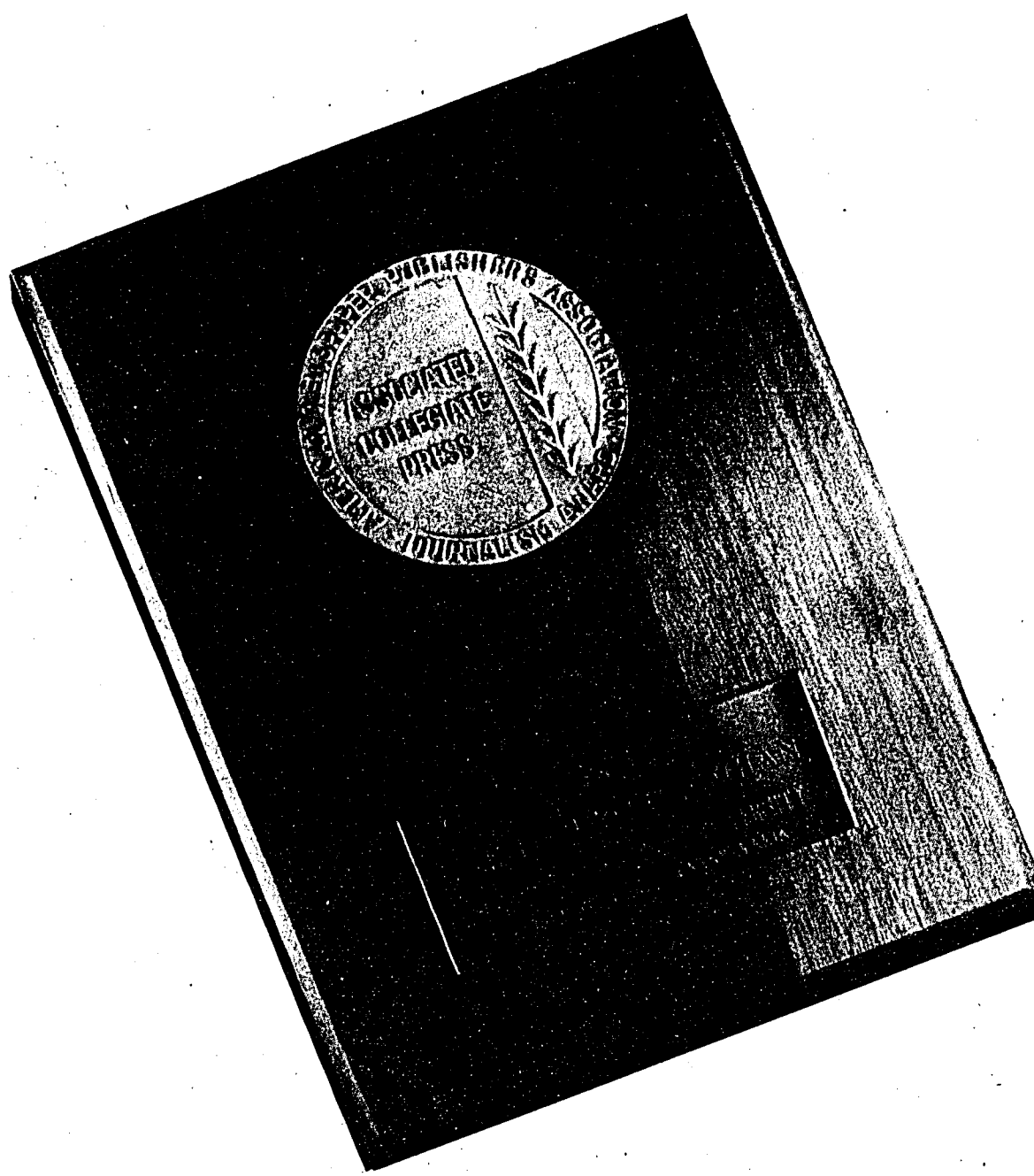
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