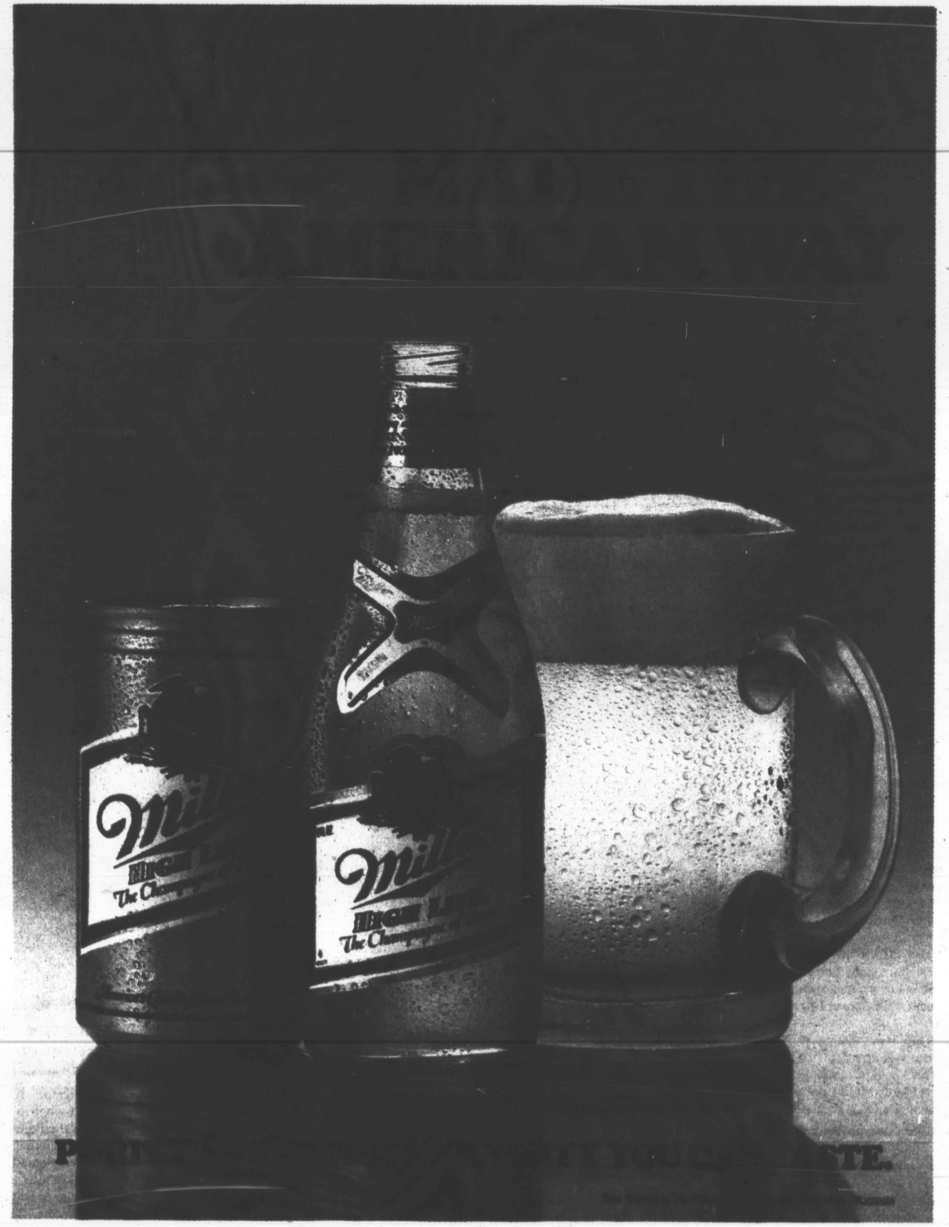


SIAC TOURNAMENT

Bullish Bulldogs surge to '86 tournament title

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

BEN JOBE'S Alabama A&M Bulldogs had traveled a desert full of mirages in recent seasons, seeing only visions of a Southern Intercollegiate Conference basketball championship.

Until this year.

The visions became reality in '86 as the top-seeded Bulldogs (20-7 during the regular season) beat upset-minded Morris Brown 85-71 in the SIAC finals in Atlanta.

A&M won three games by an average margin of 14 points in the tournament, delighting its fourth-year coach.

"It was just a matter of perseverance," Jobe said. "Our youngsters were pretty tired, but they really wanted it. It was our third time here (in the tournament since Joe's hiring), and it's the first time we've finished first in the regular season and won the tournament."

Jobe said he especially hated to face the seventh-seeded Wolverines in the finals. The Bulldogs had already defeated Morris Brown twice during the season, he said, and it's hard to beat a team three times. "However, our kids did an excellent job," he said. "I'm so excited that I don't know what to do."

His team knew what to do.

In the semis against defending champ Albany State, the Bulldogs notched a 97-88 decision by taking full control of the game in the second half.

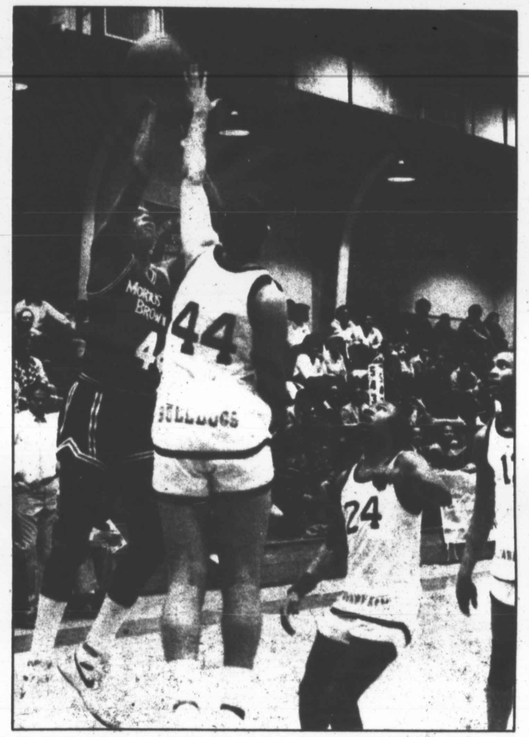
Wesley Brackett, A&M's point guard extraordinaire and the hands-down tournament MVP, personally led the assault as he scorched the Rams for 36 points.

Brackett averaged 28.3 points and 6.3 assists in three games, prompting Jobe to search for the right adjectives.

"He's probably the best point guard I've ever had," the coach said. "I usually don't let my point guards shoot as much, but he's one of our top scorers. He can run the show, and he can definitely score. You know, Brackett should be an off guard, but he's the best point guard and off guard we have, so I elected to have him handle the point position."

A&M entered the tournament with one of the top-scoring teams in Division II, burning opponents for 89.1 points a game during the regular season.

But the Bulldogs won the title with top scorer Donald Reedus sitting on the bench nursing an aggravated fractured foot. Reedus, a senior forward, hadn't been at full strength since early January.



Morris Brown's Jeff Brown gave it his all -- but it wasn't quite enough (photo by Craig Greenlee).

He reinjured his foot against the Rams and gleefully watched his teammates take the championship without him.

Reedus had missed just two games after the January injury and perhaps set the tone for the Bulldogs' championship drive by playing in pain. He simply refused to stay out of the lineup until the tourney's finale.

Fortunately for A&M, Reedus, who averaged 24 points in the tourney before the injury, was expected to be ready by the first round of the Division II playoffs, when the Bulldogs faced Tampa.

As for defense, the Bulldogs handcuffed MBC's Jerome Reeves and Chamberlain Campbell (last year's tournament MVP), though sophomore guard Macklin Bradford tried to take up the slack with outside jump shots and drives to the basket.

Still, with seven minutes left in the half, Morris Brown's LeVoyd Wardlow and Todd Harmon took turns slowing Brackett and pace of the game down and helping the Wolverines tie the game at 38 at the half.

The Bulldogs took command once more in the second half as Brackett, a virtual one-man press breaker, found seams in MBC's defense and dished off underneath for easy baskets.

The Bulldogs led 62-50 with 11:30 remaining, but the Wolverines weren't dead just yet.

Over the next five minutes, center Jeff Brown (24 points, 12.3 rebounds in the tournament) became a scoring machine, driving the baseline and tipping in missed shots to keep his team in the game.

Teammate Jeff Lewis, a guard, chipped in with driving jumpers in traffic, and suddenly MBC trailed only 62-60 with 6:25 left to play.

But there Brackett was again, penetrating for a pull-up jumper, drawing a foul and completing the three-point play that rang the death knell for Morris Brown.

Merritt could only shake his head afterward and marvel at the Bulldogs' shooting.

"I was sure they wouldn't continue to shoot as well as they did," he said. "With every defense we used against them, they put up 30-footers and they went in. Then they started taking us inside because they hit so well from the outside that we had to come out, and we made a couple of key mistakes. With the score 64-62, we made a couple of silly fouls, and we're down by seven. We just didn't have enough steam to keep coming back like that."

There is a tradition of low seeds toppling heavyweights in the SIAC Tournament, as Morris Brown apparently knows. Against Clark, the tourney's second seed, the Wolverines won 65-64 as Lewis hit an unthinkable jumper with four seconds left. Clark had a last-second chance to win the game but Ernest Lee (Division II's leading scorer at 30.3) saw his 17-foot jumper go in and out as the buzzer sounded.

MBC continued to march in the semis, throttling Morehouse in overtime 77-73 on the strength of stiff defense against the Maroon Tigers' Marcus Lee (the No. 2 scorer in Division II). However, Lee's namesake, Marcus White, did his part for Morehouse, sending the game into overtime with a tip-in.

Then things got ugly.

After the buzzer sounded, ending regulation play, the stands emptied, chairs were hurled, fists flew and pandemonium broke loose.

Merritt and Morehouse Coach Arthur McAfee wisely removed their squads from the scene while police and security people restored order. After a 45-minute delay, the overtime finally started.

After the finals, Brown, a Wolverine senior, was obviously distraught. He had led the drive to the title game, and a chance to cap a 12-18 with a fairytale finish. "Somehow, we just let up a little bit," he said. "We tried to keep our composure, but it just wasn't there."

Though Brown has been among the top five in Division II rebounding all season, he said his senior year has been tough at times. "Every game throughout the season, I had three or four guys around me, so it's kind of

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