CIAA CLASH

Eagles rule Southern Division with big win over Rams

By RANDY PETTITT
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Derrick Leak peered around the large black cloth that separated the dressing area and the hardwood floor of Memorial Coliseum in Winston-Salem, N.C., anxiously awaiting the end of the women's game between North Carolina Central and Winston-Salem State.

He then stole a glance at a large, white and mud-stained tractor-trailer rig belonging to the *Black Entertainment Network*. Parked right next door to the North Carolina Central locker room, Leak noticed the various cables and wires stemming from inside the massive remote production facility.

"Man, this is the big one," mumbled the 6-6 sophomore, turning to see a familiar face in teammate Cleo Hill.

Hill smiled back, "Yep, it sure is."

They exchanged fives and were suddenly deluged by the rest of their companions from the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association school in Durham, N.C. Collapsing in a circle, someone in the middle of the heap of bodies began to shout.

"This is our house!"

The others were quick to join the chorus.

"Who's house is this," asked the voice, referring to the house of basketball dynasty built by the legendary head coach of the Rams, Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines.

"Our house. North Carolina Central rules the South," they said, alluding to their perfect 7-0 mark in the Southern Division of the CIAA. On the heels of fourteen straight wins, including a 57-56 squeaker over powerhouse Norfolk State in the early days of December, the Eagles were flying as high as a kite lost in a gusty March wind.

A lot of credit is due to head coach, Michael Bernard, who has a new worry these days.

"We need a bigger gym," Bernard joked.

He had a point. If the Eagles keep this up, Bernard may have to consider renting nearby Raleigh Coliseum. Less than three years after taking over a program that had netted just one winning season since the early 1970's, Bernard has watched his team make the difficult climb from the CIAA cellar to the very top of Division II basketball.

The secret of his success is really no secret at all. In fact, basic fundamentals are trademarks of his team.

"We feel you're better off leaving complexity out of the game," he said. "Do what you do well and you can play like we're playing now.

"I like it. We're beating teams honestly -- with plain old hard work on defense and good rebounding. We're sounder than a lot of teams."

His cure for an ailing program was simple, too -- attitude adjustment.

He ran off some of the more negative upperclassmen and put walk-ons in their place. It worked, as his first team won 14 games.

"That was a lot of wins for this school at the time," said Bernard. "But it wasn't great. I thought the main thing we had to do was make an attitude adjustment. That takes a winning product on the court, though.

When the Eagles finally showed some signs of sustained life last year, the swing to positive attitudes around campus perhaps turned the corner.

Bernard refers to the WSSU-Central matchup of a year ago in Durham. The McDougald gym was nearly bursting at the seams and they've been playing to sell-out crowds ever since.

En route to their hallowed matchup with the Rams, the Eagles were playing the best team defense in the CIAA, allowing their foes to shoot just under 40% from the floor.

"We won't overpower anyone," said Bernard. "But if we play our game, then we can win."

In the ever watchful eyes of the CIAA, the doubters contended Central's luck would run out when they faced the Rams. But never mind those who refused to believe in this youthful bunch -- they had relied on self-faith to carry them this far.

On the other side of the dressing area stood a wincing Matthew McMillan of WSSU. McMillan, who looks somewhat like a miniature version of the Washington Bullets' Manute Bol, shrugged off the Eagle chants and walked toward the curtain where the girls game had ended. The Lady Rams had beaten Central's Lady Eagles, 66-61. But it was not big news, as Central had lost all but two of their 16 outings.

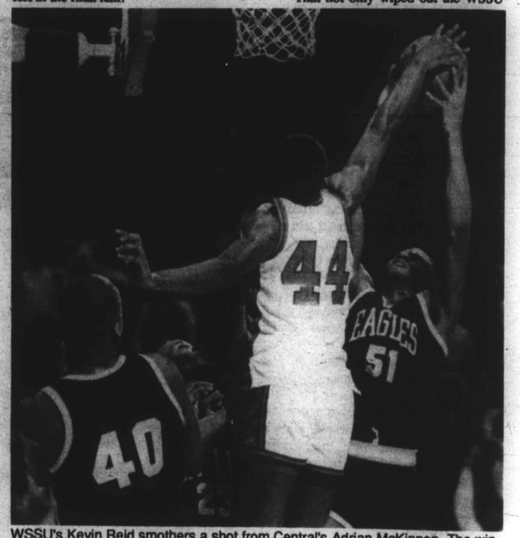
The real attraction of the evening was about to begin.

What normally would amount to routine business in the Southern Division, was no longer just a CIAA tune-up for Gaines and his pre-season favorite Rams. One could hardly call a matchup with the number one team in all of NCAA Division II basketball just another date on the calendar.

For such a wonderful matchup, though, the deliberately played game ended in typical CIAA fashion -- bizarre.

The first half was pretty much a scoring duel between Hill and WSSU's Mike Lesane. Hill scored 10 of his 17 points before intermission, including a pair of three-pointers. Lesane, a surprising junior forward who probably had his best offensive game in a Ram uniform, tossed in 11 of his 18 points at the break, which had the Eagles holding a 21-20 edge.

With each possession becoming more and more deliberate, the two inter-state rivals stood knotted up at 44-44 when a television timeout was called with 4:08 left in the final half.



WSSU's Kevin Reid smothers a shot from Central's Adrian McKinnon. The winning layup by Derrick Leak was one of the few times NCCU could get it inside (photo by Joe Daniels).

Gaines, who had sat with his arms folded throughout most of the defensive affair, was suddenly a changed man. He smartly saved his enthusiastic advice for when the Rams needed it the most. Down the sidelines a short way, Bernard had hardly sat down a single moment and was frantically waving his arms to set up his team's offense.

Guard Wayne Howell tried to whip a pass inside to Leak, but WSSU's sophomore rebounding sensation, Kevin Reid, stepped in front of the ill-timed delivery and raced down the floor for an easy layup and a 46-44 WSSU lead. Howell missed a three-pointer on the next trip down and Ram center Gary Cromartie was fouled on the rebound. Cromartie hit the first shot, but the second took an Eagle bounce out of the cylinder.

Again it was WSSU making the big defensive play, when Mike Lesane stole the ball and passed it down court to McMillan for an apparent layup. But on the play, the Rams lost the ball coming upcourt and it careened off the leg of referee Ramon Kendall. Lesane scooped it up and tossed the pass over to McMillan for the layup. Coming from the far sideline, veteran official John Russell waived the basket off saying the ball hit Kendall while he was out of bounds.

That not only wiped out the WSSU basket, it gave the ball and the momentum back to the Eagles.

Hill was fouled on Central's reprieve, but he missed the one-and-one and the Rams breathed a sigh of relief when Reid gathered the miss and slung a pass to McMillan for a one-hand dunk to put WSSU up 48-45 with 1:36 left. The Eagles answered with a pair of free throws and trailed 48-47 when their magic wand seemed to cast a spell upon the steady Rams.

Lesane impatiently drove to the basket with 40 seconds left and tossed in a soft jumper with his right hand. On the way down though, he ran into the firmly-planted feet of Leak and the two thudded to the floor. Lesane stretched out on the floor and grinned in disbelief when Kendall whistled the charge, negating the basket and possession of the ball.

The Eagles' hypnosis of the Rams continued as they patiently distributed the ball around the perimeter, just waiting

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