SWAC

Jaguars roll to third straight SWAC title

All season long, Southern University was favored to add another SWAC Tournament championship to its trophy case. Top seeded teams aren't ordained to win it all.

But SU prevailed, rocking Grambling 78-62 in the finals at Baton Rouge, La.

The victory gave Southern an automatic berth to the NCAA Tournament, the school's third in four years.

Jags' head coach Ben Jobe never felt comfortable as the favorite. "There was a lot of pressure on us the last few weeks (of the season)," Jobe admitted. "Sometimes it's better to be the team at the bottom. I play the underdog role better than I do being the top guy."

Last season, Southern was felt to be no better than sixth in the conference. No pressure there. They were loose for the tourney I and blasted Grambling 105-55 in Jackson, Miss.

"Last year the tournament was a holiday for us because no one expected us to be in the top two," he added. "This time, there was a lot more pressure."

While Jobe felt the pressure, his team never let it show. Early on, it became apparent that the title belonged to SU. The question was What would the margin of victory be?

SU was on its home court, the F.G. Clark Activity Center, where they've won 24 straight, including 14 games this season. The Jaguars' last home loss was in 1986.

The home team had to be pumped up, playing before a capacity crowd of more than 7,500. Thumping sounds from the Spike Lee movie "School Daze" rocked the house as fans boogeyed to "Da Butt."

SU rocked Grambling on the court from the start. They trailed early 9-6, then reeled off 15 unanswered points that settled the matter for the evening. The Tigers' never recovered from the on-slaught.

Senior forward Kevin Florent took charge, totaling 29 points and 17 rebounds (21 of those came in the first half). Florent, alias "the Lutcher Leaper" took his game inside the paint where he administered some serious damage to Grambling's championship hopes.

The high-flying dunkster put on a masterful performance inside, forsaking his vastly improved outside shooting game. "Inside was working well," Florent said, "so I stayed there and it worked out well."

While Florent was nearly unstoppable down low, senior point guard Avery Johnson was busy weaving his Merlin magic with the roundball. Johnson is known as "Mr. Assist." He ran Jobe's offense like a finely tuned engine with,10 points,11 assists and 6 steals. For the second consecutive year, Johnson was named Tournament MVP.

The accolades are gratifying for Johnson, who leads the nation in assists at 13.5 a game. However, he stressed that singular awards are not his top priority. "I don't get too high on individual awards," Johnson said in a post-game interview. "The team winning is what counts. They could give the MVP Award to our trainer and it wouldn't bother me."

The ultimate difference in the game's outcome was SU's ability to rule the glass and their pressure cooker full court press. The Jags forced 25 Tiger turnovers. They outboarded GSU 44-36.

"They killed us on on the boards," said a somber Bob Hopkins, Grambling head coach. "They outquicked us around the basket.

Earlier in the tournament, we were able to box out and get the job done. this time we didn't."

Jobe didn't feel there was any one stretch of the game that put the game out of reach for his team. He like the defensive pressure SU applied and he was especially pleased with the play of reserve senior forward Patrick Garner.

Garner, a walk-on, saw more playing time when starting center Rodney Washington got in foul trouble and eventually fouled out around the middle of the second half. Garner scored 17 points in 20 minutes, 13 of those coming in the game's final eight minutes.

"Because our defensive pressure," added Jobe, "Garner came in and helped out with his jumper and some tip-ins. He's really super. As a walk-on, he never asked for a dime. He just works hard, goes to school and plays ball."

Garner wasn't a solo act coming off of SU's bench. He was joined by freshman guard Carlos Sample, who scored 22 points and was instrumental in the Jaguars' pressing defense.

Grambling was down, but they never called it a night until the final buzzer. They never totally regrouped, but they regained some of their composure after SU's first half blitz.

"Southern got leads by getting second and third shots," Hopkins pointed out. "Then they tried to pad their leads by shooting three pointers. But they weren't hitting them 4 of 14 and that enabled us to stay close enough to have a chance."

Terrell Wesley led the GSU scoring with 14 points. Shawn Matthews and Cedric Quinn had 11 and 10 respectively. Mountainous freshman center Jessie Spinner (6-8, 235), had six points and five rebounds in 22 minutes of play. The night before vs. Texas Southern , he had 22 points as Grambling won 81-75 in the semifinals. Hopkins took Spinner out of the game because Southern's front line kept out maneuvering him for rebounds at both ends of the floor.

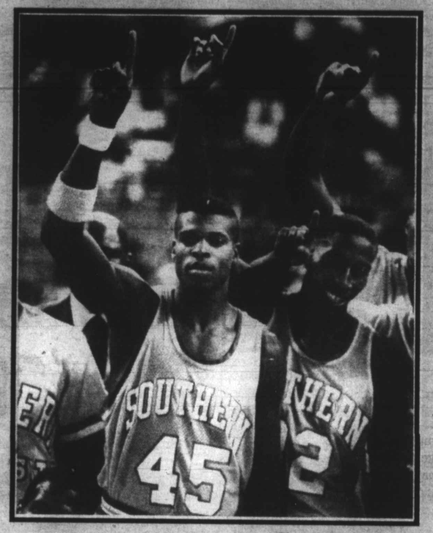

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Daryl Battles & Co. celebrate another Southern University SWAC Tournament Championship.

For brief moments, it seemed as if the tigers would make a contest of the championships round. when Washington fouled out at 12:19 in the second half, GSU came back slowly, cutting the lead to 51-41, but the Tigers never got over the hump.

Freshman back-up pivotman Andrew Glover made a valiant effort to get his team back into contention.

Entering the game midway into the second half, he scored eight points in seven minutes (shooting four of five from the field). This particular game held special meaning for Glover, who played his high school ball at Gonzales, La., which is located near Baton Rouge.

Glover is a basketball walk-on. His athletic trades are utilized for Eddie Robinson's football team as a wide receiver.

"He's really good in the transition game," Hopkins said. "His offense is not there yet. He gets a lot of his points in the running game, going to the glass, getting dunks, and that kind of thing. He's a good defender and plays with a lot of intensity."

Southern showed a new wrinkle offensively when they became more patient on offense in the second half. For a team known for their up tempo style, they operated reasonably well. They milked the clock, kept their lead, and took advantage of Grambling trying to force turnovers in order to erase their deficit.

"We've started working on our half-court offense," Jobe said. "We know that we can't blow everybody out and we can't outshoot everybody we play. The idea in that offense, is not so much to attack the defense, but to make sure we get good shots at the basket."

Hopkins was asked by one reporter if he thought Southern would do well in the NCAA Tournament. The coach replied that it depended on in the opponent. In recent years, Division I black schools in particular, are normally seeded against the schools ranked in the top 5 five nationally. He feels that if Southern is matched against schools more equal in size, talent, and depth, the Jaguars could advance to the second or third round. "But," he cautions, "you just never know."

– Craig T. Greenlee

COVER STORY

Virginia St. upsets Norfolk for coveted CIAA crown

North Carolina Central probably thought they had the part of Cinderella down to a science in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association. But as they soon discovered, nothing is safe in the CIAA -- not even fairytales.

The Southern Division regular-season winner rode the crest of a 24-1 season -- one that included a perfect 7-0 record against Northern Division opponents -- and entered the CIAA Tournament looking to add another feather in Coach Michael Bernard's ever-growing cap.

Another Cinderella story would indeed prevail at the Scope arena -- several of them in fact -- but none of the fabled glass slippers were to fit the claws of the Eagles.

A photo or two in the semi-finals would've told the story quite nicely. A picture of Fred Bennett's reaction to a last-gasp NCCU three-pointer that did nothing but stir the breeze inside the Norfolk Scope. While Bennett laid on the hardwood in disbelief of his miss at the buzzer, consider a snapshot later that night of two would-be stars (Virginia State's David Blackwell and Chris Holloway) as they kicked their heels in celebration on that very floor. What a photo album of memories the 1988 CIAA Basketball Tournament made with it's upsets, underdogs and euphoria.

While the focus was perhaps on Hampton's women, favored Central or Northern Division champion, Virginia Union, Virginia State slipped in the back door and quite literally stole the show.

The Trojans' 75-72 win over Norfolk State in the title game was quite a doing in itself, but the preceding chain of events were as miraculous if not more.

The high-flying Eagles of Central spent much of the season tabbed as the nation's best in Division II and their polished 24-1 record had Southern Division fans looking to end a 10-year drought that last saw a team south of Virginia capture the conference crown when C.E. "Bighouse" Gaines and his Winston-Salem State Rams did it in 1977.

The Rams, however, were ousted in the opening round of the tournament when Elizabeth City State's Ernie Griffin finished them off (81-78) with an 18-footer in the closing seconds, leaving the Southern Division torch to be carried by NCCU, St. Augustine's and Johnson C. Smith. WSSU's surprising early departure was just an omen of things to come for the south, as both men's and women's finals were strictly a Northern Division affair.

Norfolk State took the matter of wiping out the south into their own hands, as they got a controversial 65-62 win over the Golden Bulls to set up a semi-final meeting with Central.

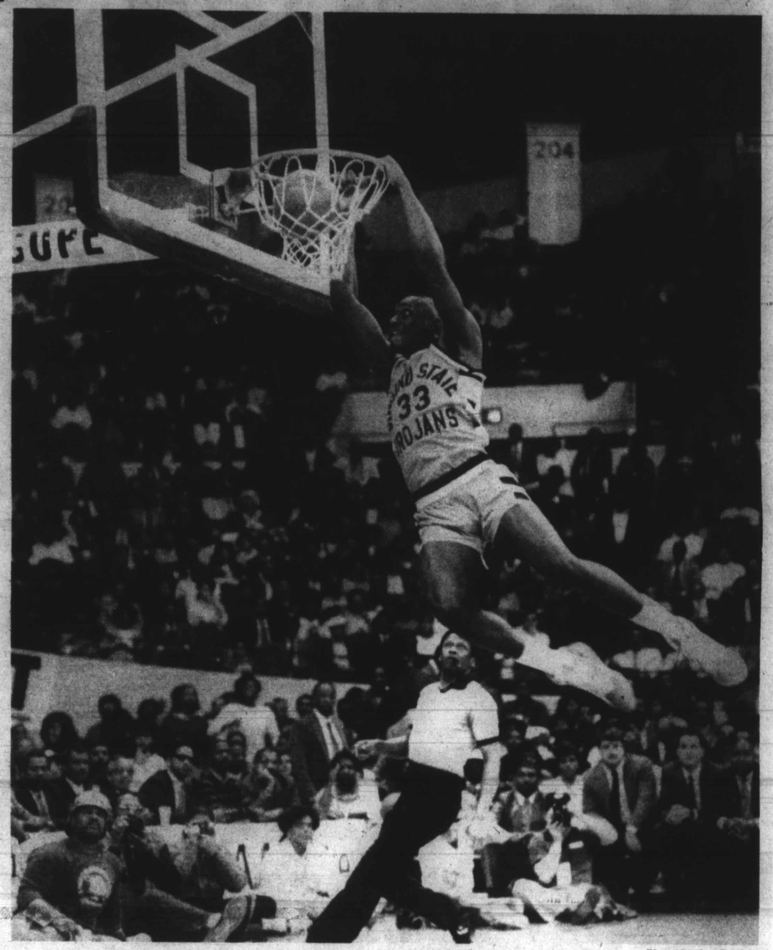

Photo by Joe Daniels

David Blackwell and the Virginia State Trojans had a slamming good time at the 43rd annual CIAA Basketball Tournament. Blackwell scored 19 points, including this dunk in the title clincher with Norfolk State.

The Spartans had a difficult time with the upstart Bulls and the hot three-point shooting of guard "Downtown" Vincent Brown. In fact, the Spartans, who have won seven CIAA titles under Coach Charles Christian, were trailing a good deal of the first half. But the inside tandem of Lee Johnson and Jerome Coles combined with some timely jumpers from guard Antonio Stith, proved to be too much for J.C. Smith despite their claim to the CIAA's leading three-point scorer.

The controversy, which has been a trademark of the tourney in recent years, came in the form of a Golden Bull basket that had apparently been credited to Norfolk on the scoreboard. Scoreboard keeper Leroy Porter, who has handled the clock at the Norfolk Scope since 1973, insisted along with the official scorekeeper, that things were in order as they stood.

Supervisor of officials for the

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