CIAA, Danny Doss, was put on the spot and the answers reminded fans of Virginia Union's controversial win over WSSU a year ago.

"The official scorer has the final say," said Doss, who no doubt remembers the apparent whistle on an obvious walking violation that no one dared claim in last year's marred semi-finals.

"We stopped the game and conferred with the table," he said. "They said the score was correct and we went on with it."

Though the Spartans only won by three, 65-62, JCSU Coach Steve Joyner was surprisingly calm about the entire situation.

"They stopped the game and checked it out," Joyner told a local television station.

"No mistake was found, so what was the use. Once they made their decision, all we could do was go and continue the game."

Nonetheless, the result left some doubt among the crowd about how the youthful Spartans would overcome the experience and patience of the deliberate Eagles.

Christian said, however, that there are really no such things as freshmen in the CIAA Basketball Tournament.

"At this point, you can't really say a team is all that inexperienced," said Christian, whose team was faced with a chance to avenge an early-season 57-56 loss to Central.

"Sure we have some young players," he said. "But we've been relying on them all season and they've came through."

Meanwhile, Virginia Union thrashed Elizabeth City 100-76 to move into the semi's against a heretofore quiet third-seeded Virginia State, who had previously knocked off St. Augustine's, 89-86.

Though the tournament final has been known to produce some surprises over the years, the semi-finals have always been the source of basketball bewilderment -- the 1988 version was no exception. To say the third day of the tournament caught everyone off guard would be a tremendous understatement.

Unbeknownst to anyone but perhaps the good Lord himself, the 43rd annual CIAA Basketball Tournament would belong lock, stock and barrel to Virginia State.

The Trojan women were probably as responsible as anyone for starting the upset craze. Kammy Brown (tournament women's MVP) & Co. simply outplayed an uninspired Hampton bunch, whipping the 27-1 Lady Pirates, 80-73, to advance to the title game with Norfolk.

The CIAA faithful hadn't seen anything yet, though, as the night would end leaving sportswriters, television commentators and a crowd of 10,500 scratching their heads to figure where they had gone wrong--in deducing the chain of events that took place that evening.

As one fan put it following Friday night's upset parade: "Show me a man that picked it that way and I'll show you a damn crazy man."

But crazier things have happened than Virginia State beating Hampton's seemingly invincible women -- like the Trojans putting both teams into the finals of the CIAA Tournament.

Friday night's men's semi-final opener was almost enough to put the crowd to sleep at first, as both Norfolk and Central struggled to make things happen. Had it not been for three-point baskets from NCCU's Cleo Hill and a wide-eyed Bennett, the 20-16 halftime score could've been much worse.

By comparison, it only took Hampton and Fayetteville State some five minutes way back in the initial round of the tournament to produce the same numbers. But Christian said his team acknowledged that the pace would be deliberate.

"We saw the Winston-Salem State and Central game on T.V.," he laughed, referring to NCCU's 49-48 thriller over the Rams on national television.

"Not very many people are going to light up the scoreboard against Central this year," said Christian, who wound up making a victory speech instead of bowing graciously to the CIAA's hottest team as expected.

"Both teams opened up the game real tight," he explained. "I guess they were sort of feeling each other out."

The Eagles played a waiting game in the second-half, exhibiting the patience and three-point shots that yielded 24 victories on a tough CIAA schedule.

However, Norfolk played the waiting game to perfection, too. And the Spartans proved to be the most patient of all, as they relied on their defense to force critical turnovers and alter the Eagle jumpers in the closing minutes.

Bernard's usually patient bunch faltered in the stretch offensively and went four straight times without scoring to leave Norfolk a 51-50 lead with James Walker's free throw at the one-minute mark. It was the Spartans' first time in front since the early minutes of the first half.

The Eagles had the ball and began their pattern of a dozen quick passes that had usually led to someone being left all alone in the corner for an easy three. But Hill missed the long jumper with 20 seconds left on the clock, and the rebound went to Bennett.

The sophomore forward whipped a pass to teammate Antoine Sifford, who raced toward the basket to launch one in the lane. Instead of finding a stymied Spartan defense, Sifford found 6-7 freshman Jerome Coles there to draw the charge.

Without wasting any time, Hill, the son of former Winston-Salem State star, Cleo Hill Sr., immediately fouled NSU guard, Guy Fauntleroy.

Bernard, who had been pacing the sidelines all night, cracked a little smile in

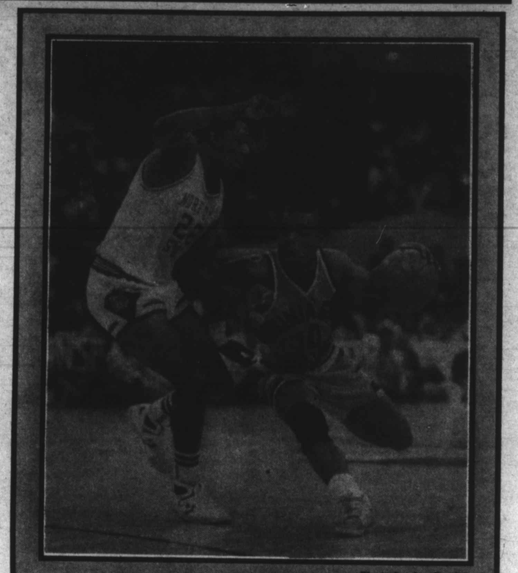

Photo by Joe Daniels

Anthony Reid (22) of Norfolk State had a job on his hands trying to keep up with Chris Holloway. The 5-7 Trojan guard became the first freshman since Ralph Tally to claim MVP honors.

Hill's heads up play. He had probably fouled the best possible choice on the court, as the junior guard had only shot 16 free throws the entire season.

Fauntleroy seized the divine opportunity to put his name on the CIAA basketball map and calmly got nothing but net on the one-and-one attempt. The bonus trickled in, too.

Bennett had the Eagles' last shot with just seconds remaining -- a three-pointer from the corner -- but it failed to draw iron as the buzzer sounded. Bennett fell to the floor in disbelief of the tragic end of Central's bid to capture the CIAA title for the first time since 1950, where he laid for several minutes as the Spartan fans spilled onto the court. The misty-eyed sophomore forward finally made his way back to the dressing room, but not before he became well acquainted with the cold floor of the noisy arena.

Not only did the Spartan role player raise his unimpressive 43% shooting at the charity stripe, but Fauntleroy became an instant hit with the biased Norfolk crowd at the Scope. He and the Spartans had slain the mighty Eagles with their own tactics -- sound defense and patience.

"I wasn't nervous," Fauntleroy shyly told the press after the game. "I wanted to play so bad that I went in there and totally forgot how important this game was. I just went in there and did it.

"Those were definitely the biggest free throws of my life."

Bernard, a former Spartan assistant, said it was not all that hard to swallow. After all, his fifth-ranked team would still make the NCAA Division II playoffs and it was merely another lesson from his former teacher on the value of a strong defense.

"If there's one thing Coach Christian taught me, it's that defense will win you games," said Bernard, who was most gracious in the loss. "Even when you're not playing well, defense will win it for you. I'll remember that and take it as another lesson."

Stith and freshman James Walker were the only Spartans in double figures during the low-scoring affair. Bernard, who in three short years has constructed a powerhouse at Central, said team defense was what won it for his old boss.

"They have five good defensive players," he said. "They don't just have one or two like some teams do. They did the things they had to do to stop us and that's why they won the game"

Ironically, the same characteristics were the same of Central during the regular season. But when money time loomed near, the Eagles simply couldn't score.

"They basically shut off what we do best," said Bernard. "You don't have to look for no secret in there. We got the

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ball inside just a few times. And when we did, we didn't do anything with it once we got it.

"Hopefully, God willing, our season is not over. We have come such a long ways in a very short period of time. I can't be nothing but proud of my guys."

Hill, who valiantly tried to keep his team in the hunt with timely outside shots, said they simply didn't execute.

In the semi-final nightcap, the battle of Virginia came down to a prayer.

And the heavens were kind to Virginia State, as they broke a 73-73 deadlock with Virginia Union in the closing seconds to move into the tournament finals for the first time since 1963.

The Trojans' Chris Holloway pushed the ball up the floor with some eight seconds left and appeared be headed down the lane for a layup. Instead he dished off to teammate Lamont Walker on the right wing, who bobbled the ball momentarily before gaining control. Walker got off the 18-foot miracle and the buzzer sounded as the shot reached it's peak.

Falling softly through the net, the Trojans' prayer was answered and seventh-ranked Virginia Union would be left to the mercy of the Division II selection committee with a 23-5 record.

Union's ace -- CIAA Player of the Year, Terry Davis -- was held to just 15 points. Coach Dave Robbins made no excuses for his Panthers.

"It would've been a miracle if we had won," said Robbins, whose team won the Northern Division by taking pivotal victories over Norfolk and Virginia State in the regular season. "We simply played that bad and they played that good."

Though Union got 20 points from guard Jonathan Walker, Robbins said Davis' off night did hurt his team's chances. But Robbins added: "Even he can have a bad night. He'll be back."

Harold Deane said the game's final play was not exactly by design.

"I just left it up to the kids," said Deane. "I told him (Holloway) to either penetrate inside, pass it to the big men inside, or look an open man on the wing.

"Walker scared the heck out of me," he winced. "But he was fortunate to get the shot off and we won. We're very happy to make it this far."

The ride wasn't finished, though.

The Trojans continued their mystique in the championship game with Norfolk despite a shooting slump from all-CIAA forward, Leonard Harris. While Harris struggled through a scoreless first half, senior center David Blackwell held the Spartans in check.

Really, the CIAA finals were quite anticlimactic if compared to the semi-finals. When Blackwell bagged a three-point play late in the first half, he gave VSU a lead they would never relinquish. The Trojans appeared to have the game wrapped up on a Blackwell tap in that left VSU leading 73-66 with 1:38 left.

But Jerome Garrett, who made his only bucket of the night on the play, came up with a three-pointer from the left wing. The bomb, coupled with a Antonio Stith jumper off a Trojan miscue, put the Spartans within reach, 73-71 with 48 seconds left.

Sensing that things were getting out of hand, Deane called a time out.

"I just told them to settle down and not give it away," he said. "Norfolk was getting second and third shots and that really concerned me."

Christian told his team to set a pick for the three-pointer.

"We had hit that shot to get us here," he said. "And we wanted the three or to get it inside for an easy bucket."

Virginia State's Dwayne Ellis made a major dent in Christian's strategy when he blew past the Norfolk press for an easy layup and a 75-71 Trojan lead.

Norfolk's James Walker converted one of two free throws with 16 seconds left, but missed the chance to tie as a pair of three-pointers failed to draw iron.

Though Blackwell, who led VSU with 19 points, was the catalyst inside, the CIAA decided on Holloway for tournament MVP honors.

"I don't think I deserved it," said Holloway, the league's first freshman to capture the honor since Norfolk's Ralph Tally did it in 1984.

The 5-7 CIAA version of Tyrone Bogues said the title victory was honor enough.

"I don't look forward to stuff like this," he said. "I do out there to win awards, I just wanted to win the title. That was award enough."

With 10 points and 10 rebounds in 39 minutes of action, Christian said the league finally shied away from an old habit.

"They usually pick the guy who scored the most points off the winning team for MVP," the Norfolk head coach noted. "I'm glad they chose him (Holloway). The little guy just penetrated inside all night on us. When he wasn't getting a layup, he was getting it to their big men for a dunk or a layup.

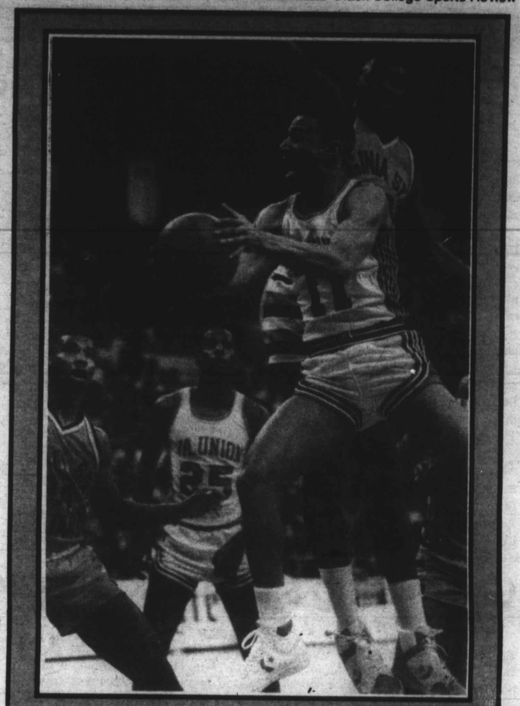

Photo by Joe Daniels

All-CIAA guard Jonathan Walker of Virginia Union drives under the outstretched arms of VSU's David Blackwell.

"He was their spark."

Harris, the only All-CIAA member on the team, admitted to his struggles and said the emergence of Holloway and Blackwell were the key.

"I played rotten," said Harris, who fought throughout the four-day affair to just maintain his 19.7 average.

"Our big scorers didn't play that great of a tournament. Blackwell and Holloway came in and stole the tournament. In fact, this whole team was a surprise to everyone but ourselves. We knew we could do it, but we had to prove it to everyone else in the league."

"I thought the key to the game was that we hung in there when it was close and hustled," said Deane of his first CIAA championship.

"If it was any point I felt it was slipping away, it had to be when they were getting second shots late in the game. Not many of them went in, though.

"Someone was looking out for us, I guess. I think maybe it was just our turn."

Indeed, 41 years was a long time to wait in line.

-- Randy Pettitt

Howard Bisonettes defeat A&T 83-57 to win MEAC championship

Yes, there was a N.C. A&T-Howard matchup in the finals of the MEAC, but it was in the women's competition.

The Bisonettes were favored to defend their women's title and received little competition from A&T, who knocked off Maryland-Eastern Shore and Player of the Year, Monica Felder, to set up the finale.

The Bison built an 11-point lead in the first half and cruised to an 83-57 romp.

"I didn't think there was a team in the MEAC that could beat us," declared Howard head coach Sanya Tyler, whose team has won three of the last four women's titles.

"You can't play a schedule as tough as ours and not expect to do well," she insisted.

Though the Aggies were clearly beaten, head coach Tim Abney was pleased.

"We were even expected to be here at the beginning of the season," he said. "They were the favorites all year and they proved it tonight.

"I'm proud of our girls. I told them not to let this one game determine whether we've had a good year or not. We have accomplished a great deal and have nothing to be ashamed of."

Vanessa Graham, Artine Hector and Darlene Beale of Howard were named to the All-Tournament Team. They joined Sheila Rivers and Diedra Cheeks of A&T in the honor.