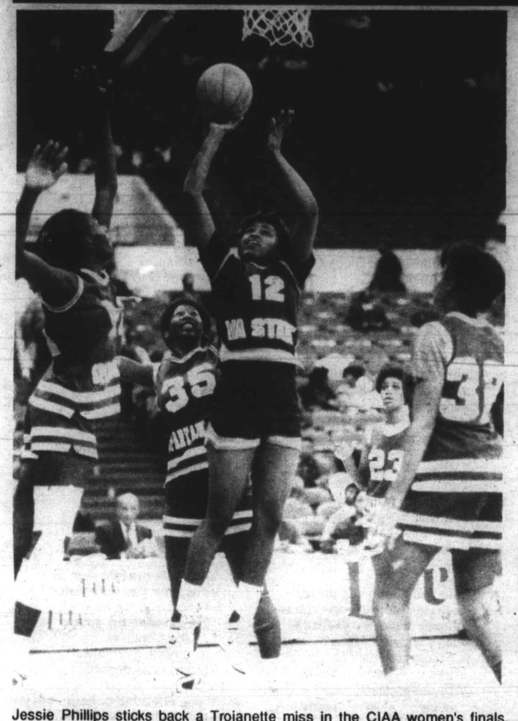
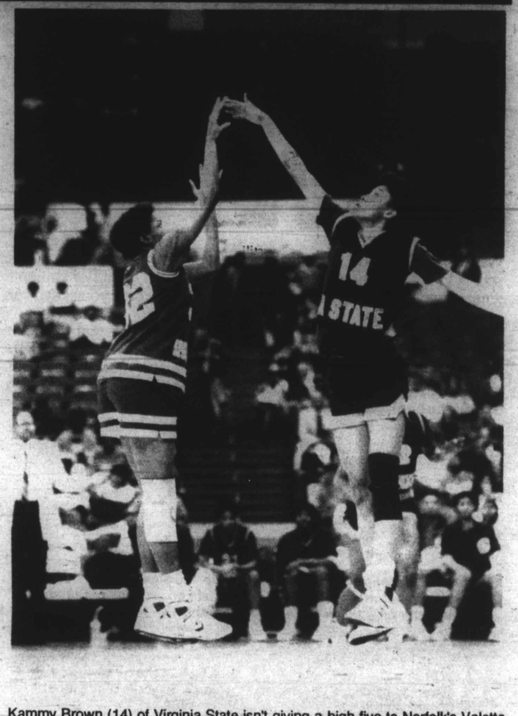
CIAA WOMEN



Jessie Phillips sticks back a Trojanette miss in the CIAA women's finals. Phillips' 14 points were key in VSU's 66-57 going-away present for Coach Leon Bay.



Kammy Brown (14) of Virginia State isn't giving a high-five to Norfolk's Valetta Johnson. Brown, the CIAA women's MVP, was trying to alter Johnson's shot.

Virginia St. sweeps CIAA tourney with women's victory

The way Kammy Brown and Toni Hill were jumping around the floor of the Norfolk Scope, one would've thought they had just won the lottery.

They did even better-- they won the CIAA women's championship.

Though VSU went on to beat Norfolk and claim the women's portion of the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association basketball tournament, it was the semi-finals where they really hit the jackpot.

The prize was a shot at Hampton University, the nation's second-ranked Division II women's team, who set a torrid pace and easily won the Northern Division en route to several NCAA scoring records.

Virginia State came home with the big kill and a tournament championship to boot.

"We couldn't ask for more," said Leon Bay, the head coach of the Trojanettes.

"I think beating Hampton in the tournament would've made any team's season. But to come home with the title as well is something really special."

The Lady Pirates were seemingly a lock to repeat as CIAA champs. Paced by one of the best shooters in the country, CIAA Player of the Year, Jackie Dolberry, Hampton was on a 22-game winning streak after losing to Northwood ages ago.

Until Dolberry and Venise Frazier -- both All-Americans -- ran into Kammy Brown and Company, Hampton had ran over everyone in their path by often ugly margins.

But despite only three points from Brown, VSU actually led Hampton 33-31 at the half, and the crowd sensed an upset was in the making.

Though both teams shot under 40%, Brown was 5 of 7 in the second half and the Trojanettes won the important battle of the boards.

Meanwhile, Dolberry had one of the worst shooting games of her career, finishing 8 of 28 from the field and 1 of 11 from three-point range.

Frazier would end her last CIAA contest on much the same note -- a bad one. The 5-10 Virgin Island native was held to just nine points and 11 rebounds.

The combination of a rejuvenated Brown and Hampton's slumping stars led to perhaps the biggest surprise of the tournament -- men or women.

Despite a late rally that saw Hampton slice the lead to four points in the final two minutes, Brown would not let her team lose.

The sophomore hit a jumper and handed out two assists in the final moments to pull VSU ahead for good.

"Once we played them even at halftime, we knew we could beat them," said Brown, whose 17-point performance earned her MVP honors.

"I didn't think they could beat us three times in a row. That's hard for anyone to do -- even Hampton."

"They simply outplayed us," said Dolberry, whose team loses about as often as it snows in Hawaii.

"Virginia State is a good young team. They were going after the loose balls while we stood around and watched. I'll bet half their 80 points was off of layups."

Bay said the outcome boiled down to the basics.

"Neither team played that well offensively," said Bay, who will retire at the end of the season.

"I think our hustle on defense is what won it for us. We played good defense and hit some clutch free throws in the end to pull it out.

"My wife went into the locker room before the game and asked the team to win this one for me. I'm going to have to bring her tomorrow, I guess."

The good luck charm worked in the finals, too.

The Trojans beat Norfolk 66-57 to make it a clean sweep for VSU in the tournament -- but a win over Hampton was a hard act to follow.

Even when it's the CIAA title game.

-- Randy Pettitt

MEAC

A&T continues MEAC dominance

There was finally a new kid on the block in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference basketball tournament, but resident bully North Carolina A&T wasted little time in disposing of the new guest to claim their seventh-straight automatic NCAA bid.

It was a rather historic affair, with the tournament adopting both a new two-day format and initiating a new face, Florida A&M, into the finals.

The outcome, however, was predictable as ever and exactly the same as last year -- almost.

The Aggies did manage to break the monotony of meeting Howard University for all the MEAC marbles. They disposed of the Bison in the semi-finals by fending them off at the free throw line.

Though the Aggies were heavily favored to waltz away with the right to collect another fat NCAA payday, the Bison did manage to throw them a legitimate scare.

On a horrible night where guards Corvin Davis and Thomas "Ice" Griffis could only remember what it was like to score, the Bison and senior guard George Hamilton literally took A&T to the limit before succumbing, 67-62.

"They weren't playing well at all," said Hamilton, who led Howard with an adept shooting touch and 16 points.

"We sensed that we could maybe pull off a win, but A&T just managed to do the right things to win it in the end. I didn't care if we had to play them in the semi-finals or whatever. I just wanted us to beat A&T -- we almost did."

Alas, Howard has managed to trip up Coach Don Corbett but once during his nine-year reign at A&T. The Bison were on the winning end of a controversial decision last year in Washington, but their long and frustrating winless streak in Greensboro continued.

With the two minute-mark just barely eclipsed, the Aggies held a comfortable 64-56 lead on Griffis' two free throws. A turnover and two missed shots later, Corbett's bunch suddenly found themselves in a ballgame.

John Spencer and Guy Owens accounted for six quick Bison points and had finally brought in sight a 12-points lead they had chased the entire second half.

With seconds ticking down to precious few, a mad scramble erupted for a loose ball. Griffis, the smallest player on the court at 5-8, came up with the hot potato and was fouled by Howard's Milton Bynum.

The smooth Aggie guard who bears the moniker of "Ice" for his cool performances in the clutch, lived up to the name by sinking both ends of the one-and-one. That gave A&T a 66-62 lead and proved to be the undoing of Howard.

"Even with "Ice" at the line, I was still a little nervous about the end of that game," said Corbett.

Corbett joked with Griffis in the A&T locker room afterwards.

"I believe I would've shot you if you missed," he taunted.

Griffis just smiled.

"I know, coach."

While the "Iceman" and teammate Davis were cold as Griffis' nickname in their efforts to hit from the perimeter, Carlton Becton rescued the day with 16 points and four buckets from three-point land. Tournament MVP -- Claude Williams -- had 15 points and joined a strong Aggie inside game with a 17-point showing from hot shooting Kenny Cox.

The foursome was further evidence why the Aggies have been so invincible during their 26-2 campaign. All five starters average in double figures and when one is off, another shines even brighter.

Griffis reiterated the point.

"We play team basketball," he said. "If I have a bad night, one of my teammates pick up the slack. We all cover for each other."

And the Aggies are well covered, indeed.

Their title matchup with Florida A&M had imaginations running wild at the Greensboro. Some thought the Rattlers had the guns to perhaps mount an upset bid.

Black Entertainment Television commentator, Gil McGregor, was among those hinting that an upset could be in the works.

"It would be good for the conference if A&M won," said McGregor, a former starting center for Wake Forest in the late 60's and early 70's who went on for a brief stint in the NBA.

"I believe with their outstanding record, A&T is in the NCAA tournament regardless of what they do here. If Florida wins, that gives the MEAC two berths."

MEAC commissioner, Ken Free, upheld McGregor's notion.

"I think if N.C. A&T loses, they most definitely deserve an at-large bid to the NCAA's," said Free, who sits on the selection committee.

"It would be historic if it happens," Free admitted.

"You see if one of my teams is being discussed during the selection process, then I have to leave the room. If it boils down to an MEAC school and someone else, I don't have any part in the decision."

Corbett insisted to his team and the press that the only way to the promised land was to win the tournament.

"We have to win this tournament to get to the NCAA's -- I've said that all along," Corbett bellowed in the locker room.

"The MEAC is still a one-bid league as far as I'm concerned. That's what I told my players. I told them that we could be sitting at home with 23 wins if we didn't win this thing.

"I so much wanted this group to get another shot in the NCAA's, and now we are there again."

-- Randy Pettitt

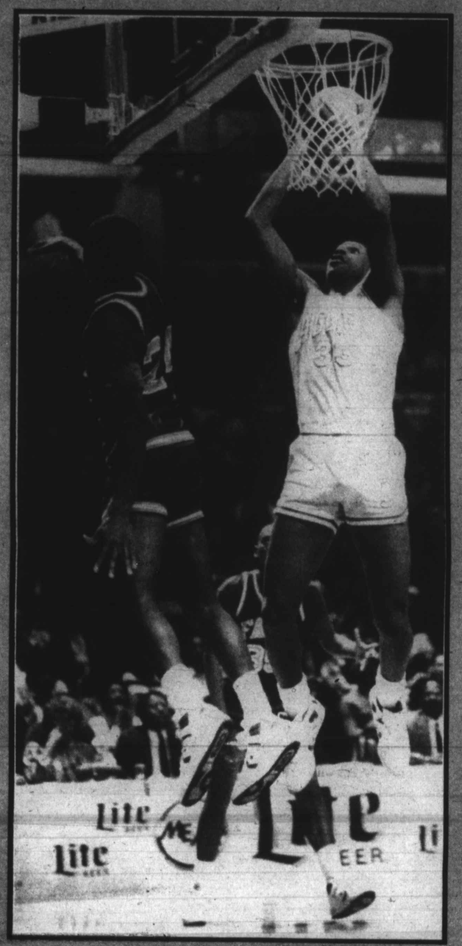


Photo by Joe Daniels

Claude Williams didn't have a great first half against Florida A&M, but when money time came, the Aggie senior poured in a team-high 19 points to guide A&T to their seventh straight NCAA appearance.