COACHES

Spry may be facing his toughest challenge

Paine College had just finished destroying Knoxville College in a holiday tournament basketball game, winning by more than 30 points. But coach Ronnie Spry wasn't satisfied with what he saw on the floor that night.

Too many missed assignments. Not enough thinking about what it takes to win consistently during a long hoops season that starts in November and ends in March.

Turnovers and lack of concentration is something that Spry won't tolerate from his troops. And this season, he may be facing the toughest coaching challenge in his nine years as the Lions headmaster.

For the last eight seasons, Spry's teams have averaged 20 victories per year. His '88-'89 team may be hard pressed to come anywhere near that mark this time around.

Spry's teams of the past have been small, but well-conditioned and thoroughly schooled in hard-wood fundamentals. The Lions were 22-5 last season.

This year, however, he finds himself almost starting from ground zero. Only three players have returned who have any meaningful playing experience. He admits that it will take time for his people to totally absorb his teachings. The question is whether or not the season is long enough for his guys to execute the way he thinks they should.

"The big difference this year," Spry says, "is experience. Right now, we don't have the leadership at point guard like we have in the past. Scott Johnson is a sophomore who's still learning and Don Smith has been injured and isn't back to his usual form yet.

"It's going to take some time for our young people to get that game experience. The people we have now, aren't sure about what they can and can't do."

Still, observers who know Spry and the game of roundball, won't be surprised if his club finishes the year over .500. Spry has a way of instilling fortitude in his players where they produce winning results.

As usual, Paine doesn't have much size inside the paint. Michael Jones is their most experienced inside player at 6-5. After Jones, the height drops off. And with SIAC foes such as Alabama A & M, Albany State, and Clark/Atlanta University, the lack of inside punch could make for a very long season.

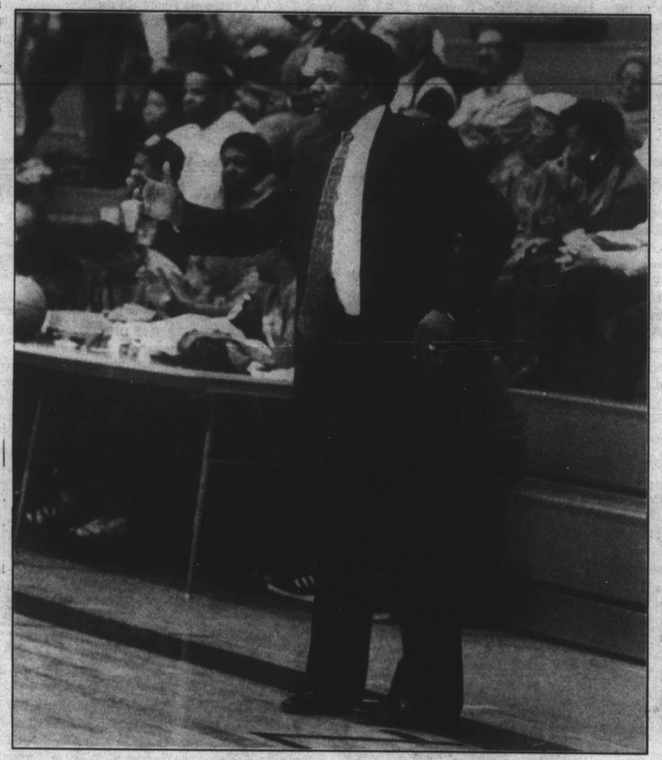

Photo by Max Dunhill

Paine's players feel that if Spry isn't on his feet and getting on them verbally, he's not doing his job.

However, Spry likes some of the things he's seen after three games (Lions were 3-0). "The most pleasant thing," he says, "is that the kids are working hard and they won't quit regardless of what the game situation is."

Success has a tendency to breed expectations for more success from all circles. Spry feels that this year's team is no exception, even though they aren't supposed to be the equals of his previous Paine teams.

"In all honesty," he points out, "I feel that we're overrated this year. Because we've had a winning tradition, people tend to look at that and forget about what kind of team you have at the present. It's no different at the major schools."

Spry is hoping that his team continues to mature as the season progresses. He feels that the Lions defense has to be honed and rebounding has to be more consistent. Free throw shooting is also a major concern. In an early meeting vs. Morris Brown, the Lions won, but they almost gift-wrapped the game for the Wolverines with horrible shooting from the charity line. They missed 17 free throws and still managed not to be burned by that deficiency.

The Paine mentor is a body full of emotion during a game. In many ways, the coach has his own personal aerobic work-out along the sidelines as he instructs, cajoles, and fires up his team to play on a consistent level.

For those who fancy the laid-back, let everything take care of itself type of coach -- Spry isn't it. His personality is highly charged. He barely has a voice left when the final buzzer sounds.

At times, it appears that he's too harsh on his troops. Spry doesn't mind getting in faces and speaking what's on his mind. But there's a gentler side also. A side of Spry that commands his players respect.

"During my eight years at Paine," the coach notes, "I've asked all of my players if they would respond better if I just sat on the bench and didn't say a lot. They told me they like it better when I'm on my feet and letting them know what I want done. They expect me to be emotional. If I'm not emotional, they don't think I've done a good job of coaching them."

Jones, a three-year player, agrees. "I don't know what it is," he says. "But when he gets down on us, it motivates us. When he doesn't do that, we just don't seem to play as well as we're capable of. He has a way of making you dig down deep inside of yourself to be the best that you can be."

Realistically, this season is likely to be an uphill climb for Spry and his Lions. They have the talent, but are woefully lacking in experience. The team was left almost barren for this season as they lost 10 players from last season. "When you look at us from that standpoint," Spry says, "you have to figure that we'll do very good to finish at .500. But the funny thing about it, is that nobody but me seems to think that we're rebuilding this year."

-Craig T. Greenlee

Men of Alpha Phi Alpha, circa 1916

ORIGINALITY:

it's inspirational

Since the days when Black fraternal organizations were born, Black men have come together in clubs and community groups to serve as role models, mentors and benefactors of Black youth.

Today, the members of 100 Black Men of Atlanta carry on in that inspirational tradition, helping young people to develop self-esteem and pride through their "Project Success" program. Adopting an entire eighth-grade class, members help provide health care, tutoring, counseling and full scholarships for post-secondary education.

The Adolph Coors Company, brewer of Coors, Coors Light and Coors Extra Gold* is proud to assist this program of education and aspiration. From one original to another, let's pass on the tradition of achievement.

Coors.

*Other fine Coors brands: Herman Joseph's, Herman Joseph's Light, Killian Red Ale