COVER STORY

Absolutely Astounding

A.J. English is the dominant factor

In many minds, Virginia Union's A.J. English is as splendid as any shooting guard in college basketball today.

At any level.

College coaches know it.

So do NBA scouts.

The acrobatic senior with the 43-inch vertical leap has made the court his sole domain, a place where he is the undisputed ruler. The 6-5, 180 lbs. human sky pilot is not only effective, but spectacular in a breathtaking kind of way. His high wire act has left opponents, scouts and fans awestruck each time he makes a mockery of Sir Isaac Newton's laws of gravity.

It's clear that English is a prime factor in Union's surprising 23-1 record and the reason why the Panthers are sure to make a serious run at repeating as the CIAA tournament champions.

Amazing numbers

With three games left in the regular season, the Wilmington, Del. star had produced some very impressive numbers. For instance:

- Scoring -- 33.4 ppg, tops in the NCAA Division II and the conference;
- Field goal shooting -- 51 percent
- Three-point field goal shooting -- 47 percent
- Free throw shooting -- 80 percent
- Rebounding -- 7.4 a game

So far, no team has found a way to at least neutralize him, much less stop him. Opponents may find it easier to slay Superman with a sizeable chunk of Kryptonite.

To get a better understanding, all one has to do is look at what he did to two of the CIAA's best teams -- North Carolina Central and Norfolk State. Both are among the best defensive teams in Division II. Central, the defending national champion is No. 1 in the division in scoring defense (allowing 55.9 ppg) and the Spartans were ranked No. 9 (allowing 62.1 ppg).

Rendered helpless

Against English, both teams' defensive efforts proved to be futile.

In the NCCU contest, English burned the Eagles for 30 points, 9 rebounds and 5 assists as the Panthers triumphed 76-61. In Union's only regular season loss, A.J. torched and scorched Norfolk for 49 points as his team dropped an 87-86 decision. At that time, English's points total was a career high. But in early February, he surpassed that by erupting for 54 points vs. St. Augustine's as Union breezed to a 128-90 victory.

Meeting the challenge

English, a two-time, All-CIAA selection, relishes the challenge of beating defenses that are designed to negate his every move.

"I love the attention I get from other teams," English admitted. "When things get crucial in a game, I want the ball in my hands. The team has a lot of confidence in me, so I like to show my gratitude by coming through when we need it the most. At this level, there's nobody who can stop me."

Total package

Union's lithely built skywalker has the total package to play the No. 2 guard spot in the pros. It all starts with quickness, the ability to run the floor, and an intense desire to win.

His adeptness at levitating allows him to dunk on 6-10 and 6-11 centers. That same skill puts smaller guards who have to defend against him at his mercy. English can easily get his shot off by just going airborne -- and he's accurate with it, whether it's inside or outside the three-point arc.

Dave Robbins, the Virginia Union coach, is very familiar with everything that English can do on the hardwood, having been A.J.'s roundball mentor for the past four seasons after English graduated from Howard High School in Wilmington.

Passion for winning

"What makes A.J. special is that he loves the game," said Robbins. "He has a true passion for winning and he always plays hard. He has always been very talented. What we try to do with him is to get him to understand the game more. We work on having him learn to make the right decisions at the right times during a game. With experience, you learn that the shots you take in the first half of a game might not be the best shots to take in the final minutes of a game."

Robbins feels that as English refines that part of his game, the more polished he will be come NBA Draft time in June. The Panthers coach makes no bones about his feelings on A.J.'s chances to land a spot in the NBA.

"The NBA has known about him since his sophomore year," Robbins added. "If Marty Blake (the NBA's Director of Scouting) is high on him, A.J. will be invited to those all-star games to play against guys who will be among the top draft choices. Marty has a lot of input as to who is invited, so that's going to be a key. But from what I understand, some of the people who work with Marty are very impressed with A.J."

Legit prospect

Blake feels that English should get a thorough look. "He's a great athlete, has great speed, a lot of quickness and can run the floor," said Blake. "He is a true NBA prospect, not a great outside shooter, but he doesn't have to be. English is the No. 1 small college player in the U.S. and should be named player of the year in Division II. He can play with any of the Division I players."

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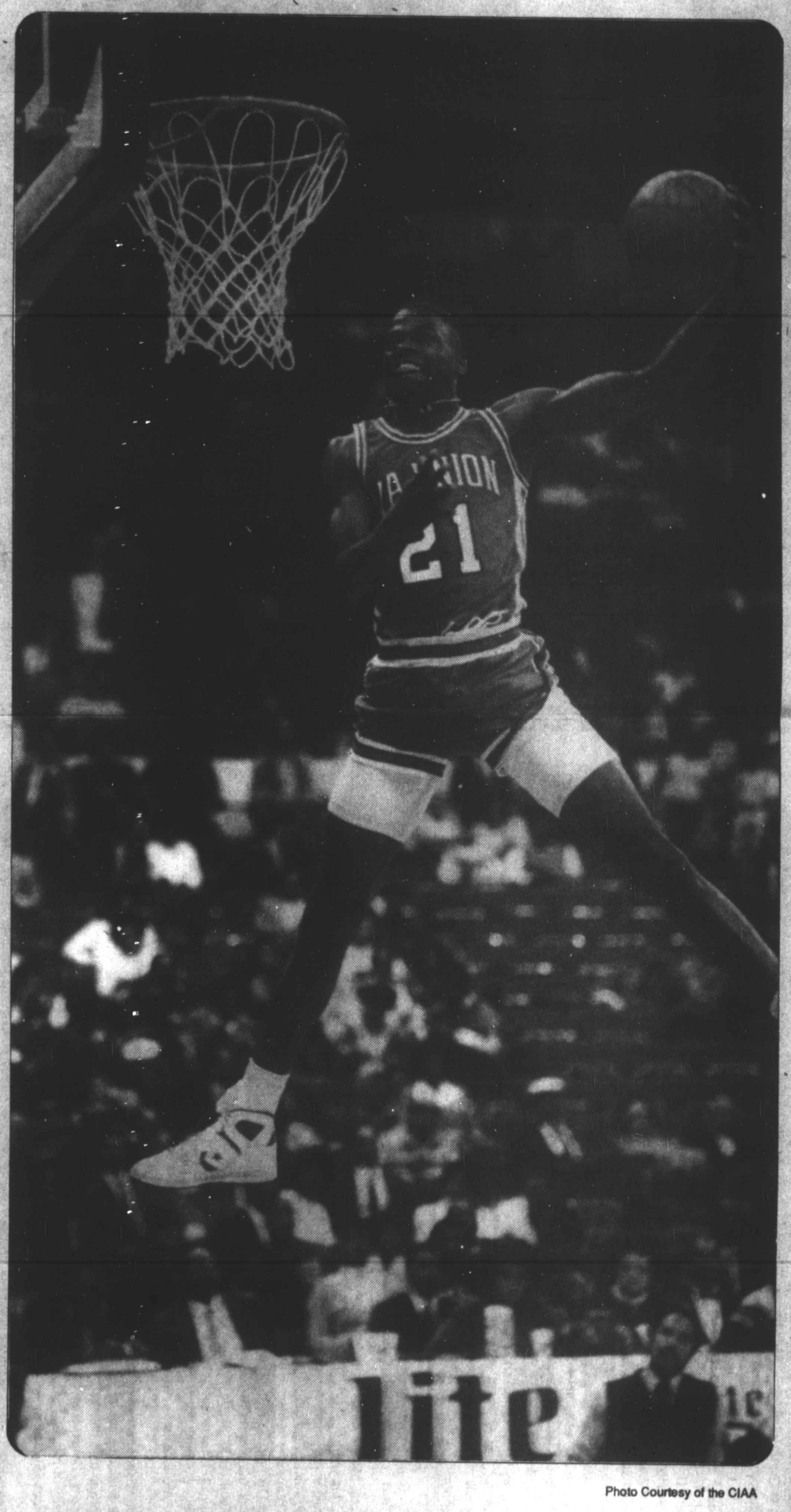

Photo Courtesy of the CIAA

Career Book on English

Season	Games	Points	Ave.	FGM/FGA	FG%	3PT. FGM/3PT. FTA	3PT FG%	FTM/FTA	FT%	Rebounds	Ave.	Assists	Ave.
'86-'87	31	305	9.8	105/235	44	23/50	46	72/95	76	90	2.9	95	3.1
'87'88	29	474	16.3	172/365	47	35/79	44	95/133	71	137	4.7	145	5.0
'88-'89	30	616	20.5	210/417	50	58/123	47	138/170	81.2	120	4.0	93	3.1
'89-'90*	24	802	33.4	260/505	51	53/112	47	229/288	80	124	7.4	65	2.7
TOTALS	**114**	**2,197**	**19.3**	**747/1,522**	**49**	**169/364**	**46.4**	**534/686**	**77.8**	**471**	**4.1**	**398**	**3.5**

** With three games left in the regular season.*