MEAC ROUNDBALL

Coppin is closing in on title as FAMU chases

This is the year that the Eagles fly.

Coppin State is letting everyone know that they are the team to beat in the MEAC. Coach Ron Mitchell's team is 16-5 overall and undefeated in nine conference games.

But Florida A&M, 12-7 overall, is steady on the case with a 9-1 league mark and is hoping to make a move on the top spot before the conference tournament gets underway at the start of next month.

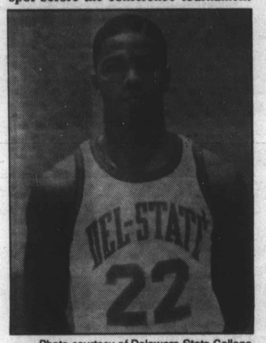


Photo courtesy of Delaware State College

Emanual Davis handles the perimeter game for the Hornets. He's averaging 15.2 points a game and is ranked among the league leaders in field goal (44.9) and free throw percentage (77.1).

This season's edition of the Eagles have shown that their rigorous early season success was no fluke. Up to this point in the season, Coppin is hanging tough, doing what they have to in order to record the win.

The Eagles have ruled because they have played complete basketball on a more consistent basis than their league counterparts. The MEAC team statistics provide an undistorted picture:

• Defense -- They top the MEAC in average points per game allowed (69.3) and opponents' field goal percentage (.41).

• Offense -- Coppin is the best shooting team in the conference (48.4 percent from the field). They are ranked second in scoring offense (79.5 points a game).

Individually speaking, shooting guard Reggie Isaac is having a very special season. The junior shooting guard leads the league in scoring (22.6 ppg), is second in steals (54 in 19 games), and is the MEAC's third best from the foul line (84.8 percent).

The Eagles have also benefitted from the contributions of Larry Stewart. Stewart has shined as brightly as Isaac, tallying 18.5 points and 11.2 rebounds a game. He is the conference leader in rebounds and field goal percentage (.637).

Phil Booth, who has submerged his game to fit in with Mitchell's game plan, continues to make his presence felt without putting up big numbers in individual categories. Booth adds 12.3 ppg, but he's also ranked No. 9 in the MEAC in steals (21 in 34 games).

Point guard Larry Yarbray has maintained his status as the league's el numero uno dish-out artist at 8.2 a game. Yarbray, by the way, is ranked third in steals (44 in 20 games) and has become very reliable at the free throw line (70.4 percent).

Florida A&M doesn't have as much offensive firepower as Coppin but they do nicely with what they have.

The Rattlers are the No. 4 scoring team in the league (77.6 ppg), and they have excelled. FAMU is ranked second among league teams in scoring defense (76.4 points allowed per game) and offensive field goal percentage (.469).

Ace guard Terry Giles has looked to score more and the books reveal that transition. Giles, who usually looks to pass off, is averaging 17.2 points and 5.7 assists per game. During his college career, he has hovered around the 14 ppg mark.

Defensively, however, Giles is up to his own old sleight of hand tricks, topping the conference in steals (54 in 19 games).

Giles isn't the Lone Ranger when it comes to scoring points for coach Willie Booker's team. Reggie Finney has a scoring mean of 15.9 ppg plus 6.1 rebounds. Kevin Glover adds 7.6 rebounds a contest and Delon Turner pulls downs 5.2 caroms a game. Turner was hitting 55.6 percent from the field at presstime, good enough to rank him second among the MEAC leaders.

Cy Alexander, head coach at South Carolina State, is not out of the hunt for the league crown by any means. Alexander has what amounts to a brand new group, quite different from the guys that bagged him the MEAC regular season and conference titles last spring

For starters, the Dogs have the top scoring team in the conference, putting up an average of 80.2 points a game. The bad news is that SC State gives up too many points to the opposition -- 81.3 points a game -- third worse in the conference.

Travis Williams has assumed the scoring load for Alexander's team. He's second in the league in scoring (21.5 ppg) and ranks among the MEAC's top people in field goal percentage (.498).

Juan Mason is making more headway as a force with a 13.8 points per game and a 54.1 percent showing in field goal shooting category. Ricky Byrd and Chris Felix are among the best free throw shooters in the league, canning 87.9 and 81 percent from the line respectively.

The Delaware State Hornets (8-10 overall, 4-5 MEAC) find themselves in the position of having to save the best for last it they are to live up to pre-season billing.

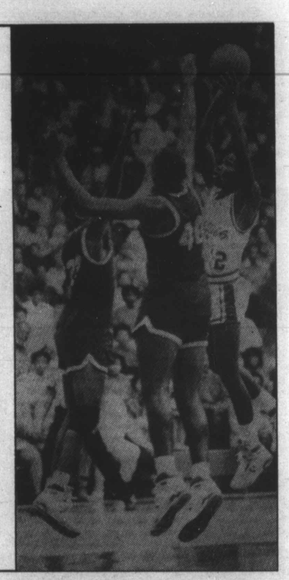
Tom Davis (21.1 ppg) leads the team in scoring, but as a team, DSC doesn't play enough solid defense (allowing 81.9 ppg -- second worst in the league). But Emanual Davis (15.2 ppg) and Tim Anderson (14.3 ppg) have taken up the slack.

-Zack Monday

Tough Times For A&T

North Carolina A&T has had its share of woes this season. At presstime, they found themselves one game ahead of Maryland-Eastern Shore and Morgan State, keeping them out of a three-way for the MEAC cellar. Guard Glenn Taggart (above) hasn't had one of his more consistent seasons shooting the ball. Taggart is averaging 14.2 ppg, but has compensated by handing out 7.1 assists per game to rank second in the conference.

Photo Courtesy of North Carolina A&T



Tournament Update

Dates & Format: The conference tournament will be held March 1-3 at the Greensboro Coliseum in Greensboro, NC. Eight of the nine MEAC teams will compete for the conference tourney championship in a single elimination affair, with no first round bye for the regular season champion. Maryland-Eastern Shore will not appear in the men's tournament because of irregularities in the men's tennis program.

Seedings for the tournament are based on how teams finished during the regular season. The tournament champion gets an automatic berth to the NCAA Division I playoffs.

Picks For Final Four: Coppin State, Florida A&M,South Carolina State, Delaware State.

Favored Team To Win It All: Coppin State.

Darkhorse Pick For Championship: Delaware State

Ticket Information: Call conference headquarters at 919/275-9961, the Greensboro Coliseum at 919/373-7474 or member institutions of the MEAC.

SWAC ROUNDBALL

Southern's Jaguars aren't giving up anything

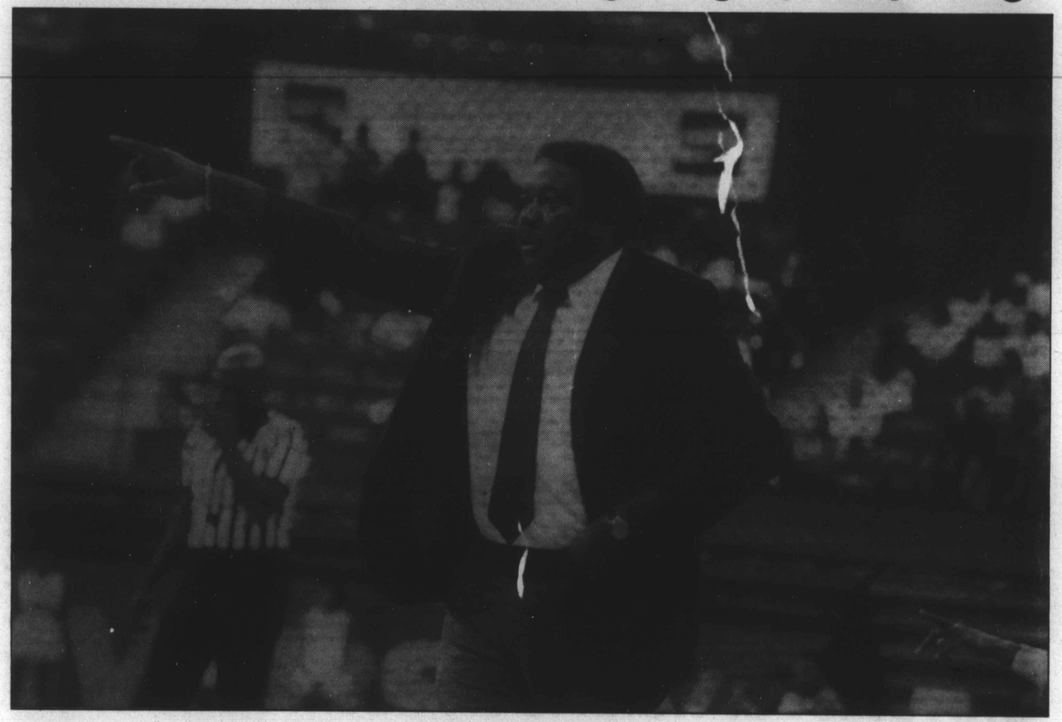


Photo by James W. Terry III

Coach James Oliver's Alabama State Hornets started the season like gang busters, but have recently tailed off in conference play. ASU is led by the crowd pleasing scoring of Steve Rogers who pumps in a little over 28 points per contest.

It really doesn't matter how you slice it, The SWAC tournament will more than likely come down to Southern vs. Texas Southern in the finals.

But regardless of what happens, SU coach Ben Jobe has to get a Lion's hare of the credit for his team, who was 17-2, 7-0 at presstime. This just may be his best coaching job of his career.

Jobe's Jags had a 7-0 conference slate and were 17-2 overall. SU also has Texas Southern's number as evidenced by their 87-93 victory over the Tigers at home. TSU was picked to win the SWAC in the pre-season polls and are eager to even the score in February rematch when they host the Jags.

Bobby Phills (21.9 ppg) has taken over the scoring leadership for SU this season, and he has a lot of help from Joe Faulkner (19.8 ppg) and point guard Carlos Sample (17.6 ppg).

But there's plenty of help for Phills. Robert Youngblood and Faulkner do their share of work on boards, averaging 8.8 and 8.6 rebounds a game.

As a team, SU has done the job on offense and defense. The Jaguars are No. 1 in the league in offense. They score 99.8 ppg . SU has allowed an average of 81.3 ppg) -- second in the conference.

Texas Southern (11-9, 5-2) can't seem to put Southern to rest. They lost three times to the Jags last season. The last time was a gut-wrenching loss in the conference tournament finals.

Charles Price leads the Tigers in scoring at 21.6 ppg and the ever ready Fred West backs him up at 15.5 ppg and 8.5 rpg.

Alcorn State is creating waves in the league. The Braves didn't have a decent record overall (4-14), but they slipped into third place behind the Jaguars and Tigers in the league standings with a 4-3 mark.

Grambling has had a rough go of it, but were still in position to make a move or two before the start of the conference tournament. Darrell Harris ranks among the league leaders in rebounds (6.3 a game) and Claude Newell leads the SWAC in three point field goal percentage (.447) and free throw percentage (.809).

Alabama State (11-7, 4-3) has been up and down lately. Steve Rogers is the top gun in the league at 28.2 ppg. But the Hornets will need more if they are to challenge in Houston.

-Bruce Winters

Tournament Update

Dates & Format: The SWAC tournament will take place March 9-11 at the Texas Southern University Health & Physical Education Arena in Houston. All eight teams in the conference will compete for the tournament championship in a single elimination format. The victor gets an automatic berth in the NCAA Division I tournament.

Picks For Final Four: Southern University, Texas Southern, Alcorn State, Grambling.

Favored Team To Win It All: Southern University.

Darkhorse Pick For Championship: Grambling.

Ticket Information: Call SWAC headquarters at 504/523-7574.