SWAC ROUNDBALL

Jags, Tigers deadlocked going down the stretch

At the start of the season, a lot of folk believed that Texas Southern was the team destined to take SWAC by storm. But Southern's Jaguars and coach Ben Jobe had other ideas. They've served notice that they won't give up their throne without a major scuffle.

For now, anyway.

The Jaguars and Tigers are tied for the league lead with identical records of 5-2. But SU has the edge because of their 102-91 win over TSU last month. The Tigers have the chance to even the series in a Feb. 25 rematch.

Nevertheless, those knowledgeable about the conference insist that a tourney final between SU and TSU isn't a sure thing.

For starters, the Jags aren't as balanced during the second half of the season as they were during the season's first half. Johnnie Steptoe has been lost to the team because of academic difficulties. All Steptoe did was average 20.6 points, pull down 8.3 rebounds, and shoot 52.4 percent from the field.

With his absence the Jaguars' edge has been reduced and the rest of the conference figures to be more balanced in terms of competitiveness.

Southern discovered that in the most abrupt fashion recently. Alcorn State, who had won just three of 14 games, upset the Jags 98-97 in Baton Rouge.

Arthur Harris won the game for the Braves on a last second shot to seal the win for coach Dave Whitney's crew. That night, the junior guard scorched Southern for 33 points, six boards, four assists, and two steals.

Until the loss to Alcorn, the Jags owned the nation's longest home court winning streak at 29 straight.

While Steptoe's production will be sorely missed, Southern still possesses ample offensive firepower. Carlos Sample, Daryl Battles, Joe Faulkner, Bobby Phills and Robert Youngblood account for nearly 80 percent of the Jaguars' offensive output.

Not having Steptoe's points will hurt Jobe's team, but SU will also miss his work on the glass. Battles pulls down 11.7 a game. But after Battles, the rebound numbers fall off. With fewer rebounds, Southern's running game is diminished.

Mississippi Valley State isn't having one of its more scintillating seasons as a team. They won their first conference game of the year last month.

Individually though, sharpshooting guard Tim Pollard is doing well at what he does best -- sink 'em from long range. At presstime, Pollard led the nation in three point field goals made per game (5.7 average). Against Southern Louisiana, Pollard hit eight of 15 three pointers.

Texas Southern is hanging tough and eagerly awaits their return engagement vs. Southern. Fred West continues to be the straw that stirs the drink for the Tigers. He's among the league leaders in scoring (19.4 ppg), rebounding (8.8) and blocked shots (57 in 19 games).

Since the holiday break, TSU has undergone a metamorphosis regarding their foul shooting. At the end of December, they shot less than 40 percent from the line as a team. With two weeks left in the regular season, they're tops in SWAC (70.9 percent).

Alabama State and Grambling comprise the two other teams playing over .500 ball in the conference (both were 4-3).

The Hornets have Terry Brooks, SWAC's leading scorer (24.7 ppg). But there's also Darrin Mayo (13.6 ppg, 6.6 rpg), Clifford Griffin (11.7 ppg) and Gerald Smith (10.2 ppg, 7.1 rpg).

Alabama State can score with the best of them (87.2 ppg), but their defense needs to be tighter. They are ranked next to last in the conference in scoring defense, allowing 90.3 ppg.

On paper, Grambling is a mystery team. They haven't been overwhelming offensively (74.4 ppg), but they have held their own defensively (allowing 79 ppg). However, one can argue that those figures are skewed because of the "killer" schedule Grambling had early in the season, which included a hefty share of games against Top 20 teams.

GSU has no truly dominant scorers. Darrell Harris, Terrell Wesley, and Andre Blackett all average between 11 and 12 points a game individually. Harris is the top boardsman at 6.2 rpg.

Jackson State, Prairie View, Alcorn and Mississippi Valley, will have to be spoilers at best when you consider their regular season showing.

JSU has SWAC's top defense (allows 74.5 ppg) and they do have Tyrone Kidd (17.1 ppg, 4.8 apg) and Demetrius Abram (16.4 ppg, 9.2 rpg). However, the Tigers haven't been able to maintain the kind of consistency that's required for them to be a contender in March.

-Steve Zimmerman

Tourney Time

SWAC's basketball tournament is scheduled for March 9-12 in Baton Rouge, La. at the F.G. Clark Activity Center located on the campus of Southern University.

The championship round takes place on March 12 and ESPN will broadcast the game live, beginning at 7 p.m. For more details on this round robin affair, involving all eight teams in the conference, contact the SWAC office at 504/523-7573.

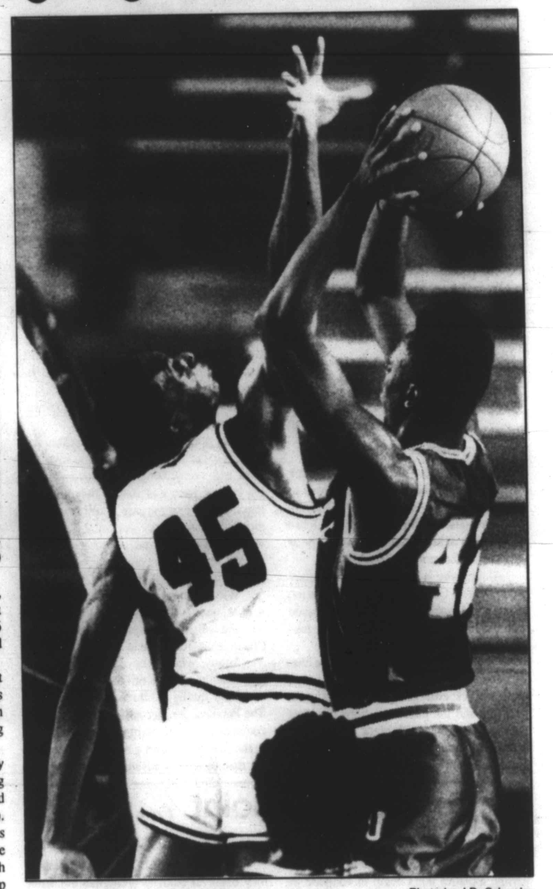

Photo by J.D. Schwalm

As the regular season winds down, Jackson State finds themselves in the middle of the pack. The Tigers' strength, however, is defense. JSU's Eric Strothers (45) extends himself to contest a shot by Tennessee State's Nico Child.

SWAC Standings

As of February 7, 1989

	Conference	Overall
Southern University	5-2	11-8
Texas Southern	5-2	10-10
Alabama State	4-3	9-10
Grambling	4-3	7-12
Jackson State	3-4	9-9
Prairie View A & M	3-4	7-10
Alcorn State	3-4	4-15
Mississippi Valley State	1-6	5-14

MEAC ROUNDBALL

It's a new day!

There are some new faces at the top of the MEAC basketball heap this season. Those faces have replaced North Carolina A & T and Howard, who are usually theteams who have battled for the conference crown in recent seasons.

But in '88-'89, a changing of the guard has started to take place. Instead of the Aggies and the Bison taking the lead, those schools have taken a back seat to the likes of South Carolina State, Florida A & M, Morgan State and Coppin State.

That quartet is the most likely to appear in the conference tournament's Final Four in early March.

South Carolina State (17-6, 9-1) is in the driver's seat as the regular season winds down. They have been the dominant squad, but did suffer an 84-69 spanking at the hands of second place Florida A & M.

Coach Cy Alexander has molded a team that fits his philosophy of what he wants to see on a basketball court. On offense, the Bulldogs are patient and methodical. Defensively, they like to apply pressure and use it as a means to get their offense going. SC State appears to have developed a foundation for winning teams in the future. Before last season, the Dogs hadn't seen a winning season in nine years.

It's a quite a different story now.

The script begins with powerhouse forward Rodney Mack. The senior is the rock that stabilizes this team. His scoring average is down from previous seasons (14.7 ppg), but he's a machine on the glass, pulling down an average of 11.3 a game.

But while Mack isn't scoring as much, he makes the most of all of his offensive opportunities. His 66.3 percent accuracy from the field ranks among the top five in Division I. Additionally, he's canning 79.3 percent of his free throws.

State's winning ways are clearly evident when you look at MEAC statistics. They lead the league in team scoring (82.4 ppg), field goal percentage (.494) and scoring margin (+ 7.6 points per game). The Dogs are also the second ranked rebounding team in the conference (38.9 caroms a game).

Eric Jeter, Arthur Caldwell, and Darrell Gilmore provide some quality play to supplement Mack's output. Jeter scores at a 14.6 ppg clip and he's shooting 49.4 percent from the field. Caldwell runs the offense and hands out nearly five assists a night, while defensive specialist Gilmore has come up with 54 steals in 23 games.

Florida A & M seems to have the best chance to do some damage to the Dogs hopes of winning the title. The Rattlers reached the MEAC finals last season before falling to A & T. Aside from their triumph over SC State, they edged Coppin State, 69-68.

This season A & M has come back with a vengeance with Leonard King leading the way. King won conference player of week honors for three consecutive weeks. He's scoring 20.7 points a contest, shooting 53.1 per cent from the field and has converted 41.4 percent of his three-point field goal attempts.

Kevin Glover handles a large part of the rebounding duties (7.2 rpg) for coach Willie Booker's squad. And Reginald Finney has demonstrated his ability to contribute right away as a rookie. Finney hit a hot streak late in the year, copping MEAC rookie of the week honors for two weeks straight. In one three game stretch, he scored 43 points, had 11 assists, and grabbed nine rebounds to go along with three steals and three blocked shots.

When FAMU puts on the heat defensively, Terry Giles is usually the prime guy in this department. Aside from dishing out nearly five assists per game, he has averaged almost two steals a game during the course of the season.

Morgan State could be the surprise team of the conference this year. The Golden Bears have taken their share of names and their confidence level has steadily grown with each victory.

Nathaniel Frazier has successfully guided the Bears with his fiery approach that apparently has infused a high level of intensity in his players. In one instant, Frazier's emotionalism made national headlines in his team's forfeit loss to Florida A & M in Tallahassee.

MSU led the Rattlers 42-40, when Frazier was hit with his second technical foul. College rules stipulate that when you've been assessed the "T" for the second time, you must leave the playing premises. Frazier refused, so the refs called the game and awarded Florida A & M the victory.

Morgan has a solid club. Anthony Reid is the league's No. 2 scorer (20.9 ppg) and Damon Williams chips in at 16.8 ppg.

The glass, though, is where MSU is effective. Marcus Sheffield, Williams and Reid, collectively average close to 25 boards a game. The Bears are the MEAC's third ranked rebounding team (37.2 game). And they are particularly stingy on the defensive end. They allow 72.7 points a game ,which is the league's second best in that category.

The Eagles of Coppin State could be the most dangerous bunch among the MEAC's projected Final Four. Coppin plays good, hard-nosed defense (league leaders in field goal defense -- 42.9 percent). They have outstanding guards and Larry Stewart is a prime time performer in the front court. Stewart, like Mack of SC State, leads the MEAC in field goal percentage (.663), meaning that both are ranked among the top five in Division I.

Stewart is a smooth operator in the paint. He's scoring 18.3 ppg and snatching 10.3 rebounds a night. Phil Booth, a preseason all-MEAC pick, is scoring less (12.8 ppg) but playing a more complete game in all phases.

Guard Reggie Issac is a pressure player, able to do what's needed when a game is there to be won or loss. Issac scores 16.6 ppg and is shooting 42.3 percent from three point range.

It's been a rough year for coach Don Corbett's Aggies. For the first time in eight seasons, it's a good bet that A &T won't be in the NCAA tournament. They get scoring from Carlton Becton (17.2 ppg), Glenn Taggert (16.5 ppg) and Corvin Davis (15.3 ppg). But the points those three get usually come from the perimeter. And in this league, you need more than outside shooting to take all the marbles.

Delaware State has the league's top scorer in Tom Davis (23.3 ppg), but they'll need a lot more to get to the conference tourney's championship round. Howard, Bethune-Cookman, and Maryland-Eastern Shore have a combined conference record of 8-23, so they are likely to enter the first round of the MEAC tournament play as visiting teams -- a very unenviable position.

-Ronald Kirk

Tourney Time

The road to the MEAC tournament championship begins on Feb. 28 on the campuses of the top seeded teams in the league. The winners will advance to the Final Four which will be played at the Greensboro Coliseum in Greensboro , NC on March 3 and 4.

Tip-off times for the semis on Marc h 3 are 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. The championship final will be played the following night (March 4) at 9 p.m. and will be televised live by ESPN.

For ticket information, contact the MEAC office at 919/275-9961.

Photo by Max Dunhill

Don Corbett and North Carolina A&T hit some rough spots this year. Unless the Aggies have a late season surge, they'll watch the conference tournament's Final Four as spectators for the first time in many moons.

MEAC Standings

As of February 10, 1989

	Conference	Overall
South Carolina State	10-1	18-6
Florida A & M	9-2	14-7
Morgan State	7-4	12-10
Coppin State	6-5	12-10
North Carolina A & T	5-6	8-13
Bethune-Cookman	4-7	7-14
Howard University	3-7	7-14
Delaware State	3-7	8-13
Maryland/Eastern Shore	1-9	1-20