

In Defense Of The MEAC In The NCAA Tourney

By Elson Armstrong, Jr.

Recently, during a friendly sports argument here in the Times offices, (we were arguing over the UNC-Georgetown game), I made a statement, where I put my big foot right into my even bigger mouth. I said something crazy like "A&T shouldn't have been in the NCAA tournament!" Before all of you Aggie fans run me out of town, let me say emphatically that I take it back, hook, line and sinker!

I think the MEAC and other so-called smaller conferences should have a bid even though sportscasters such as Dick Vital of ESPN say that they have no business at the same party with the big boys. Vital, and others like him, base their opinions on the "fact" that the MEAC Champion has been blown off the court over the past few years in the NCAA's opening round. It's hard to argue with that (it did happen). But what they've also got to take into account is that during those same two years, the MEAC Champ has been placed in the Western Regionals over three thousand miles from their home base. Most MEAC fans can't afford to trek that far to give their teams support, and yes, this does make a difference. Even Georgetown complained when it was announced that they were going out west. All of the crowds there naturally will be hostile to any eastern outfit and Georgetown was just so overpowering that they snatched the west title in defiance.

Just because a team loses badly in one particular year in the NCAA's doesn't mean that the entire league has to be barred. It has happened to the best, UCLA was sent to the east and was promptly blown away in an early round last year, but you better believe that this won't deny the Pac-Ten or UCLA any future invitations.

This brings up the question why, other than being placed in a hostile region, has the MEAC looked so bad in the playoffs?

My answer to that is one word — "DEFENSE". The smaller, predominantly black schools just don't have the depth to get in a running-gunning match with a national power. (This was illustrated when A&T chose to run with West Virginia and lost by a score of 102-72. Fresno state, which em-

phasizes defense, also lacked depth but they beat the high scoring Mountaineers 50-46 in the next round.)

Sure, MEAC schools are capable of putting points on the board, but as has been proved time and time again, the NCAA winner is the team that plays the best defense.

North Carolina and Georgetown can run with anyone, but their defense is awesome. This is what got them into the national finals.

Georgetown even out-defended Fresno State (tears, tears), the nation's No. 1 defensive team over the past two seasons. If you saw that game, sure the Hoyas were not only blistering with their shooting percentage (64%), they also played great "D". Fresno State was still in the game until the last four minutes when the Georgetown defense kept them from getting their usually high percentage shots.

Defense can be exciting and it does not mean holding the ball. Fresno State Coach Boyd Grant, whose junior college teams used to run and gun, says, "Defense will always keep you in the game, even when your shooting is off."

There is where I think the MEAC can improve. Oh sure, the fans like the running style, but contrary to what many people think, a team can be high scoring and play defense, too!

A case in point was Hillside's teams of the mid-1960's that were coached by the late Carl Easterling. The Hornets made hitting the 100-mark a tradition, but they also played a stifling press that made scores like 147-57, 138-70, 110-68, and 119-57 common. If you noticed, Hillside must have been putting the ball up (which they did), but when you score over 100 points and hold the other team to 70 or less, you're also playing some great defense (which they also did).

The great Morgan State team of 1974 was the last really great defensive MEAC team that I've seen and it got the Bears a national championship.

So, for the MEAC to be competitive now in the NCAA's, I think the coaches should emphasize the defensive aspect of the game more. I hope to see the day come when there's a MEAC team in the final four and this is a major way to get there.



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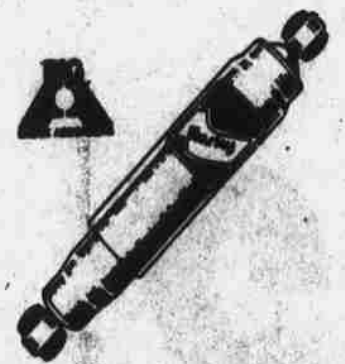
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