

THE COACHES

Howard Mentor's Youngsters Grow Up Fast

By EDWARD HILL JR.
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When A.B. Williamson came to Howard University in 1974, he brought some impressive credentials with him.

As one of the most successful coaches in the talent-rich Washington, D.C., area, Williamson compiled a 107-26 mark in five seasons at Eastern High School. In the process, he developed such all-Americans as James "Turk" Tillman (University of Maryland and Eastern Kentucky), Rodney Wright (Oral Roberts and later Howard) and James Ratiff (University of Tennessee and Howard).

So it was only natural to assume that Williamson would attract his share of the local talent and build Howard into a basketball power.

But Williamson and his followers soon discovered that nothing can be assumed when it comes to coaching college basketball.

"Now that I look back on that first year, I think I was very naive," Williamson admits. "I really believed that I could do many of the same things here at Howard that I did while I was on the high school level. I didn't think it would be that big a transition.

"Boy, how wrong I was. I didn't take into consideration the many ancillary and administrative responsibilities a coach has to perform. In addition to the basic difference you have in the relationship between the coach and the athletes, you have other things like recruiting, budgets and assistant coaches to worry about."

And, if Williamson needed any further proof of the vast difference between the two levels, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill gave it to him in the form of a 107-69 drubbing.

"That was a very traumatic experience," recalls Williamson. "My first game as a college coach and we're playing North Carolina on their court. I had never had that kind of experience before. It definitely alerted me to the realities of college coaching."

Following the shock at Carolina, Williamson recovered nicely and led the Bison to a respectable 15-11 record. Since that maiden year, he has given the program stability and clearly established himself in his profession.

Now in his ninth year, Williamson has won more than 60 percent of his games. He is the first coach to win more than 100 games at Howard, compiling a 132-89 mark.

During that span, the Bison have won three MEAC championships (1980-81-83), five tournament runner-up finishes and the university's first-ever appearance in the NCAA playoffs.

Good coaches are judged by their ability to teach, motivate and to make the necessary adjustments. Williamson has fulfilled all of those requirements.



Practice Makes Perfect

Williamson says he learned fast that there's much more to coaching on the college level than coaching.

When transfers Wright, Ratiff and Larry Spriggs (now with the Los Angeles Lakers) all came to Howard, Williamson was expected to win, and he did.

Last year, with only one proven player in all-MEAC guard Bernard Perry (1983 draft pick of the Washington Bullets), Howard was not expected to win; yet Williamson surprised everyone by leading his team to a 19-9 mark and an 11-1 record in the MEAC to capture the regular season title.

"I'm still trying to figure out how we won as many games as we did last season," he says, downplaying the significance of his coaching. "We had a bunch of guys who were not great on ability, but they showed a lot of character and determination. As a coach, I think it was my most gratify-

ing moment."

What made Williamson's accomplishment even more remarkable was the fact that he lost four players midway through the season due to academic difficulties.

But as impressive as that may have been, Williamson may have outdone himself this season. Not only did he start the year with no proven starters and a freshman backcourt, but he had to do it against such heavyweights as UCLA, St. Peter's and Old Dominion, all on the road.

It looked as if Williamson was flirting with disaster when the team got off to its worst start during his tenure as it lost six straight and compiled a dismal 3-8 mark.

But Williamson knew what he was doing as he proved later by knocking off conference favorite North Carolina

A&T handily and going on to win five in a row and seven of eight.

"The tough early schedule was designed to get the team ready for the conference," explains Williamson. "After playing in Pauley Pavilion and some of the other places we've played, our young players have grown some. Now they are ready to play anywhere and not be intimidated."

During the streak, Williamson has started three freshmen and, in many instances, they have been instrumental in the victories. One of them, Fred Hill, a 6-2 guard who was high school player of the year in Boston last year, has emerged as a leader.

Hill is averaging 12 points per game and also leads the team in assists and steals. He has already been named MEAC Rookie of the Week three times

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