



Steady Eagle

East Forsyth's Robert Hill, the *Chronicle's* Male Athlete of the Year and East's most consistent player, drives during a Monday practice session. Hill's 16 points led the Eagles' offensive effort against Morganton Freedom (photo by James Parker).

East Forsyth tops Morganton Freedom

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put the East on top 3-0.

However, Gerald Rutherford, the Patriots' leading scorer and rebounder, then took charge for Freedom, scoring four of the Patriots' next six points to give his team a 6-3 lead.

From that point until the end of the first period, the Eagles had to scuffle to prevent the Patriots from blowing them out of the game.

With Rutherford, Bradley Ervin and Tim Moss providing the spark, Freedom looked too strong for East. But the Eagles refused to give in. A strong second period by Davis and Scales on the offensive boards enabled East to get a number of crucial second and third shots.

And, when Robert Hill, East's outside threat, began to find the range in the final three minutes of the period, the tide began to turn.

Hill hit three consecutive bombs from about 22 feet out to send his team into the lockerroom tied at 28-28.

After intermission, East played its trump card, unleashing a furious full-court pressure defense that spelled doom for Freedom. The Eagles forced numerous Patriot turnovers, then converted them to easy layups on

their end of the court. East also continued to pound the backboards and took a 46-40 lead at the end of three quarters.

East widened its lead to 50-42 in the opening minutes of the final period before going into a delay offense. Although they missed several one-and-one opportunities down the stretch, Hayes said he is proud of the way his players kept their poise.

"I was pleased with the way we held on once we took the lead," Hayes said. "We showed a lot of patience under pressure. These kids are getting more and more confidence as the season goes along. If we continue playing good defense, there's no telling how far we could go in the playoffs."

Rutherford and Moss led the Patriots in scoring with 22 and 10 points, respectively. The Eagles, on the other hand, had four players in double figures. Hill led the East with 16. Chris Davis and Scales each pumped in 13, while Calvin Davis added 10.

With the win, the Eagles move into the quarterfinals of the Western 4-A playoffs Friday, March 16, at East Burke High School.

MEAC tourney: Where are the fans?

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cent years, it also has not made very much. The reason? Shockingly poor attendance and a general 'I-don't-give-a-darn' attitude by MEAC fans and those living in the MEAC area.

The tournament's lack of success contrasts sharply with the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association tournament.

Held one week before the MEAC tourney, the CIAA tournament attracts more than 50,000 fans for four nights of play, as compared to fewer than 10,000 for three nights of play in the MEAC.

The result is that the CIAA, a Division II league, is much stronger and much more financially sound than its Division I counterpart.

It is too bad that the Carolinas-Virginia area cannot, or will not support two black college basketball tour-

"Our tournament is 39 years-old. The MEAC has been around only 10 years. Give them time."

CIAA Commissioner Bob Moorman

naments. The CIAA tournament was played this year in Norfolk, Va., at the Scope Arena, which seats 10,250. Though the league charged premium prices for tickets, the tourney sold out on three of its four nights, and came close to a full house on the fourth.

In Greensboro, where the MEAC tourney was played, there was a different story. The Greensboro Coliseum seats just 16,000, and about 2,000 folks rattled around in the place while the semifinals were played. Once host school North Carolina A&T -- which eventually won the tournament -- played its way into the championship game, attendance picked up. A crowd of about 4,000 saw the title game.

But the MEAC tournament's total attendance still numbered less than the attendance on the CIAA tournament's slowest night.

Needless to say, the MEAC attendance was far less than what Free had hoped for, and he says the time may have come to move the tourney, which fared even more poorly during a three-year stint in Winston-Salem.

"We have been entertaining thoughts of taking the tournament elsewhere," says Free. "Nothing is firm yet, but we have to keep an open mind."

You can bet that such considerations by Free and the MEAC are more than just casual. In fact, serious negotiations are under way to play the tournament in either Philadelphia or Washington next year.

New York also is a possibility.

"A lot of things would have to be worked out," says

Free. "We couldn't go without a (money) guarantee from whatever city wanted us."

The CIAA has not had that problem. It may move its tournament to Richmond, but only because that city is willing to open the door to the vault and guarantee the CIAA tens of thousands of dollars if only it'll bring its four-day show a little farther north.

In return, Richmond hotels would be booked solid for four days with plenty of people who would spend plenty of money. That's the kind of atmosphere the MEAC is looking for.

"I don't think you should say we are competing with them," says Free. "I really don't think we go after the same group of fans."

Bob Moorman, commissioner of the CIAA, agrees. He says the MEAC's problems began 10 years ago when a group of schools, including North Carolina A&T, left the CIAA to form the MEAC.

"When those teams left the CIAA, they did not represent the dominant teams in the league at the time," Moorman says. "The best teams were still in the CIAA, and the interest stayed with those teams and with the CIAA."

Still, the question must be asked: Why don't more folks attend the MEAC tournament? Moorman offers a simple answer.

"Our tournament is 39 years old," he says. "The MEAC has only been around 10 years. Give them time."

It would appear, however, that the MEAC needs more than just time on its side. Unlike the CIAA, its teams are spread out along the East Coast, from Baltimore, Md., to Daytona Beach, Fla. That means, come tournament time, only one of the league's schools brings any fans to Greensboro -- North Carolina A&T.

It should also be pointed out that A&T is located in -- you guessed it -- Greensboro.

"It's a tough situation for us," admits Free.

What the commissioner means is that if A&T is knocked out of the tourney early, it becomes a financial disaster.

Because of that, some have suggested that the officials give the Aggies favored treatment to help prevent them from losing.

"That's not true," says Free, "not true at all. We play fair in the MEAC. All we want is a fair shake from the fans."

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