

Pickup games bring out best in Ram little-big man

By DAVID BULLA
Chronicle Sports Editor

A 5-foot-7, 150-pound bear of a man, Fernandez "Bumpy" Griffin pulls up five feet from the top of the key and slingshots the ball through the basket.

Griffin, the diminutive, behind-the-scenes dynamo of the Winston-Salem State athletic program, surprises no one with his accurate long-range touch. WSSU's equipment manager and sports information director played point guard for Reynolds High School a decade before we had even heard the name Tyrone Bogues. In 1973 he and his Demon teammates advanced to the state 4-A championship, where they lost to powerful Reidsville. That Ram team featured Melvin Watkins, who would start on UNC Charlotte's Final Four team in 1977.

"That Reidsville team is generally considered the most talented state champion since Atkins in '69," Griffin said recently. "They just had too much for us."

Judging from the size differential, one would think that Griffin would be no match for C.E. "Bighouse" Gaines, the Rams' 41-year athletic director and basketball coach. But the resourceful Griffin has been matching Gaines barb for barb since the former was a freshman at WSSU in 1973. Instead of playing basketball, Griffin chose to be Gaines' statistician, equipment manager and right-hand man.

"I didn't get an athletic scholarship," the Winston-Salem native said. "So I would have had to play freshman ball -- we still had jayvee then. I had the confidence to play, but it made more sense to help Coach because I had to pay my way through school and I could get some work-study (money) working for Bighouse."

Griffin was so good as a stat and equipment man that Gaines decided to retain him after he completed work on his degree. While he's been a prominent figure in a WSSU athletic program that produces consistent champions in the revenue-making sports, there's still a little of the player in him. So the ubiquitous Griffin opens Whitaker Gym four nights a week for pickup basketball from late May until mid-August. On these nights the gym that witnessed all of those bombs by Earl Monroe comes alive again. Only now Griffin, Luther "Ticky"



Fernandez "Bumpy" Griffin rules the court in summer pickup games at Winston-Salem State's Whitaker Gym (photo by James Parker).

Burden and Carl Redd are the among guys launching the long ones now.

"For most of us basketball paid or paved the way for our education," Griffin said. "We owe basketball something, and this is a way to keep playing and maintain our love of the game."

For guys like Burden, who played for the NBA's New York Knicks, and Redd, who played at UNC-Asheville, "Bumpy's League," as it is incorrectly called on the street, offers an opportunity to stay in shape while playing against quality competition.

"The play here is a little more physical," said Redd, now a supervisor at Guilford Mills in Greensboro. "But everybody knows everybody and the games are friendly. Bumpy keeps everybody in line."

Redd, whose summer league experience includes a stint in the Bob McAdoo League in Greensboro, said there was a certain amount of wisdom being passed on from the older to younger participants.

The pickup games are at best loosely organized. There are no referees, no clocks

and no scorebooks. Each night Griffin puts together two roughly equal teams to get things started. The winner stays on the floor, while Griffin makes another fivesome among the waiting players. Since individuals make their own calls, Griffin arbitrates in case of a controversial call.

The cardinal rule is that Griffin surrounds himself with enough talent to keep the court for a few games. The Ram assistant coach will help younger players to improve a weakness and to remember to play within the team concept.

"One guy doesn't win a game," said Griffin, who also has the wisdom to sideline himself from time to time. "It takes five guys playing together to win. You have to have a good work ethic and be willing to dive on the floor for a loose ball."

For the half-dozen WSSU players who are in summer school, the Whitaker Gym sessions offer the closest thing they have to legal organized ball. NCAA rules prohibit them from playing in unsanctioned leagues, and since Griffin is an assistant coach, he does not play on the same team as current WSSU players.

The closest sanctioned league is in Greensboro and that requires transportation, which is in small supply for these college students. So they hang out at the old gym waiting for Bumpy to put them into one of the pickup games.

"The older guys try to teach us the fundamentals that will help us in the season," said Charlie Spell, the point guard from Fayetteville. "I talk to Ticky a lot, and he tells me to penetrate more and dish off. But I think one of the big things I learn in the summer is not to get into any bad habits."

One such habit would be mixing it up with Carlos Terry, the former WSSU and Washington Bullet big man. On the nights Terry's around, the level of play under the boards picks up a notch.

Getting into these pickup games requires some patience. Guys come in off the street, but they usually have to wait a few nights and must learn to talk Griffin's language.

"If I had said the thing was open, we'd have to get organized and get sanctioned," he said. "Then we'd have to collect dues and stuff like that. Actually, I've thought about doing that, but most of us work and that

Please see page B11

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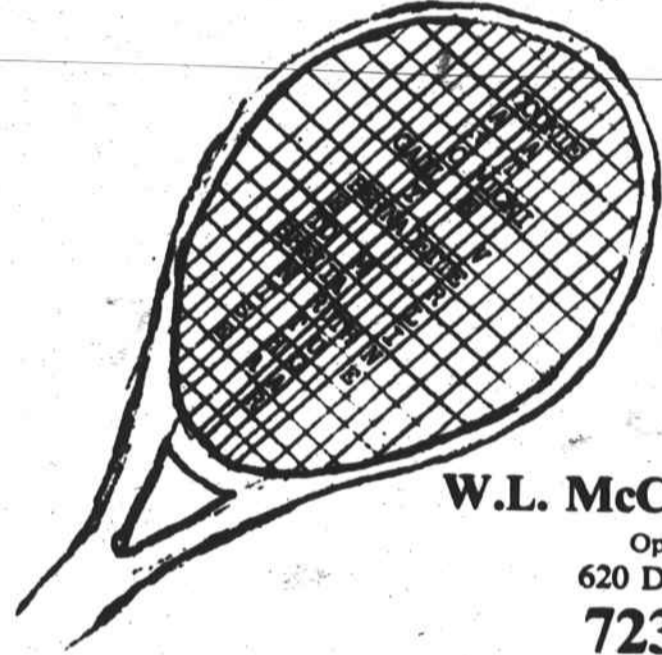
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Big Apple Spotlight

Local stars to play in Charlotte tourney

By KENNETH RAYMOND
Chronicle Sports Writer

The Big Apple League has been invited to participate in an all-star basketball tournament in Charlotte.

League Commissioner Walter L. Funderburk has been asked by Bill Shelton, director of community service for the YMCA in Charlotte, to form a team of all-stars from the league to participate in the NBA-Coca-Cola-YMCA Pro-Am Tournament, which begins Saturday at 4:30 p.m. at Johnson C. Smith University. It will continue for three consecutive weekends, ending Aug. 3.

"I'm surprised and honored that they asked us to get involved," Funderburk said. "It makes me feel that we are really doing something special here."

The tournament will feature a handful of outstanding players who are now active in the National Basketball Association. Players such as Walter Davis of the Phoenix Suns, Cedric Max-



Walter Funderburk

well of the Los Angeles Clippers, Eric "Sleepy" Floyd of the Golden State Warriors, Dominique Wilkins of the Atlanta Hawks and Al Wood of the Seattle SuperSonics have committed to play in the tournament.

Eight teams will participate. Three teams will come from the Charlotte area, two from the Wayne Robinson League in

Greensboro, one from Gastonia, Durham and the Big Apple League.

Steve Martin, field program manager of the NBA in Charlotte, is working in conjunction with the Charlotte YMCA to give children an opportunity to see professional basketball action without having to travel to the closest NBA stop, Atlanta.

The players chosen to represent the Big Apple League are Eddie Jordan and Terry Strickland of the Players, Danny Womack and Roger Mason of Domino's Pizza, Rob Little of the Rockets, and Harry Davis, John Watkins, Mike Jones and Dwayne Aikens of Winston-Salem's Finest.

Funderburk believes his all-stars will represent Winston-Salem well in the tournament and that being involved may have some positive ramifications.

"I'm sure we have the talent within the league to do well," Funderburk said. "Being recognized like this should also help in getting the league sanctioned."

Local Sports

From Page B4

playing 30-minute halves full-court.

One of Hentz's favorite drills is a three-on-two/two-on-one break. Three players drive against two at one end of the floor, then the point man retreats to play defense against two drivers.

"I think this is the best way to teach defense," Hentz said. "The most important things are backpedaling, keeping your knees bent and getting your arms ready to steal a pass."

Hentz has been particularly impressed with the play of Carlos Gregory, who attends Atkins Middle School.

"That's our future right

there," Hentz said of Gregory. "Look at the way he makes the fake on the drive. That's advanced."

Hentz said he has de-emphasized weightlifting this year because his class is younger and the heat has been too intense. Still, he has four of his older students working on the weights in Bryant Feggins, Kevin Thompson, Chris Parks and Elbert Thacker.

TC Track Series

The Twin City Track Club is hosting a summer track series at Wake Forest on Wednesday evenings, starting July 23.

Entry forms are available at the Winston Lake Family, Kernersville and Central YMCAs. The series runs through Aug. 13. All meets will be held at the Wake Forest track, except the Aug. 13 meet. It will be held at Hanes Park. Starting time each Wednesday is 6:15 p.m.

Events include the long jump, 100 meters, 200, 400, 800, 3,000, mile, 4x100 and 4x400 relays and long jump.

For more information, call Anthony L. Boerio at 722-1682.

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