

PROFILE

Screen has quietly succeeded as tennis mentor

Hampton tennis coach Robert Screen has guided the Pirates into the land of NCAA net prominence.

The Pirates have won two national titles. They are the '89 Division II champs. The school claimed their first collegiate crown in '76.

Without a doubt, he has become one of the premier tennis coaches in the country - black college or white college. He is the only black college tennis coach to ever win a national title and has yet to experience a losing season.

Screen, who has a career record of 434-91 in 21 seasons, has turned Hampton into a virtual gold mine of tennis excellence during that time.

And the way he has succeeded is by recruiting some of the Third World's prime talent. Primarily, his team is composed of Nigerians and Brazilians.

Screen's pipeline of foreign players was constructed in 1970 when he first took over the tennis program at Hampton. Screen was befriended by Gladys Hellman, who was then editor/publisher of *World Tennis Magazine*.

"She had always received numerous letters from foreign players who inquired about different schools in the U.S. And she would attend the U.S. Tennis Nationals in Forest Hill, NY. And through that connection, I was able to meet the presidents of the tennis federations from other countries."

In Screen's mind, it was only natural that Third World countries showed more interest in sending their athletes to a black college as opposed to only looking at the tennis programs at predominantly white colleges.

"The Europeans didn't respond to us, but the Third World nations did and it has worked out well for all of us."

It's a fortunate thing for Screen and Hampton that he has a supply of foreign players. In the U.S., the top black tennis athletes almost always go to a white college. No doubt, HU couldn't be as competitive as they have been without having top-of-the-line athletes.

"We're able to get the better athletes from those countries because of the athletes that have played at Hampton previously. They come over and are treated well. Those players tell other players in their country about the school and the program and they want to come and play for Hampton."

"What helps out so much is that the people that players recommend to us are prospects who can step in and potentially be a No. 1 player for us."

When you look at the Pirates' roster it can readily be seen that their top players come from across the water.

For example, Luis Nascimento is the No. 1 player who comes from Brazil. Nascimento finished the season at 18-8 and a No. 2 national ranking Division II singles play. Islam Ul-Haq is the team's No. 2 player (18-4) and he attained a national ranking of No. 8. Ul-Haq is rated as the best player in Pakistan. Ul-Haq and



Photo by Max Dunhill

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-- Robert Screen

Muritala Ajibade (Nigeria) finished the year as the nation's top-ranked doubles team.

Because of the team's foreign dominance, there have been assertions that Screen has purposely avoided the recruitment of black American players.

The truth is that Screen hasn't been able to get the black American athlete because they go to the white schools.

That issue, he explained, is a very emotional one for him.

"We can get those athletes if they will take a look at us," said Screen. "Every year I go after those players, and in a lot of cases, they won't even respond when I contact them by letter."

Because the top black Americans go to white colleges, some people have told Screen that he should recruit black Americans who may not be as gifted as the for-

ign players he's been getting.

"They expect me to take the also-rans," he said. "Hey, if a kid can't play that well and still wants to try out for the team, he's free to do so. But you can't expect me to offer them a scholarship if they can't play that well."

"As for the really good black American tennis players, they're going to realize sooner or later that a black college like Hampton can provide them with some things that the big schools can't. I've seen so many top players go to a white college and not do well because they were never made to feel comfortable with their environment. Kids who feel comfortable where they are, tend to play up to their potential and that's what we've seen happen with players in our program."

Screen not only has molded two national championship teams, but he has

taken Pirates tennis to a level of consistency that has been difficult for many other programs around the country to match.

In 21 years, the Pirates have never been ranked lower than No. 6 in the nation. Since '83, the team has finished no lower than fourth. Last year, they were the No. 1 team in the country, before losing in the finals to Chapman College. They ended the '88 season at 29-1. This year they were 22-3.

Outwardly, Screen is a low key type of coach. You'll seldom if ever see him become overly emotional when his team is on the court. "Screaming is not my style," he said. "I don't get outwardly excited. So I do look calm on the outside. But people don't know what's going on inside of me."

- Evan Nottingham