

ELITE EIGHT

UNION IS NO. 1

Most of the time, being everybody's pre-season pick to win a national championship is akin to getting the kiss of death. Teams seldom live up to such lofty billings, twitching as they bite the dust in their quest for a title. So along comes Virginia Union, a team that survived all the hoopla and met every challenge face-to-face.

After four months of proving their worth, the Panthers boogied back to Richmond with the national championship trophy in hand after smacking Bridgeport (Conn.) 100-75 in the Division II finals at Springfield, Mass.

Sporting shaved heads as a symbol of team solidarity, the Panthers can proclaim themselves the undisputed genies of college roundball.

So much for the kiss of death.

The Panthers' celebration didn't reach a peak until they returned home. First there was a parade on campus, then another one in downtown Richmond, followed by a visit to the Governor's mansion, courtesy of an invitation from Virginia Governor Doug Wilder, a Union alumnus.

"This has been a very rewarding year," says Dave Robbins, Virginia Union coach. "It's a big relief to win because so much was expected of us all year."

Union took care of some serious business at the Elite Eight. These are the main ingredients that make up the VU championship recipe:

- A forbidding defense that nullifies, frustrates, and otherwise disarms the deadliest of shooters;

- A small fleet of wide bodies who would do any football team proud. Life in the paint against Union is extremely tough and you don't get many rebounds;

- Offensive balance -- the Panthers have nine people who could be the team's leading scorer on any given night.

But while Union was the team that rejected losing, Robbins is quick to note that in spite of the final scores, his team's journey to the promised land was not necessarily a smooth one. Says Robbins: "The first game was a dogfight. In the second game, we led by 17 but went flat during the last five minutes. And even in the finals, we didn't run away with it until late in the first half."

Defense, though, was oh so prominent. Entering the Elite Eight, Union led the nation in field goal percentage defense at .375.

It wasn't much different in Springfield. In three games, opponents never found the found the range -- collectively (mis)firing at 35 percent accuracy.

In the finals, the defense set the tone as the Purple Knights shot just 32.6 percent from the floor.

One key item for the champs was the success they had in smothering Lambert Shell, who finished the game as Bridgeport's all-time scoring leader (3,001 career points).



Photo by Max Dunhill

Virginia Union coach Dave Robbins

Elite Eight Results

First round

Virginia Union 81 Ky. Wesleyan 69
Cal State-Bakersfield 89 Jacksonville St. (Ala.) 59
Bridgeport (Conn.) 127 Central Oklahoma 124 OT
California (Pa.) 84 South Dakota State 73

Semi-finals

Virginia Union 69 Cal State-Bakersfield 66
Bridgeport (Conn.) 76 California (Pa.) 75

Championship finals

Virginia Union 100 Bridgeport (Conn.) 75

Shell, who averaged 23.7 ppg, 7.2 rpg for the season, was limited in part, by a severe ankle sprain that hampered his mobility, and by Union's defensive efforts. For the game, Shell had 11 points, hitting four of 14 shots.

For all intents and purposes, the title game was over with about 16 minutes left to play in the second half. Union built a 14 point lead and at no time appeared to be vulnerable to any of Bridgeport's comeback attempts.

Union was just too strong. Elite Eight MVP Derrick Johnson was dominant enough with 17 points, nine rebounds and six blocked shots in the finals. But Johnson was far from being a solo act. Reggie Jones produced meaningful numbers with his Michael Jackson imitation, the only missing element being a set of rhinestones for Jones' glove.

Jones wore the glove as protection for the stitches in his shooting hand. That injury occurred during the South Atlantic Regionals two weeks prior to the Elite Eight. Jones delivered a game-high 19 points and 11 rebounds and joined Johnson as a member of the all-tournament team.

But even with those two grabbing most of the spotlight, Union, which shot 57.3 percent from the field, got lots of help from lots of people.

Backup center Robert McKie, the 6-7, 260 pounds bull elephant, contributed 14 points and seven rebounds in 15 minutes playing time and Troy Phillips finished with 11 points and five boards. Walter Hurd, the team's leading scorer at 15.4 ppg, played the most complete game of his career, adding 10 points and a very impressive 10 assists. Warren Peebles factored into the total with nine points and nine assists.

That kind of balance is rare, but for Union it's standard fare. In the semis, Peebles led the way vs. Cal State-Bakersfield with 19 points and four assists. Against Kentucky Wesleyan, Tim Davis and Mike Matthews came off the bench to contribute 16 and 13 points respectively. Davis went seven for seven from the field in 13 minutes and Matthews did his damage in 21 minutes of playing time.

Union's emphasis on low post play differs from Robbins' approach in past years when his Panthers favored the racehorse pace and scored 90+ points a game. For Robbins, it's a matter of showcasing Union's major asset. "You should change your style according to what type of players you have," says Robbins. "Any coach who doesn't do that isn't worth his salt. When you have big strong guys, you better use them."

Robbins has taken Union to greater heights because his players have completely embraced his philosophy. And in so many instances, it's the little things that help make the difference.

You'll rarely see the guards take a shot on the fast break if there are no teammates in position to get the rebound. Neither will you observe a non-ballhandler trying to beat the press with the dribble. These guys know their roles. Robbins won't let them forget.

"Aside from our depth, what helped us was the players understanding that being selfish hurts our team. If our people do what they're capable of doing, nobody will beat us, except us. I push my players to the limit. If they can handle me, then the games are easy."

- Craig T. Greenlee

Virginia Union packs a lot of power inside the Jones (pictured at right) is a strong inside player. The second time that Union has won the national championship may be the best in school history. Fact is, Oakley (New York Knicks), Terry Davis (Dallas Mavericks) and a national championship team.