

CIAA WOMEN

Norfolk State.

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And...Norfolk State Again.

RICHMOND - It's getting so that the CIAA women's tournament results are beginning to sound like a broken record.

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And... Norfolk State.

The Spartannettes have become the first team to win three of the tournament championships in a row, but neither of the first two were nearly as trying as the third: a 78-77 Houdini escape number Norfolk State pulled on St. Augustine's.

"When a team plays for 40 minutes, you win," said Norfolk State coach James Sweat. "If we'd played for 39 minutes, we would not have won."

It's true. Norfolk State kept trying to pull away from undersized St. Augustine's. And the Spartannettes game plan of getting the ball inside to 6-1 Hycynthia Spells and 6-2 Stephanie Palmer would work for a little while, then stall for a little while. Palmer's being in constant foul trouble didn't help, but neither did St. Augustine's Carolyn Brown, named CIAA player of the year for the second straight season.

Brown scored 15 of her team's first 19 points and looked to be on her way to perhaps her best game ever in the best time to have it.

A junior transfer from Columbia, S.C., Brown had been denied at every turn by Norfolk State. But she was more than ready to make good on her final chance to exorcize her personal demons from Virginia.

But she picked up her third foul with 8:08 left in the first half, her team down 28-20. But Palmer also was sitting out. And St. Augustine's, even without its star, began to fight back.

By halftime, Norfolk State's lead was 38-36. When Brown returned with 13:42 left, Norfolk led 49-48. This was going down, as the television folks say, to the wire.

There was one brief spell when the Spartannettes tried to end it, taking a 70-61 lead after scoring 10 straight points, but Brown gave up an assist and hit a three, and so much for that.

St. Augustine's finally caught and past Norfolk State with 1:14 left when freshman Rachelle Pierce hit a spinning

layin. St. Augustine's led 75-74. With 51 seconds left. Devonia Dixon hit two for St. Aug. that made the lead 77-74. Fourteen ticks later, St. Augustine's didn't foul Lisa Rice and let her score for the Spartannettes. That layup cut the St. Aug. lead to one, 77-76.

Brown, though, missed her free throw with 26 seconds left.

Norfolk coach Jim Sweat called time out.

The play he designed was to go inside to one of the twin towers, Spells or Palmer, but St. Aug. fouled Jennine Tanks before she could get the ball inside.

Tanks would go to the line with a chance to give her team the lead.

"The only thing that was on my mind was a three-peat," Tanks said. "We'd come this far, and we could make CIAA history tonight."

If only she could make these free throws.

"If there was one girl that I was going to pick to shoot those free throws, I'd pick Jennine," Sweat said. "She's won every big game for us this year. There was no doubt in my mind when she went to the line."

Tanks cleanly hit both of them, and now the Spartannettes were 8 seconds away from history.

But they knew what was coming: a freight train named Carolyn Brown.

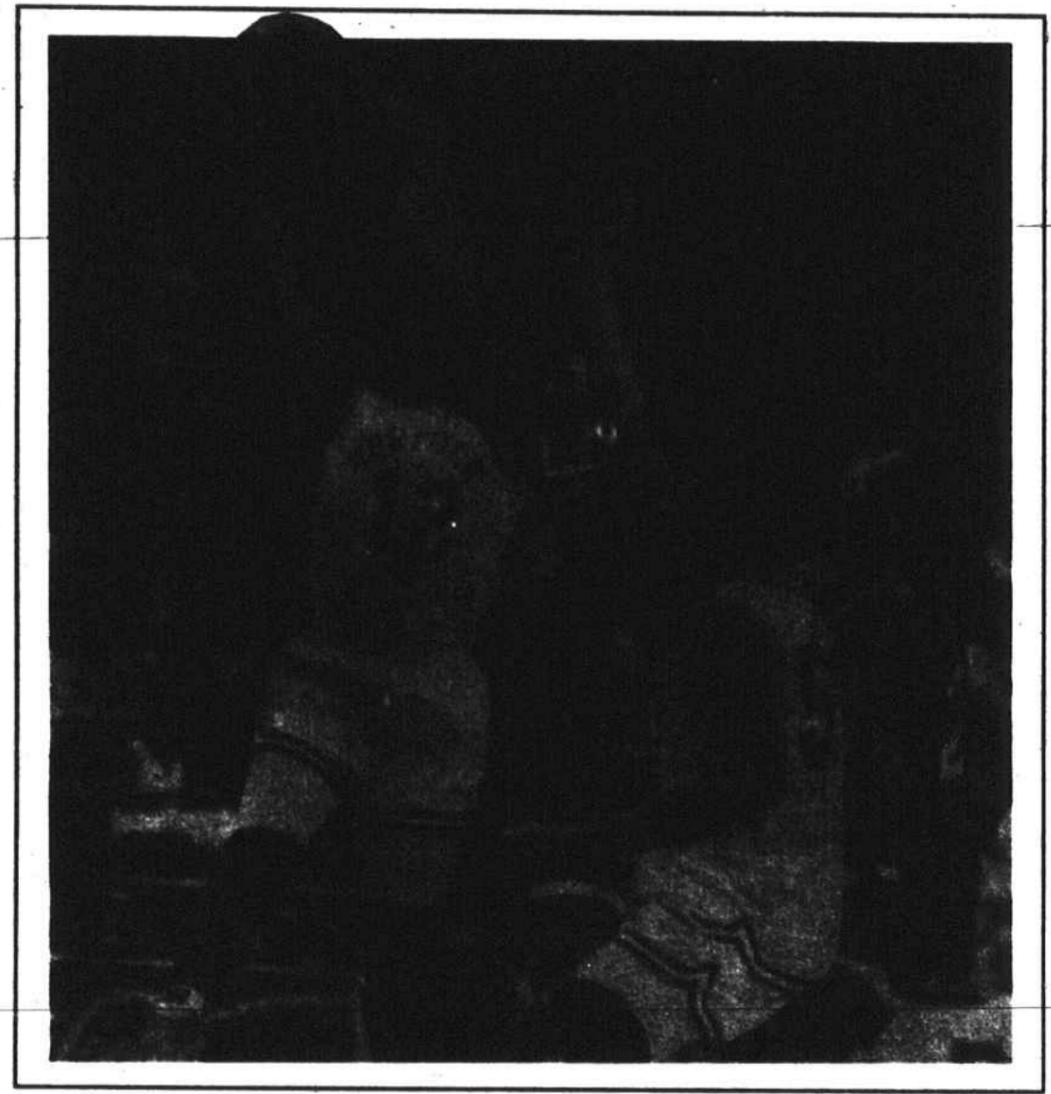
"We all knew that they'd want to get it to Brown," said Spartannette guard DeShonna Anderson, "and we all said if she gets a shot off, she'll get it off with a hand in her face."

Well, St. Aug.'s got the ball to Brown, their All-American who averages 29 points and 7 steals per game. To this point, she'd scored 21 points. And Brown flew up the left side of the court, passing Sweat, who was yelling at his team to stop her.

Brown passed by her coach, Beverly Downing, who held her hands over her mouth in anxious anticipation.

Finally Brown arrived about 13 feet from her basket and pulled up for a shot. Two Norfolk players threw their arms in the air. One appeared to hit Brown when she let the ball go. No foul called.

The ball hit the backboard and



Lisa Rice, 12, goes for a rebound during Spartanette's remarkable tournament bid.

bounced off the front of the rim. Brown grabbed the rebound. Two seconds left. A Norfolk player appeared to again foul her. No whistle was heard until the ball landed out of bounds. There was one second left on the clock when the whistle blew. But the buzzer sounded, and the referee looked at each other, bewildered, and ran off the court.

But what about that one second?

"Obviously the whistle blew," Downing said. "I thought one second was on the clock, but everyone ran on the court, and the refs left the court, so maybe I was just wishing."

She paused.

"But there was a whistle blown and a foul designated."

Brown stood outside the interview area and was hugged by a friend.

She'll never know what she could've done. And what she did do was almost enough.

Almost means not quite, though, so Norfolk State won again. That broken record keeps playing.

"All this week, sometimes I felt like giving up," said Spells, crying. She plays with a partially separated shoulder that has a painful habit of popping out of the socket. She'll have surgery in the off-season.

"But we're winners," Spell said. "We don't give up."

Not until the final buzzer sounds.

—By Langston Wertz