

BLACK COLLEGE Sports Review

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EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Ernest H. Pitt

PRODUCTION
Deborah Holiday-Belcher
Kathy Lee
Crystal Wood

STAFF WRITERS
Barry Cooper
Langston Wertz, Jr.
Roscoe Harce
Derrick Mashone

PHOTOGRAPHERS
Mark Gail
Joe Daniels
Wade Nash
Naville J. Oubre III

The Central Saga

N.C. Central reached for new heights when no one thought reaching anything above a .500 record was much a possibility. In March, the Eagles made the Elite Eight of the NCAA Division II Tournament - D2's version of the Final Four - before losing to eventual national champion Cal-State Bakersfield, the only unbeaten team in the country in any division.

But when the '92-'93 college basketball season began, about the only place fans and media thought that Central might be going in March was on spring break.

The Eagles, one of the nation's smaller teams - no one on the team is taller than 6-6 - were without their best big man, Stephen Birchette. They were also coming off a 13-13 season. Some people expected a little improvement. A little, don't get too excited. That seemed to be the message around Durham: "We'll be, ah, OK."

But then tragedy struck.

Birchette dies a few weeks prior to the start of the year, die to a vicious asthma attack. CIAA coaches picked the Eagles coach Greg Jackson, beginning his second year, to finish fourth, or worst, in the league's Southern Division. But with Birchette not playing now, the forecast was getting worse.

The message changed now among Central supporters: "We'll be OK... "Next year."

One writer who covers the league said, "Central will be lucky to win five games this year."

Five games?

Who expected the Eagles to do well? Not too many people.

Well, not many except the guys who matter most, the players and the coach. Their message was: "We're gonna be good this year."

Believe it or not.

"I work hard and we have a good coaching staff," said Eagles coach Greg Jackson. I believe whatever you put into anything is what you get out of it. I thought we'd have an excellent season."

His optimism, of course, was based on his knowledge of what he'd put into the program. What else could he have but a good season, this was his thinking. Really, it was.

Jackson and his assistants had hit the road in the spring and summer of '92 and found a few junior college players who they thought could have an immediate impact on the program.

Bleu Oliver was one of those assistants. Oliver had played for Johnson C. Smith, but now worked at Central, and when he found two diamonds in the rough Washington-area juco league, he sent 6-1 guard Jimmie Walker, a speedy, gritty type with a touch as soft as Charmin, and

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In College Athletics, It could be anyone

And we've come to the end of the road...

And I can't let go...

It's a natural thing.

The pop music group Boyz II Men sang those words in their big hit, "End of the road," and indeed those words ring too true for many of the country's better college basketball players, from Valapraiso to Virginia Union.

For the majority of the seniors, the ones not named Bobby Hurley or Calbert Cheaney, the NCAA championships represent March Madness, basketball mania at its finest, but they can also represent, as the Boyz say, The End of the Road,

It's the end of being the big man on campus, the end of girls yelling out your name, the end of being local, or possibly, a national media figure.

You try to guess if it's not hard to let go off all that.

"That's extremely tough on any player at any level," said Johnson C. Smith men's basketball coach Steve Joyner. "What you would hope is that the player has prepared himself for that and I think that the coach is responsible for that - to help prepare the student-athlete for that particular day. But that goes back to the program's philosophy and goals, that education is first and basketball is temporary. "Education," Joyner said, "is for life."

Still, there are many who don't listen.

Paul isn't really his name, but does his name really matter? He was an all-conference player two years ago in the CIAA and he spoke to BCSR only under the condition that his name nor his school's name to be used in this piece. So we'll call him Paul.

"When I was playing," Paul said, "I thought I was invincible. I thought I couldn't get hurt and I thought I'd play in the NBA. It's like a never-ending joy ride."

But Paul wasn't going to the NBA. He'd averaged a lot of points in the CIAA, but plenty of 6-2 guys score 20 points a game across the country. Paul said he understands it now, but then thought he was different, that something about his jump shot and his dunking ability was a little flashier than all the rest.

"I just knew I was going pro," Paul said.

Paul's life in college was pretty much like this. He'd go to class when he felt like it. He said his teachers were sometimes "encouraged to help me out by changing a D to a C. They gave me, you know, the benefit of the doubt."

Paul said he slept with about three different ladies a week, even though he had a girlfriend during the entire time he was in college. Everyone on his college campus, he said, he was popular in the community. His name was in the local newspapers.

"It was like a drug or something really," he said. "I mean, you had to have it. You thrived on it. And I was large. Who wouldn't want to be large like that? Everyone knew me."

But then, came the end of his senior season. He was just a regular guy now. He wasn't drafted into the NBA. His name wasn't in the paper anymore. He had a pro try-out, but it didn't work out.

He thought about getting a job but needed five classes to graduate. His grade point average, even with the "little benefits of the doubt," was about 1.4. He was in trouble.

"I sat in my room one day and cried," he said. "My girlfriend left me. The other girls who used to be on my jock (show interest towards him), they stopped coming around. Even my boys started tripping."

Paul went to summer school, but dropped out. He dabbled in cocaine for about a week. Then he went home to Mama.

Today, Paul is a dock worker at a trucking company

in his Northern hometown. He lifts 50-pound boxes for 8 hours a day. Sometimes, someone will recognize him at work. They'll ask him if he played basketball once.

Yeah, he tells them, once he was playing in big Coliseums in front of 10,000 people, playing for the CIAA championships, playing in the NCAA Tournament.

Today, Paul now plays his ball in the park in front of 5 or 6 guys waiting for next up.

"It was all there for me. I had a free education that I should've taken advantage of," Paul said. "I didn't. One day, though, I'm going back to finish up. I can't take this kind of life much longer."

The message here, and Steve Joyner said it needs to be clearly hammered home, is that even if you think you're going to school, "you need to go ahead and take advantage of the free education."

Basketball is only temporary.

Education is forever.

"The ones who take advantage and make the adjustment are the one who are better off," Joyner said. One of his former players, Mike Sherrill, is now playing in Australia.

Sherrill is the second-leading scorer in Johnson C. Smith history. He was the CIAA's rookie of the year as a freshman and was all-conference every year he played. Once, former Charlotte Hornets coach Gene Little said Sherrill reminded him of former NBA great Adrian Dantley.

Still, Sherrill wasn't drafted by the NBA. He got a few tryouts and a brief stint in the now-defunct Global Basketball Association. Now, he's in Australia. He's playing but he's not happy.

But Sherrill graduated from Smith with a degree in sociology. Unlike Paul, Sherrill has an alternate route.

He doesn't have to lift boxes for a living.

"Mark's not 100% satisfied," Joyner said. "He's saying, 'Coach, I'm thinking about coming home and using my degree.'"

Joyner said it's important for players to know that The End of the Road can come one day. He said he told Sherrill constantly that it might.

Joyner thinks that's helped his ex-star.

"If you don't tell them, sometimes kids can turn to other ways of life," Joyner said. "To drugs, to anti-social behaviors, just a whole realm of things can happen. That's where the coach has to maintain his integrity. If you get a player of mine who says we've not preached to them to pursue an education first then I'm hypocritical and I have an empty philosophy."

"But I think kids have to take responsibility, too," Joyner added. "Parents are responsible, too. But coaches are, too. If you go back and look at the Bighouse Gaines' and the John McClendons, these guys were father-figures. We need to maintain that."

We need to maintain that dearly. No one needs to find The End of the Road.

It's only a dead end.

—By Langston Wertz

