

SWAC Earns Respect with NBA Draft Hopefuls

Mississippi Valley was keeping up with good company during the NBA draft.

Valley sent two players to the NBA just like college basketball powerhouses Duke, Michigan, Indiana, Kansas, Seton Hall and Florida State.

"We eased a couple into the draft," Valley coach Lafayette Stribling said. "I'm just glad these guys will get a chance to play. It is up to the guys now."

The Delta Devils had high-scoring guard Al Ford and center Mark Buford drafted. Ford was the 32nd overall pick by the Philadelphia 76ers, and center Mark Buford was the 49th pick by the Phoenix Suns.

"It's going to bring extra respect to the SWAC," Stribling said. "It's going to let guys know that it's not where you go to school, it's what you do when you get there."

For Mississippi Valley State, a school of about 2,200 in Itta Bena, it was the biggest day in sports since Jerry Rice was taken in the first round of the NFL draft in 1985.

"The kids find they don't have to go to the Dukes to be drafted," Stribling said. "They don't have to go to Kentucky to be drafted. Because little ol' Valley is sitting back there and had two drafted. It's a tremendous thing for our school."

Ford, 6-foot-3, averaged 29 points during his career at Valley. He scored 3,165 points and led the school to the 1992 SWAC regular season and tournament championship.

"When the first round was over, I

started to get a little worried," said Ford, who averaged 26 points this season. "I thought I would go in the bottom of the first. I'm just glad I got picked."

The SWAC had four players selected in the draft, which was only one less taken from the Big 10, and one more than the Southeastern Conference and Big East.

"Scouts are concerned about the defense of the black schools, but they don't let the concern outweigh the talent," said Will Robinson, the Detroit Pistons assistant to the director of player personnel. "If the talent shows elsewhere, they're not reluctant," Robinson said. "We think that a player can come from almost anywhere."

Lindsey Hunter, the 10th pick overall by the Pistons, was not surprised the black schools fared well. In fact, he was surprised they didn't go higher.

"I think players are seriously considering going to school at Jackson State or Valley or Southern or Alcorn (State), rather than jumping up going to Kentucky, where they'll have to sit down."

As Stribling puts it, "It's not where you start, it's where you finish."

Probably the most surprised person in the draft was Buford.

The 6-10, 270-pounder said he was shocked when he heard his name called by NBA vice president Rod Thorn.

"I was surprised," said Buford, who watched the draft at his parents' house in Memphis, Tenn. "I was just sitting at home and heard my name called on the television. The people in my house went

crazy. I thought I was going to be a free agent and have to work hard at making it. I know I still have to work hard."

Buford averaged 12.9 points and 7.5 rebounds this season for the Delta Devils. He played only 2-1/2 years at Valley after transferring from Coahoma Community College.

Buford was a standout football player at Hillcrest High in Memphis. He was recruited by Miami, Georgia, Texas A&M and Memphis State as a tight end and defensive tackle.

"He only played basketball in high school about a semester," said John Anderson, Buford's basketball coach at Hillcrest. "He really didn't know which sport he wanted to play. He got to Valley and developed as a basketball player."

Phoenix officials said they realize Buford hasn't been playing the game long, but they are impressed with his raw athletic ability.

"His size is what impresses you," Phoenix director of player personnel Dick Van Arsdale said. "He is a hard worker. He has quick feet for a big man. He can

shoot the ball from 10 to 15 feet. We don't like the word project, but Mark has some upside potential, especially with his size. We are willing to take a chance on a guy like this. He seems like a nice young man."

Leonard White of Southern was selected by the Los Angeles Clippers with the 53rd pick. White, an All-SWAC selection who averaged 20 points and 10 rebounds a game, was the second-to-last player picked.

While he said his selection was a big moment in his life, he admitted he was getting nervous wondering if he was going to get picked.

"I was nervous, but my friend was telling me to hang in, that I would be chosen," White said.

White, a 6-7, 218-pound forward, thanked Southern coach Ben Jobe for helping further his career.

"Coach Jobe is the one who really made things happen for me," White said. "I've been waiting 21 years to be drafted. Now, I have to take it one step at a time and try to do well."

— By DERRICK MAHONE

JSU Has NFL, NBA Picks

Jackson State was among elite company this year in athletics. The school was one of seven colleges to have first-round picks in the NFL and NBA drafts. Guard Lindsey Hunter was taken by the Detroit Pistons as the 10th overall pick, and Lester Holmes, a tackle on the football team, was selected by the Philadelphia Eagles as the 19th overall pick. The other schools to have two first-rounders were Alabama, Florida State, Michigan, Kansas, Tennessee and North Carolina. It was the second time JSU has accomplished the feat.

Hunter and James Robinson, a guard at Alabama, helped Murrah High School in Jackson, Miss., become only the third high school to have two or more of its alumni taken in the first round of the NBA draft in the same year.

Hunter was the 10th overall pick of the Detroit Pistons, and Robinson was the 21st player taken. Both played in the same backcourt at Murrah, which is coached by Orsmond Jordon, an Alcorn State graduate. Hunter graduated from Murrah in 1988, a year before Robinson, but played in the shadow of his younger teammate. Robinson led Murrah in scoring with a

28.2-point average in 1987-88; Hunter was fifth with a 6.3 average.

Only Baltimore Dunbar High and Jersey City, New Jersey's St. Anthony's have matched Murrah in the draft. Dunbar had three alumni taken in the 1987 first round: Reggie Williams, Mugsy Bogues and Reggie Lewis. St. Anthony's, like Murrah, had two alumni drafted this year: Bobby Hurley by the Sacramento Kings and Terry Dehere by the Los Angeles Clippers.

In a recent report released by the NCAA, Alcorn State had a 7 percent graduation rate of scholarship athletes who entered the school in 1987-88 and had graduated by 1992. That is the lowest graduation rate among the nation's Division I universities.

"Quite naturally, I was surprised about this report," Alcorn athletic director Cardell Jones said. "Things are steadily getting better."

Jones, who has been at the school the last two years, said the athletic department has established a mandatory two-hour daily study session for all freshmen athletes and players in academic trouble.

— By DERRICK MAHONE

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