

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Rams senior centerfielder Jason Baytop hit .400 in four CIAA tournament games.

# Conference baseball reign comes to abrupt end

BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE  
FOR THE CHRONICLE

The familiar phrase, "It's not how you start, but how you finish," is so appropriate for what happened to Winston-Salem State in the finals of the CIAA baseball tournament last Saturday.



For the first two days of tournament play, it looked like the five-time champs were all set to celebrate winning the title for the sixth year in a row. The Rams got off to a good start with convincing wins over Virginia State (6-2) and Saint Augustine's (16-0).

The tournament's final round, though, produced a vastly different story.

Winston-Salem State's half-a-decade reign as CIAA baseball kings came to a shocking end with back-to-back losses to Chowan. In retrospect, the way the Rams stumbled in the late innings was somewhat surprising.

In both games, WSSU had problems pushing runs across the plate. In the decisive second game, Chowan scored five unearned runs in the eighth inning in a 7-2 victory which assured that a new CIAA baseball champion would be crowned. Offensively, the Rams were stymied

## WSSU's CIAA All-Tournament picks

- Michael McNamara, catcher
- Landon Steiner, first base
- Willie McRae, Jr., rightfield
- Randy Norris, second base
- Justin Norton, pitcher

by their inability to move runners. For that game, 12 runners were left on base. It didn't help matters that in the two games that mattered most, WSSU allowed 13 unearned runs.

The events that transpired in the CIAA final proved to be one of the concerns that coach Kevin Ritsche talked about entering the final month of the season. At that juncture, the Rams had issues generating offense on a consistent basis. Those very same issues came back to haunt Winston-Salem State at the conference tournament.

"It's tough on your defense when you're only scoring two or three runs a game," Ritsche told Chronicle SportsWeek at that time. "It puts a lot of pressure on our pitching staff."

The opening game of the final round proved to be a

bad omen of what was yet to come. WSSU pitching was hammered for 15 hits in a one-sided 11-2 loss. Since the Rams were undefeated in the tournament, losing that first game forced a second game in this double-elimination event.

Considering how well the Rams had played in the weeks leading up to the tournament, their downfall was unexpected. They had won nine of their last 10 games and appeared to be rounding into championship form. At the same time, there are no guarantees in the world of sports. Winning championships is not an everlasting occurrence.

Although WSSU fell short in its quest to continue its dominance, there is a bright side to consider. The season is not a done deal just yet. The Rams (29-21) have four regular season games left to play. And there's still a possibility that they could make the post-season scene as an at-large entry in the NCAA Division II Atlantic Regional.

Whether that happens or not is anyone's guess. Entering the CIAA tournament, WSSU was ranked ninth in the Atlantic Region. But of the top nine, the Rams had the most regional losses, which could hinder their post-season chances. Pairings for the regional tournaments are scheduled to be announced on May 15 during an NCAA selection show.

# Local man lives childhood dream, joins pro football team

BY TEVIN STINSON  
THE CHRONICLE

While growing up in East Winston, Rayvon Mitchell always had aspirations of signing a contract to play professional football. Last weekend his wish came true.

After years of playing and studying the game, last Saturday, April 30, at the young age of 58, Mitchell's dream became a reality when he signed a one-day contract to join the Winston-Salem Wildcats, the city's indoor football team that competes in the southern division of the AIF (American Indoor Football) league.

Mitchell is the oldest player on record to sign a contract to play professional football.

Before signing the contract, Mitchell said it feels great to live out one of his childhood dreams. He said, "Although it's just for one day, I can always say I signed a contract to play professional football."

"I really feel like a million bucks," he said. "I will never forget this day. This really means a lot to me."

Mitchell said he can now say that he has fulfilled all of his childhood dreams. He also had dreams of becoming a fireman, which he did for a short stint in Salisbury, and becoming a teacher, which he did after receiving his

degree in education from Livingstone College.

"Not many people can say that they lived all of their childhood dreams. Today I can say that I have."

Mitchell, who currently serves as an assistant trainer for the Wildcats, who are playing their inaugural



Mitchell

season in the AIF, said he enjoys being around the game and spending time with the players. During an interview with *The Chronicle*, Mitchell, a former wide receiver, said what he enjoys most about the game is the joy of scoring touchdowns and performing in front of family and friends. His love for the game started while playing at 14th Street Recreation Center. He went on to play at Carver and East Forsyth.

Although it's been years since he's seen live game action, Mitchell said he still feels he can do his thing between the lines.

"I feel like I can still play," laughed Mitchell. "I know I still have the hands. I tell the players that all the time."

Mitchell's sister Norma Gay said growing up he

always showed a love for the game of football. Gay mentioned he would always be the one gathering young boys from around the neighborhood for big games after school and on the weekends.

Gay said it feels great to see her brother live out one of his dreams.

"It's great to see him do something he has wanted to do," she said.

Other family members noted that Mitchell is the type of person who is always looking to lend a helping hand and uplift those in need. Mitchell's daughter Raylyn Long said her father has always been an inspiration for herself and others.

"Because he does so much for other people, it feels good to see him receiving something in return," Long said.

Long mentioned seeing her father run out on the field with the team is an image that will live in her mind forever.

While he didn't get any playing time during the Wildcats final home game of the 2016 season, Mitchell's signing had an obvious impact on the team's play, as they picked up their first victory of the season in a 49-19 blowout in a match-up with visiting Maryland Eagles.

"It all fits at the right time," Mitchell smiled.



Photos by Tevin Stinson

Winston-Salem native Rayvon Mitchell looks on as the Wildcats take on the Maryland Eagles last Saturday at the Winston-Salem Fairgrounds Annex. Mitchell signed a contract to join the team last weekend fulfilling one of his childhood dreams.




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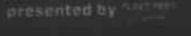
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