

## 49ers face five-game exam

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best offensive rebounding team in Conference USA and one of the top three in overall rebounding. That gives their potent offense second chances, which is part of the reason why they score more points than any other team in the conference.

But as they get into the conference schedule the true test of the 49ers will come in their next five games starting with their game at Memphis Saturday. After that they're home for three straight: Tuesday against Marquette, next Saturday versus UAB and then Jan. 28 versus Saint Louis. The final of the five is a road game Jan. 31 against Cincinnati. Those five teams have a combined record of 48-14.

"You can be better in this league and not win more games," says Bobby Lutz talking about the improved play of the conference, "this league is for real this year."

Indeed because those five games doesn't include an early February with Louisville who's probably the second best team in C-USA right now.

Good thing the 49ers have a week off before they take on their next five games and get into the meat of the conference schedule. Here's a preview of what to watch for during their run through the end of the month...

### Curtis Withers' development

With quality opponents on the schedule, two of the next five games available on ESPN, and homecoming in-between Withers has a

chance to really grab some attention. Last week he earned the C-USA player of the week honors as shot over 65 percent from the field while earning his sixth and seventh double-doubles.

He's coming off his fifth straight double-double last Saturday, a 22 point, 10 rebound performance in the win over East Carolina.

### Assist-to-turnover ratio

Good teams don't beat themselves, and the 49ers fall into that category. They're really tough when they share the ball. Point guard Demon Brown will play a huge role because he runs the offense, but Mitchell Butler and Withers also factor in. Butler is Brown's back-up and allows Brown to slide over to the two-guard when the team needs more offense. While Withers is the best post passer and is really adept at getting the ball to Iti.

### Rebounding

As mentioned before the 49ers have been excellent on the glass and that will have to continue if the team wants the wins to keep coming. As good a shot blocker as the 7-foot Iti is and as many steals and charges Eddie Basden racks up Charlotte can be scored on. Evidenced by the 96 points Rhode Island dropped in late December.

So when the opposition misses they can't allow any second chances. Conversely when they miss, as they will since the 49ers take a good number of three-pointers, offensive rebounds give Charlotte the ability to convert second-chance possessions into points.

## Cooke spices Winthrop's chances

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Concord High and was voted Iowa Junior College Newcomer of the Year, leading Indian Hills Community College to a 29-5 record and a No. 10 national JUCO ranking in 2001-02. Cooke is a player Winthrop head coach Gregg Marshall wanted very badly and he wouldn't give up until Cooke was wearing an Eagle's jersey.

"We stayed in touch with him through the year at Indian Hills...we just hung in there and hung 'I want him to come back close to home' and we just kept recruiting and recruiting and finally we were able to secure his services."

Cooke made his mother Debra Cooke very happy by coming to Winthrop. He also made the Eagles a better team despite having to battle through a knee injury last season. He still averaged 7.4 points and 5.5 rebounds, while starting 24 of 27 games. He's completely healthy now and ready to help the Eagles shoot for their sixth Big South Conference championship in seven years.

"I'm really a mid-range type of player, when 3-point-

ers start to go in for me consistently then I know I'm feeling it that night but I'm really a mid-range, slasher, screener, getting other people shots, taking it to the rim, pull up for my mid-range shot, get to the free throw line, stuff like that." Cooke said.

The 6-4, 190-pound Cooke, showcased all aspects of his game Dec. 30 in Tempe as the Eagles held off the San Diego Toreros 70-66, to win the consolation title of the ASU Holiday Tournament. He went 8-of-11 for a team-high 18 points and came up key steals down the stretch as the Eagles finished the rugged opening half of their schedule with a 6-5 mark.

"We played some big schools in Kentucky, Georgia, Weber State and at this tournament, it was great experience so now that we get in our conference we're going to be more confident than ever," Cooke said. "I think we're going to run through the conference but we've got some teams like Liberty and Radford, they've had a good schedule too. I know they're going to bring it too, but we're going to

bring it even harder."

While basketball is very important in Cooke's life, it's not the only thing. He has a 3-year old son, Nirque, so he knows the importance of getting a good education to support his family.

"(Marcus has) been through a lot in his life, he's come up hard and he's got a loving family,"

Marshall said. "He's a kid you pull for and want to see succeed and we work with him in his everyday life, his academics and his basketball because ultimately the key for this coaching staff is that Marcus Cooke one day can realize all of his hopes and dreams."

Cooke is a sociology major and has one year of classes remaining. He has plans to play pro basketball in the future and hopes to be "one of thousands" trying out for the expansion Charlotte Bobcats next season.

"I know I'm going to go pro overseas or luckily in the NBA but I'm going to finish school out for sure, that's what my mama says," Cooke said. "This is my last year of (basketball) eligibility, I'm going to make the best of it."

## Legacy an opportunity for JCSU

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games - Virginia Union at home and Carson-Newman away - and we want to stop the bleeding. We want to win some games. I think if we continue to work on the things we're doing well and stop some of the things we're not doing so well, then we're going to be successful."

Success has been in short supply for Smith. The latest setback, a 78-70 loss to CIAA East power Bowie State, underscored a basic issue for the Bulls: lack of size. The Bulldogs, with a pair of 6-9 frontcourt players in the starting lineup compared to Smith's 6-6 starters, out-rebounded the Bulls 45-29 and blocked 9 shots. The Bulldogs also converted on 7-of-16 three-point attempts, including a pair by Allen Van Norden to repel a late Smith rally that closed a 16-point deficit to one.

"It took us too long not to pay attention to

their size," Joyner said. "I thought we were much more aggressive in the second half on defense and offense as well. I thought we shared the ball. Chris Clyburn got going pretty good and John (Fulton) stepped in, but we've got to get more production out of other people."

This week would be a good time for them to start. Wins over Livingstone and Winston-Salem would put Smith back on track in front of the largest CIAA crowd outside of the post-season tournament in February.

"We work tirelessly to try to build the program and build the schedule and the Legacy is a part of that," Joyner said. "We thank (Legacy founder) Cary Mitchell for promoting that event. We get excited about that and we hope our players understand what the Legacy means and attack that game with the passion they should."

## Baseball panel scouts SE Virginia

By Sonja Barisic  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NORFOLK, Va. - Major league baseball came to southeastern Virginia on Monday, with executives checking the Hampton Roads region as a possible spot for the Montreal Expos to relocate.

The delegation met with Norfolk city officials and a group representing unidentified investors trying to bring major league baseball to one of the country's largest metropolitan areas without major-league sports.

"We've had a very constructive day," said Wendy Selig-Prieb, chairwoman of the Milwaukee Brewers and the daughter of baseball commissioner Bud Selig.

"We've enjoyed very much hearing more about the community and the community's interest in baseball," Selig-Prieb said during a brief news conference. She took no questions and left immediately to take a heli-

copter tour of the area.

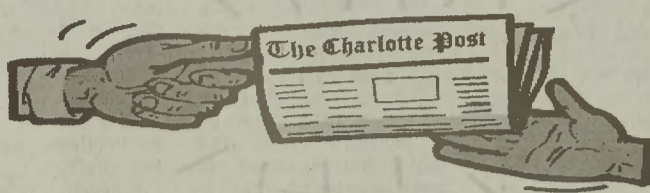
Also part of the delegation were John McHale Jr., executive vice president of the commissioner's office, and Jonathan Mariner, executive vice president of finance.

"We tried to answer for the representatives of major league baseball the question about can the region support a major league baseball team, and we're confident that it can," Mayor Paul D. Fraim said.

Fraim said officials put forth a preliminary stadium financing plan, but he gave few details of that plan or anything else that was discussed during the meeting. Fraim has said previously that he thinks a stadium could be built downtown for \$300 million, without a tax increase.

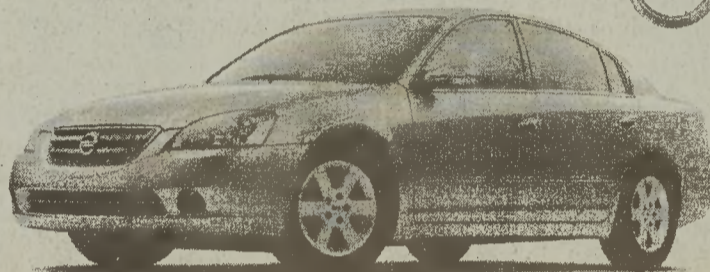
The Expos, bought by the other 29 major league teams two years ago, may relocate next year, but baseball wants funding in place for a new ballpark.

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