

But that brings us to an interesting point: Since the bigger, predominantly white schools are gobbling up every dominant black basketball player in the country -- and in Africa as well -- is there any hope for the so-called big-time black college basketball teams?

Will we ever see Mississippi Valley in the Final Four? Will Maryland Eastern-Shore ever participate in the NCAA tournament?

Only time will tell, but the odds are stacked high against those black college teams who compete in the same division with the UCLAs and Kentuckys.

Some say it is a merely a joke, a dream if you will, to find money-strapped colleges such as Bethune-Cookman College and Prairie View A&M battling in the same league as North Carolina State and Georgetown.

Some say black colleges basketball teams are all but being prostituted to satisfy an NCAA requirement so that their football teams may compete in a special division called I-AA.

Unlike the black college basketball teams, the black college football teams don't compete in the same league with the really big boys.

Five years ago, the NCAA established a separate division for small schools, which has grown to about 70 members: teams like Furman, Tennessee-Chattanooga, Southern Illinois and other not-ready-for-prime-time types.

For the football teams, it has become a perfect situation. For all but a handful of the black basketball teams, the move to Division I has been nothing more than 7-21 records, long nights on the road, cheap travel plans and fierce beatings at the hands of superior teams.

It all began in the early 70s, when football powerhouses began grumbling about smaller schools being classified in the same division as they.

The NCAA tried to head off the problem by creating a new football division -- Division I-AA. The idea was for some of the smaller schools who had been ranked in the big time to drop to Division I-AA in football, and leave Division I-A for the Oklahomas and Notre Dames.

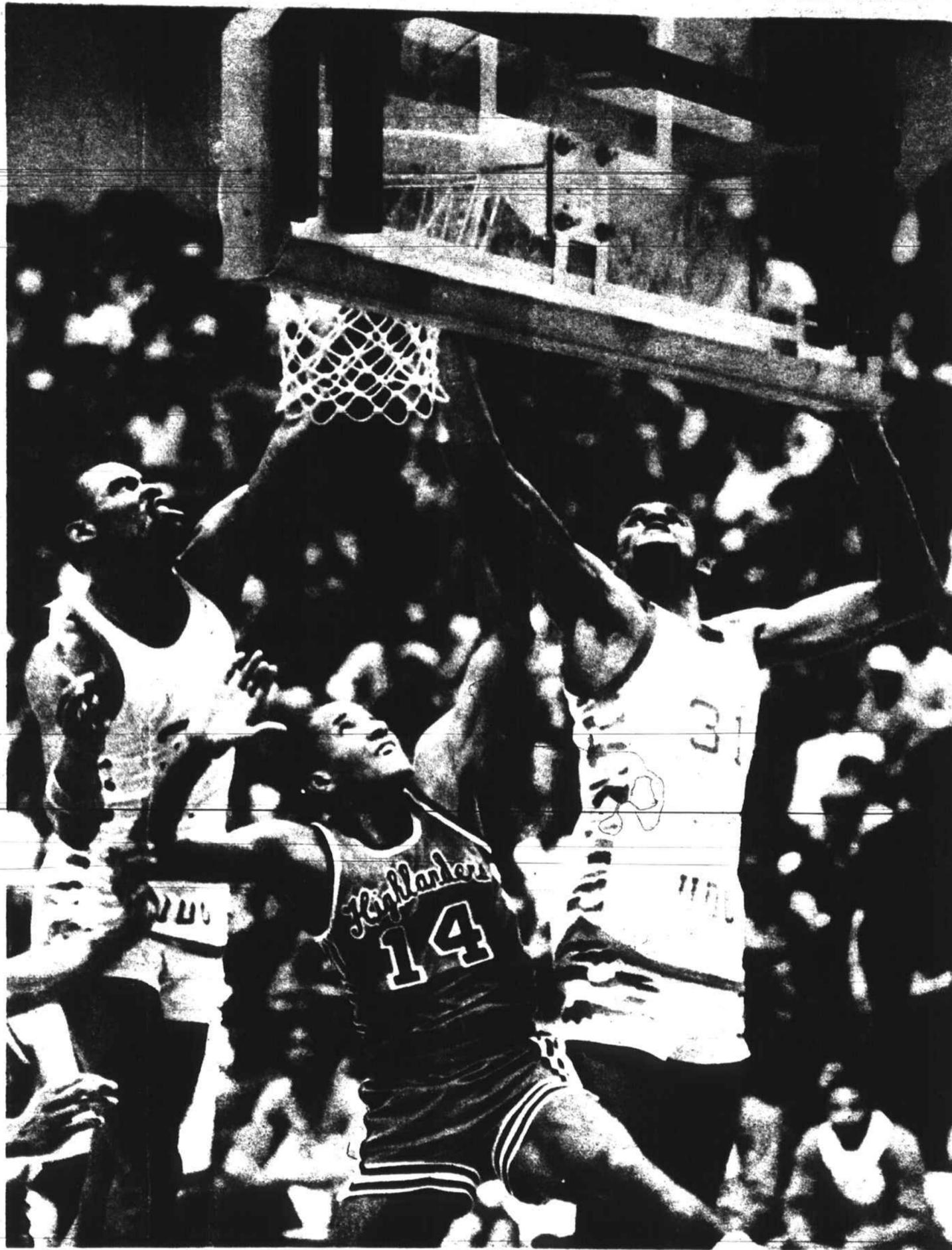
That was in 1978. But the plan didn't work. Not only did the smaller schools stay in Division I-A, but about 30 teams left Division II to move UP to Division I-AA. They also went to Division I in basketball.

Among those 30 teams were the 13 black colleges in two conferences -- the Southwestern Athletic Conference, which includes such teams as Alcorn State and Grambling, and the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, which includes Howard and North Carolina A&T, among others.

Just like that, black college basketball teams were in the big time.

Or were they?

"That was the biggest mistake they ever made," says Winston-Salem State basketball Coach Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines, whose school was one of those that chose not to move to Division I.



District of Columbia's Earl Jones (31), one of very few big men who have elected to attend black schools (photo by Brian Branch-Price).

Gaines, the winningest active coach in college basketball, figures black college teams in Division I are fighting a losing battle.

"You can't compete with those teams as far as the recruitment of athletes goes," he says. "I remember looking in a newspaper the other day. They had a list of the Top 100 high school basketball players in the country and where they had signed to go to college. Not a one of them had signed with a black college. Not one! Now, how in the hell can we compete with those big schools if we can't get the top athletes?"

Gaines' sharply delivered point has

been borne out on more than one occasion. Both Division I black college conferences receive an automatic berth in the NCAA basketball tournament, but the results have not been good.

Howard, which has made it to the tourney once, was beaten by more than 30 points.

North Carolina A&T lost to West Virginia by 30 points in its first NCAA appearance, and lost to Princeton by 12 points last year.

Southern University lost by more than 30 points in its only NCAA tourney appearance.

Of the black schools that have made the tourney, only Alcorn has held its

own. The Braves, under Coach Dave "Wiz" Whitney, have won two of the five tournament games, and played Georgetown tough last year before losing by five.

Whitney, however, shares some of the same concerns that bother Gaines.

"Certainly it is a two-edged-sword situation," he says. "Being in Division I has been good for us financially. On the other hand, it is difficult to compete because we don't have the kind of depth the larger schools do. We don't get as many quality players as they do."

"What we have had to do is take home-grown talent that may be a little

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