

CIAA REPORT

Runner-Up Union: An Up-And-Down Year

By SAM DAVIS
Staff Writer

Though Virginia Union's Pantherettes didn't notch their second consecutive national title in women's basketball this year, Coach Lou Hearn was pleased with the success of his team in the NCAA tourney.

After bowing to Virginia State 65-63 in the CIAA Tournament and losing a chance for an automatic NCAA bid, the Pantherettes were given a reprieve by the NCAA selection committee when they were selected for an at-large bid.

And they made the most of the opportunity, advancing all the way to the Division II championship game in Springfield before falling to Central Missouri State, which won national titles in both men's and women's basketball this season.

Though Union was expected to win the CIAA title -- which it didn't -- and move on to defend its NCAA title in postseason play -- which it did, by the skin of its teeth -- it had to scratch and claw all the way.

"I knew we had the talent to make a run at the NAAs," Hearn said, "but I really didn't think we could pull out the championship two years in a row. We really played well down the stretch and I'm proud of the character my players showed."

As for the conference wars, which were won by surprising N.C. Central, "We had visions of capturing the CIAA Tournament," Hearn said. "We were disappointed that we lost to Virginia State in the tournament (semifinals). We beat them on their home court during the season and we felt we were the better team."

Central, which had a losing record both in the league and overall, went on to beat Virginia State in the CIAA finals.

"Anytime you lose a game you feel you should have won, it's a disappointment," Hearn said. "But getting on NCAA bid and making it back to the final two really made our season."

Yet, while the Pantherettes have en-

joyed considerable success recently on the national level, Hearn still has problems scheduling non-conference teams, a fact that almost cost his team its bid to the NCAA tourney.

"We only played four teams outside our conference during the season, so we only had 20 games (seven below the NCAA limit)," said Hearn. "It seemed a lot of teams in our area were afraid to schedule us."

"Next year, we would like to add at least four more non-conference games," Hearn added. "Doing well in the NCAA Tournament has given us increased visibility and credibility as a black university, but we'd like to be invited to some regular season tournaments early in the year."

Like other successful athletic programs at Virginia Union, the Pantherettes rely on the fundamentals and, of course, Union's famous talent pipeline. "You're not going to win a national championship without talent," Hearn says. "If you learn the basics and throw in a few plays, that's enough to mold a winner. When you try to put in too much, it becomes complicated."

"In the heat of battle, you need to have some talent on the court," said Hearn, who admits he's no expert tactician.

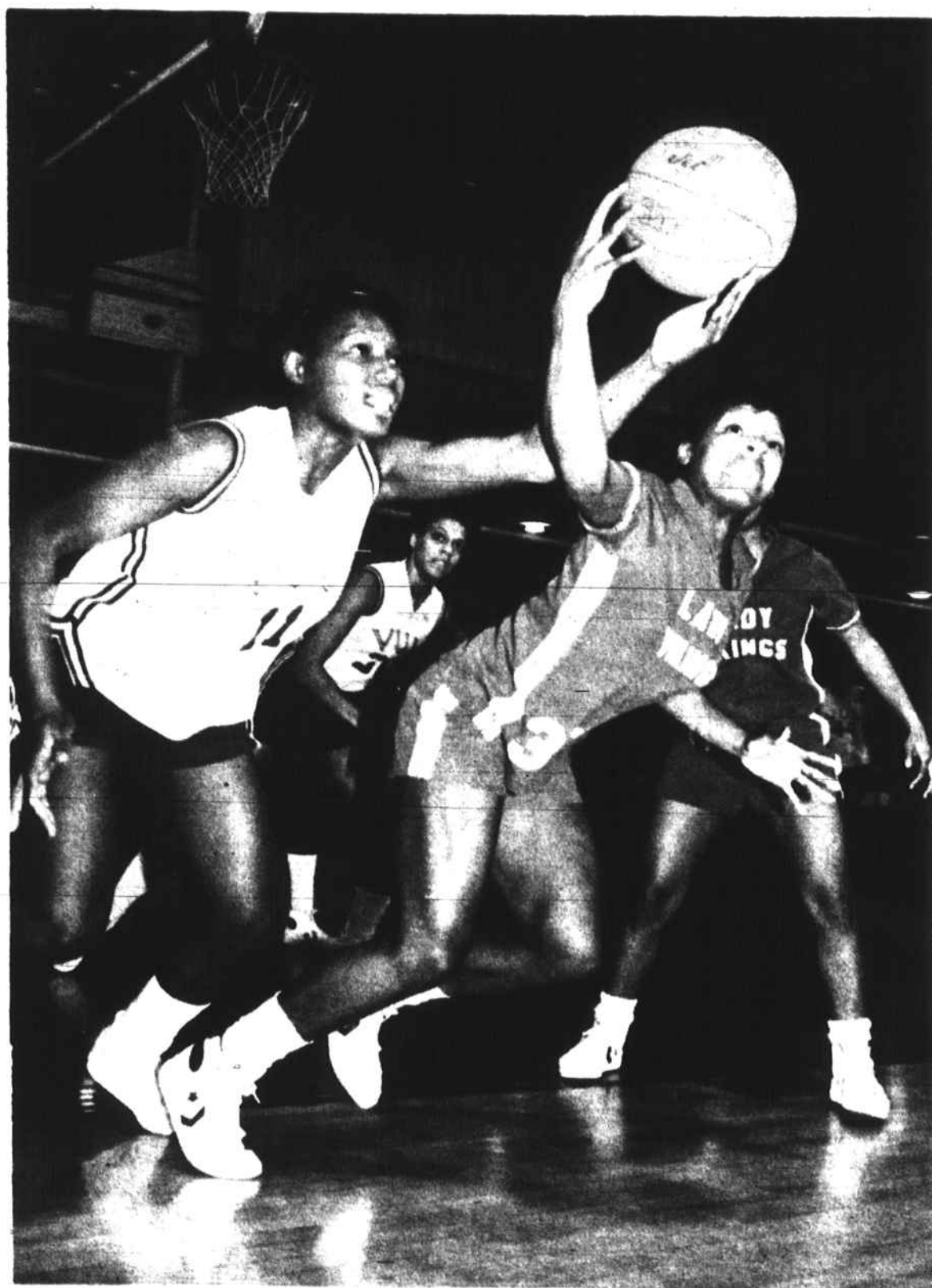
"There are so many intangibles that a coach really has no control over. If you have the talent and the team is cohesive, you should be able to deal with whatever comes up."

"If you don't have the talent," he said, "that's when coaching comes into play."

"Fortunately, I haven't been faced with that, but next year I'll have to work harder because I'm losing both of my floor leaders."

Stalwart guards guards Maria Nicholson and Paris McWhirter, who have played together since high school, are the only players who won't be returning to Hearn's squad.

And, while it will be difficult to replace the departing seniors, Hearn said, he won't be in a rush to go out and sign many high school players.



Returning

Sylvia Walker (10), a 5-11 sophomore, is among 10 players returning next year to Lou Hearn's Pantherettes (photo by Marcus Wilson).

"We're still going to be recruiting the same way we have been in the past," said Hearn. "I haven't and don't plan to go out and see many high school games. We normally rely on our alumni and use the telephone to touch base with our contacts."

Hearn said he would like to bring in about four good players next year, but, if he doesn't, he'll be content to use the 10 he already has. Those returnees include 6-3 center Veta Williams, who scored 39 points and had 20 rebounds in the NCAA championship game.

"Veta will be our only senior next year and we're expecting big things from her," Hearn said. "We've been working with her in developing her outside game because she's such a good shooter. She's also a good shot-blocker and rebounder."

Also among the returnees are 6-1 center Val Ellis, 5-11 guard Sylvia Walker, 5-9 guard Wanda Wood, 5-11 forward Lisa Burns, 5-9 twin sisters Nathelma and Nadine Walker, a guard and forward, respectively, and 5-11 forward Wanda Hobbs.

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dle the ball against the other team's press on many occasions."

Another first-team pick who will get a good look from the pros is North Carolina A&T's Joe Binion, a 6-7 senior forward who was picked as the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference's Player of the Year for the third straight season in '84. Only Marvin Webster, now with the New York Knicks, had accomplished that feat in the MEAC before.

In four seasons at A&T, Binion

broke the school's all-time scoring record and led his team to four postseason bids.

He also paced the league in both scoring and rebounding this season after leading the league in scoring and placing second in rebounding as a junior.

The fifth member and the only non-senior on the first team is Virginia Union's Charles Oakley, a 6-8 junior. As a freshman, the Cleveland, Ohio, native led the CIAA in rebounding and

has ranked second the past two seasons.

This year, Oakley, playing with four first-year starters, paced the Panthers to a 27-6 record and the NCAA Division II South Atlantic Regional title. The Panthers also came within a single point of the Division II Final Four.

"Charles has really matured as a young man since he came here," says Union Coach Dave Robbins. "He is the most physical and best rebounding player I have ever coached."

Oakley was a third-team all-America pick in Division II this season and Rob-

bins says his unselfishness may have cost Oakley a first-team berth. "He dominated a number of players who were on the first and second teams," Robbins says. "Next year, we plan to showcase his offensive skills a little more and I expect to see some 40-point games from him."

The second team includes North Carolina A&T guard Eric Boyd, Alcorn State junior forward Aaron Brandon, Alcorn junior guards Eddie Archie and Michael Phelps, and Grambling State senior center Napoleon Johnson.