

COVER STORY

Will the favored teams survive the storm in '89?

The one thing about making pre-season predictions, especially in college sports, is that the final outcome tends to be unpredictable. That's pretty much the case when you look at the pre-season black college basketball polls and compare them to what has happened during the first half of the season in 1988.

But we're into another year and the real deal has started -- conference play. And in the case of the four black college conferences, there hasn't been a clear pattern established just yet. However, it's fairly certain that there will be some surprises for the contenders and those who weren't supposed to fare too well this season.

Basketball, in particular, is a bit difficult to gage during the early portion of the schedule. That's primarily because very few conference games are played and many black colleges (Division I specifically) wind up playing against opponents who are better stocked in terms of the number of quality athletes they put on the floor. Still, those games have their merits. Many coaches prefer playing against competition that's supposed to be better in order to get their troops ready for the season that really counts -- the conference action.

After all, if you're a black college, the chances of your team reaching the playoffs are nil if you don't win your conference tournament. Very few black colleges have gotten at-large playoff bids in past seasons, and 1989 isn't likely to be any different.

But that's why they play the games. If we all knew the outcome for certain, the element of suspense and surprise would be missing. There would be no need to play.

For that same reason, favored teams in each of the black college conferences may find themselves fighting for survival as the season gets into full swing.

Black College Sports Review took a look at each conference and what transpired during the first half of the '88-'89 season. Here's what we discovered.

Jags are alive in SWAC

Coach Ben Jobe's Southern University Jaguars were supposed to be going through a rebuilding process after winning three consecutive SWAC tournaments and making back-to-back appearances in the NCAA playoffs.

But after 10 games, the Jags were 5-5 at the end of December, coming out at .500 against folks like Rice, California State, Alabama, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Southwestern Louisiana. During the Bayou Classic Tournament, SU lost a tough 90-88 decision to Ole Miss in the opening round and the Rebels hit a desperation shot with three seconds left in the game to secure the victory. The following night, the Jags won the consolation game by destroying Southern Louisiana 103-88. That points total set a new team scoring record for the Cajundome Fieldhouse in Lafayette, La.

Senior forward Darryl Battles is the lone returning starter from last season's team and he has assumed the mantle of being the team leader. Battles is the top SWAC rebounder (11.4 a game) and averaged 19.9 points per contest.

Southern's attack doesn't end there, however. Carlos Sample is showing a lot of flash and dash at guard. He leads the league in assists (8.6 a game), is second in steals (2.1 average), and still has enough energy to score at a rate of 20.7 points per game. When you add Johnny Steptoe (20.7 ppg, 8.5 rpg) and Joe Falkner (13.7 ppg), you realize that the Jaguars aren't to be counted out when it's time to play for the league crown.

In the early going, the Jags are a full throttle offense whose aim it is to simply outscore the opposition. They're tops in SWAC in those regards (98 ppg), but they're last in



Staff Photo

Vann Pettaway and Alabama A&M gear themselves for another SIAC title run.

team defense (88.6 ppg).

Texas Southern (3-7) has started off slowly. But their 3-7 mark could be somewhat deceiving. Considering the competition they faced in '88, the Tigers should be in good shape to start their serious run for the SWAC crown this month. Apparently, TSU coach Bob Moreland feels that games against New Mexico State, Texas, Wyoming, Auburn, Arkansas, and Texas Christian will put his team in the proper frame of mind to claim the conference title in Baton Rouge in the next couple of months.

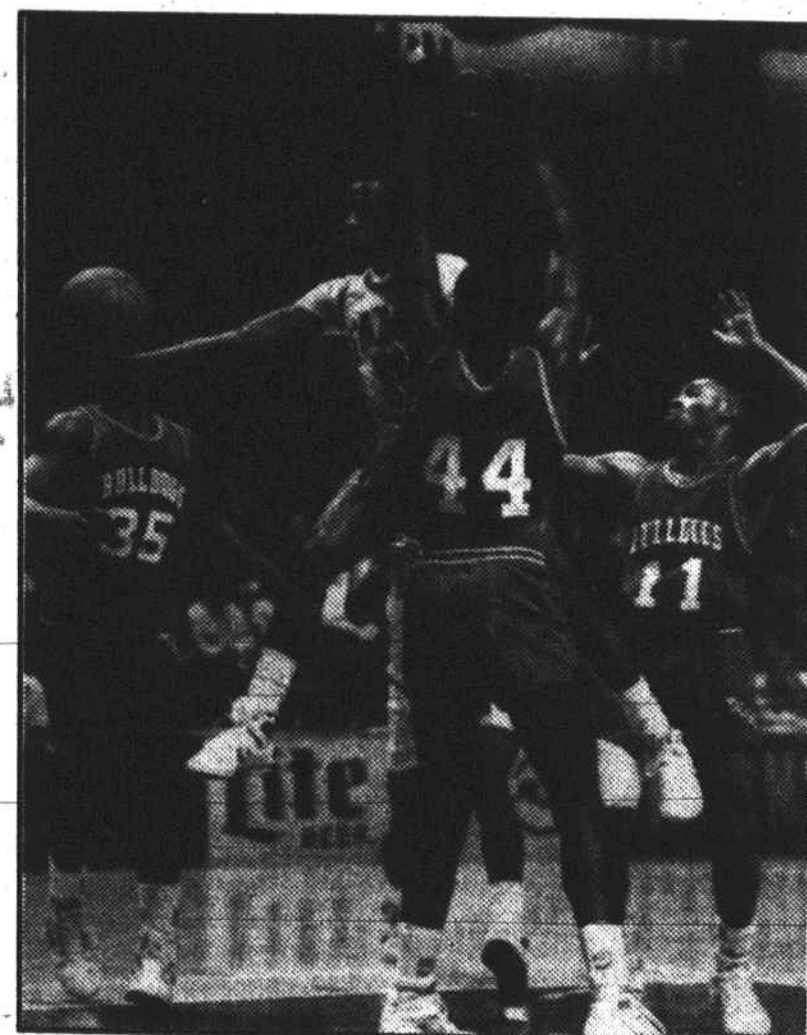
Charles Price is the Tigers scoring leader with 20.7 ppg, and he gets helps from Darron Applewhite, who averages 13 ppg. Applewhite, by the way, is the top thief in the conference -- 2.7 a game average.

But Fred West continues to be the main guy in the middle. West is second in league rebounding (9.1 a game) and is the most proficient shot blocker, having swatted away 22 in seven games.

Even with the rugged schedule the Tigers faced early, there are some telling stats that reveal why they have stumbled out of the blocks. For starters, they're shooting only 43.3 percent from the field. The good news, however, is that they've held opponents to 43 percent field goal shooting. But the stat that has to be of major concern to coach Moreland is his team's icy touch from the free throw line. TSU, as a team, is woefully bad in that phase of the game -- 37.3 per cent.

Terry Brooks leads the Alabama State attack as the No. 1 scorer in the conference at 24.9 ppg. The sharpshooter is also canning nearly 55 percent of his shots from the field. Darrin Mayo has helped Brooks with the scoring load, contributing 14.7 ppg.

The Hornets (5-5) are among the better rebounding teams in the league and are second behind Southern in scoring offense (85.9 ppg) and margin of victory. And they are winning by the slimmest of margins. ASU scores an average of 85.9 ppg while their opposition averages 84.6 points



Staff Photo

Florida A&M is hoping that their sluggish start won't hamper their efforts to capture the MEAC crown.

against them.

When it comes to the three-point shot, Mississippi Valley State's Tim Pollard is practically in a class by himself. Last season, Pollard was the top three-pointsman in the nation, sinking 132 of 308 for a percentage of .428. He's picking up where he left off this time around. At presstime, he had hit on 43 percent of his three-point shots. Currently averaging 21.7 ppg, the long distance shooting specialist canned 17 tries in road losses to Pepperdine (nine) and New Mexico State (eight). His sizzling accuracy set arena records in those games.

Pollard isn't the whole show, though. Rod Coleman and Jammie Johnson are proving to be a reliable rebounding tandem for the Delta Devils. Collectively, they average nearly 17 boards a game. Johnson also scores 13.7 points per game. The Delta Devils were 4-7 coming into the first week of January.

Jackson State (4-5) is holding their own under coach John Prince's guidance. The Tigers are paced by Tyrone Kidd's 16.3 points per contest, while Demetrius Abrams pulls down nearly eight rebounds a game. Abrams, by the way, is deadly from the free throw line. He leads SWAC in that category, hitting almost 92 percent of his freebie shots.

Prairie View hasn't been as effective as they would like to be at this juncture of the season. But the Panthers (3-6) have shown that as a team, they can shoot the lights out from three-point range. They're tops in SWAC, shooting 49 percent, which is nearly six percentage points better than their average from the field.

Guard Lamar Holt has been uncanny from that distance, converting 66 percent of his lengthy attempts. Holt also averages eight assists per game.

Sluggish beginnings aren't exactly a new order of business for the Gambling Tigers (2-8). In recent seasons, they have started slowly, only to come on strong by season's end and are usually one of the contending teams by the time the conference tournament takes place.