

MEAC ROUNDBALL

Coppin's on top, but Dogs, Aggies pursue

Coppin State has the talent, but they also possess sufficient team savvy to win their second straight regular season and tournament championships. But it won't be a Sunday stroll in the park.

South Carolina State and North Carolina A&T are steady on the case in the title chase. And don't overlook Florida A&M, a team that on a given night could wind up wearing the MEAC's glass slipper. Delaware State has been riding a pendulum of ups and downs, but could also throw a wrench in the predicted final outcome.

The rest of the cast — Morgan State, Bethune-Cookman, Maryland-Eastern Shore and Howard University are very likely to be bystanders who will watch the league tournament's semi-finals and final rounds from the stands. Here's a look at how the teams shape up coming down the home stretch of this season.

Coppin State has owned the league like a prized possession, winning 10 of 11 MEAC games. The Eagles don't have a lot of depth, but they get the maximum out of their top seven people.

The Eagles are prime choices because of Reggie Isaac and Larry Stewart, a deadly inside-outside offensive combo that destroys and dominates. Isaac (24.9 ppg) keeps defenses honest with his outside bombs as the circuit's top scorer, while Stewart (23.5 ppg, 13.5 rpg, 61.9 percent field goal shooting) handles much of the work inside the paint.

As a team, Coppin has succeeded because of an all-encompassing defense. The Eagles are the conference leaders in scoring defense (69.1 ppg) and field goal percentage defense (.416).

South Carolina State's defensive maneuvers have put them back into the upper echelon of the MEAC. State has been especially stiff at the defensive end, holding opponents to 76.1 ppg and 44.8 percent field goal shooting.

The Bulldogs have also benefitted as the circuit's top rebounding bunch with 42.6 a game, outboarding foes by a +5.3.

Travis Williams is the main weapon with 21.3 points and 12.3 rebounds per game. Williams' partners in crime include Chris Felix (13.9 ppg, 4.2 rpg), Jackie Robinson (6.5 rpg) and point guard Curtis Faust (6 apg).

State will have to get more consistency out of its offense if they are to knock the Eagles out of their comfortable nest at the top of MEAC mountaintop.

Folks around the league have been prophesying that North Carolina A&T will return to the top spot this year.

The way things have transpired, there's reason to believe that observers are correct in that assessment.

The Aggies have started to produce the right mix of floor balance that could pave the way to a championship. Glenn Taggart and Dana Elliot are the prime perpetrators offensively. Taggart is the top guy at 20.1 ppg, 5.4 apg 5.2 rpg, while Elliot contributes 18.5 points and 7.2 boards a night. Jim Humphries, Colin Spady, and Wayne Morris are a tough bunch on the glass, further bolstering the Aggies attack. Defensively, Humphries has been denial-conscious as the league's premier shot blocker (47 in 18 games).

Whether or not A&T makes that final step will depend on how much they can maintain the consistency level they've found over the final three weeks of the regular season.

This was supposed to be a rebuilding year for Florida A&M. But guess what? The Rattlers are in position to contend for another tournament title.

As usual, A&M's defense has been a major factor for them. The Rattlers are ranked among the best defensive teams in the MEAC, holding opponents to 79.4 ppg.

Perhaps the most pleasant surprise for the Rattlers has been the development of point guard Kenny Davis, who has emerged from the shadows as a prime-time floor leader. Davis leads the league in assists (6.2 a game) and is second in free throw percentage (.851). In the process, he scores 15.8 ppg and averages 2.4 steals a game.

Offensively, the Rattlers struggled during the early part of the season. That was because they were missing Reggie Finney (14.8 ppg, 5.7 rpg) and

absence because of an injury.

Come tournament time, Del State will have to tighten up its defense in order to win. Not because they are subject to being shut down offensively, but because teams will slow the pace of the game, which will reduce the number of possessions that the Hornets have during a game.

Morgan State has had its share of woes on the court this season, but Glenn Smith has contributed in a big way with 16.4 ppg. Bethune-Cookman always manages to play the opposition tough, but wins have been hard to come by. Cliff Reed is their ace offensive player at 20.5 ppg and Ambrose

Austin is the league's top foul shooter (88.2 percent). Reggie Cunningham (7.2 rpg) and Chris Carter (4.4 apg) are the Wildcats' other top players. Maryland-Eastern Shore has avoided the cellar but not by much. Darrick Powell is their most consistent guy at 12.1 points and 5.3 rebounds a game. Leland Kent contributes 6.8 rpg. Howard University has taken its share of lumps under Butch Beard, HU's first-year coach. Tyrone Powell is their top guy (12.8 ppg, 6.4 rpg) and Kelsey Sturdivant (6.5 rpg) is proving that he'll be an added factor as he gets more playing experience.

- Lonnie Sheldon

Tourney Info

The MEAC takes its conference basketball show to Norfolk, Va. for its tournament which will be held Feb. 28 - March 2 at the Norfolk Scope.

On Feb. 27, the league's eighth and ninth ranked teams at the end of the regular season will square off in a contest to determine the eighth seed for the tournament.

The league's tournament winner doesn't get an automatic bid to the NCAA Division I playoffs. Instead, the MEAC winner will face the champion of the Southland Conference to determine who will play in the first round of the playoffs.

Coppin State is a solid favorite to win the title. They should be joined in the Final Four by South Carolina State, North Carolina A&T and Florida A&M. FAMU is the dark-horse pick.

ESPN will carry a live telecast of the championship finals at 7:30 p.m. on March 2. For ticket information, contact the league office at 919/275-9961.

Delon Turner (14.8 ppg, 8.1 rpg), who became eligible last month after sitting out the first half of the season. In the meantime, Kelvin Daniels (16.8 ppg, 6.2 rpg) had to take up the slack in their absence and he has come through.

With this group back in tact, A&M should be back on the right track to create some problems for all foes by the time the league tournament convenes in Norfolk, Va. later this month.

When it comes to offense, there is no team better than Delaware State. The Hornets are the top scoring (87.9 ppg) and shooting squad (48.3 percent shooting from the field) in the conference.

Those facts are hardly surprises when you consider that two guys with the same last names who are not related, ply their trades for DSC.

Tom Davis draws a lot of attention whenever he goes on the floor. The power forward contributes 23.7 ppg, 11.9 rpg and shoots 53.7 percent from the floor. Emmanuel Davis is just as valuable in the backcourt. Emmanuel tallies 20.2 ppg, 5.4 apg and leads the league in steals with 3.1 a game.

The Hornets suffered during his two-game

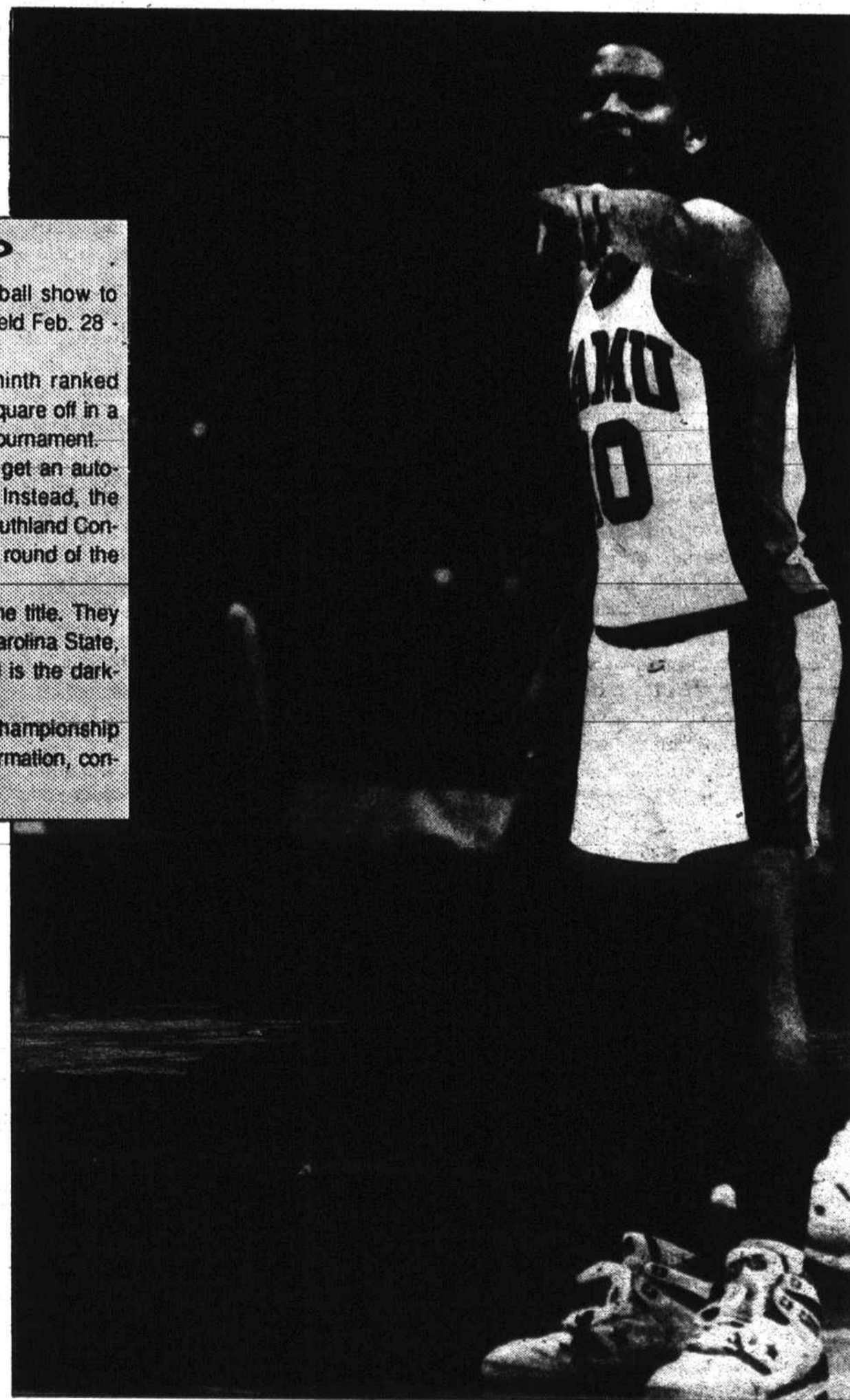


Photo by Max Dunhill
Rattlers point man Kenny Davis leads the league in assists (6.2 a game) and steals (2.4 a game) while averaging 15.8 ppg.