

PROFILE

Smooth Stewart keys Coppin's Eagles

As a high school player at Philadelphia's Dobbins Tech, Larry Stewart's basketball skills were hidden in relative obscurity. Stewart didn't receive the notoriety that such celebrated prep stars like Lionel Simmons, Pooh Richardson and Bo Kimble acquired throughout their careers.

But even in the face of little or no publicity, Stewart has developed into a top-of-the-line player for Coppin State.

Stewart, a 6-7, 220 pounds senior, has been the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference's most impressive player this season. At presstime, he was averaging 22.7 points and 13.2 rebounds a game while leading defending league champ Coppin to another possible appearance in the MEAC tournament finals.

"I didn't play any organized basketball until my junior year in high school," said Stewart, who was voted MEAC MVP by conference coaches last season. "I spent a lot of time playing basketball in the schoolyards. I had to adjust to playing high school basketball. But I worked extremely hard on my game in the Sonny Hill League. It really made a difference in my senior year. I made the All-Public League team. It's just that I didn't get any recognition from the press, so I wasn't recruited by many colleges.

"Actually, Coppin State was the only school that really showed a lot of interest in me. Coach Fang (Ron Mitchell) was building the basketball program at the time. Basically, he wanted me to be a part of the school's success."

When Mitchell took over at Coppin State in the fall of '86, the Eagles had finished on the downside of .500 for three straight years. It wasn't until Mitchell's third year that the Eagles came through with a winning season at 18-11.

Last year, the Eagles continued to ascend to new heights with a 26-7 mark and its first-ever trip to the NCAA playoffs. Mitchell feels that Stewart has been a major factor in his team's rise to prominence.

"Larry was a big recruit for us," Mitchell said. "He came in and played a lot for us. He had an impact on the team right away. Larry, who runs the floor, rebounds, shoots and plays good defense, kept getting better each year. As he got better, so did our team. He also did a good job of blending in with the other players."

But while Stewart has produced at a high level, he's quick to admit that Reggie Isaac's presence has been a major plus for him. Isaac, a 6-3 senior guard is a deadly accurate outside shooter who averages 24.4 ppg.

"We have a pretty good inside and outside combination," Stewart said. "The other teams have to respect Reggie's outside shooting. He can hit from just about anywhere on the court. This gives me an opportunity to roam the baseline, post up, and make some moves in the lane. I think Reggie is one of the best shooting guards in college basketball. I'm sure NBA scouts will take a look at him."

The scouts are familiar with Isaac and they are also knowledgeable about Stewart's value as an all-purpose contributor. At the end of the season, he'll get his chance to show what he can do in the prestigious Portsmouth Invitational Tournament, which is heavily attended by NBA scouts each year.

Don Levanthal, an NBA draft expert, has rated Stewart as one of the top forwards in the country.

"Larry is playing power forward in college," Levanthal said. "He'll have to play small forward in the NBA. He is a very consistency player and he puts up good numbers every night. The only thing he needs to develop is an outside game."

For now, however, Stewart is more concerned about his team making a repeat appearance in the NCAA Tournament. He realizes that the road leading to the playoffs won't be an easy one for the Eagles.

"This year we've got to win our tournament and then we have to play the winner of the Southland Conference," Stewart said. "We don't have an automatic bid like most conferences. But I want to get back to the tournament. I know how important it is for the school. I want Coppin State to continue on the path to success."

-Donald Hunt

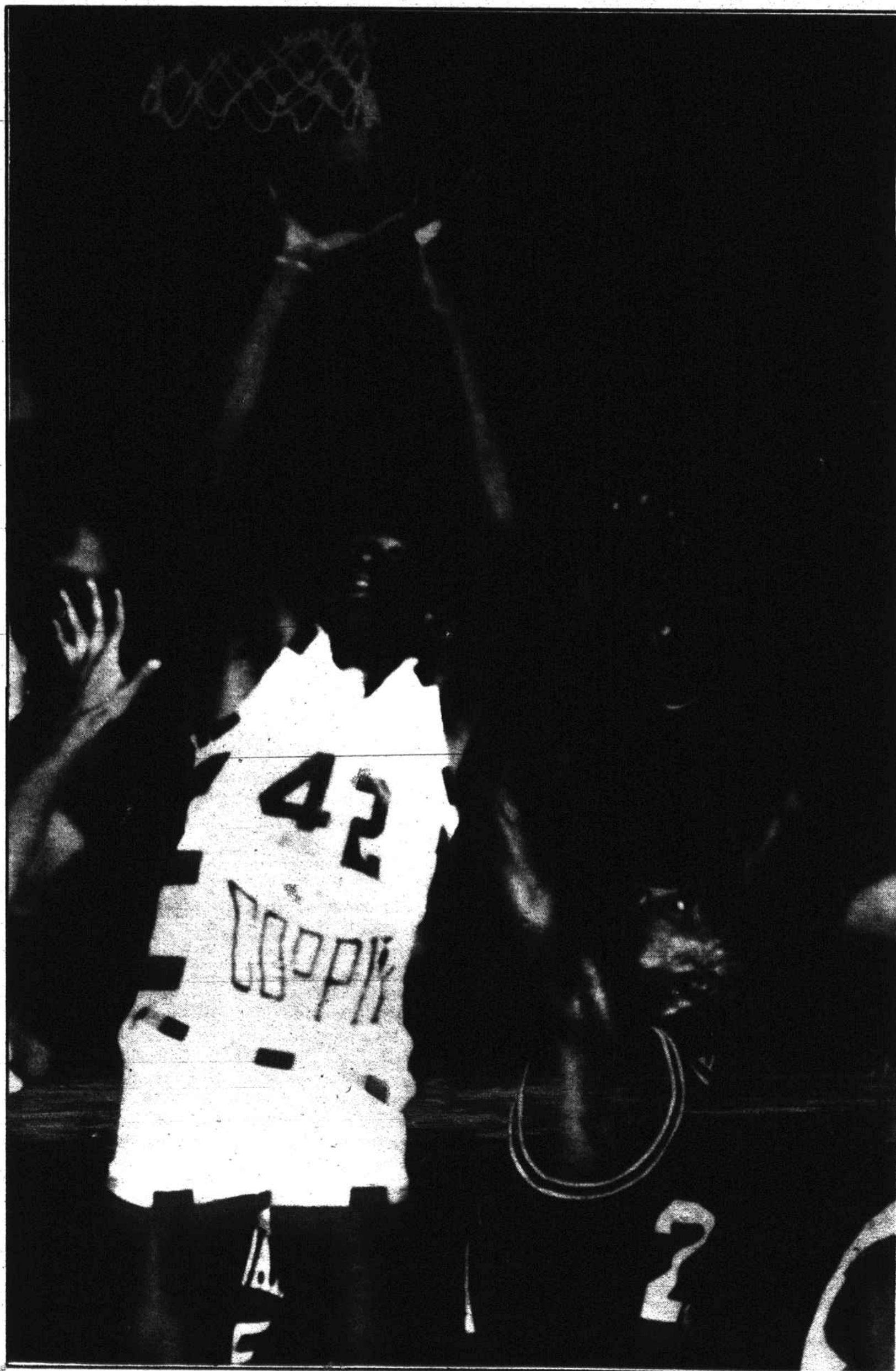


Photo courtesy of Coppin State College.
Stewart's stellar play makes him a heavy favorite to repeat as the MEAC's MVP this season. Entering the season's final month, Stewart was averaging better than 22 points and 13 rebounds per game.