

NORFOLK STATE'S WOMEN

Spartanettes haven't peaked just yet

Winning 33 of 35 games is a grand treasure of excellence by anyone's standards. The only things to surpass that would be finishing the year undefeated and winning a national championship to boot.

That's the saga (for this year anyway) of Norfolk State's Spartanettes, a feisty bunch guided by a heady coach who knows the rudiments of building a program that's second to none.

In the Spartanettes case, the realization of a title didn't materialize this time around. But it was still a dream season, a season that was filled with most of the delights that a coach could dream of. Tracy Saunders was voted Division II Player of the Year and James Sweat earned Division II Coach of the Year honors.

Norfolk's 33 wins tied two Division II records — most wins in a season and most consecutive wins in a season.

The Spartanettes scaled the mountains to the Final Four without the elements that powerhouse teams usually have to contend for a national crown. Sweat's team had just one senior, Saunders, and they were minus the services of their top rebounder and one of their major offensive contributors, Stephanie Palmer. (More on Palmer later).

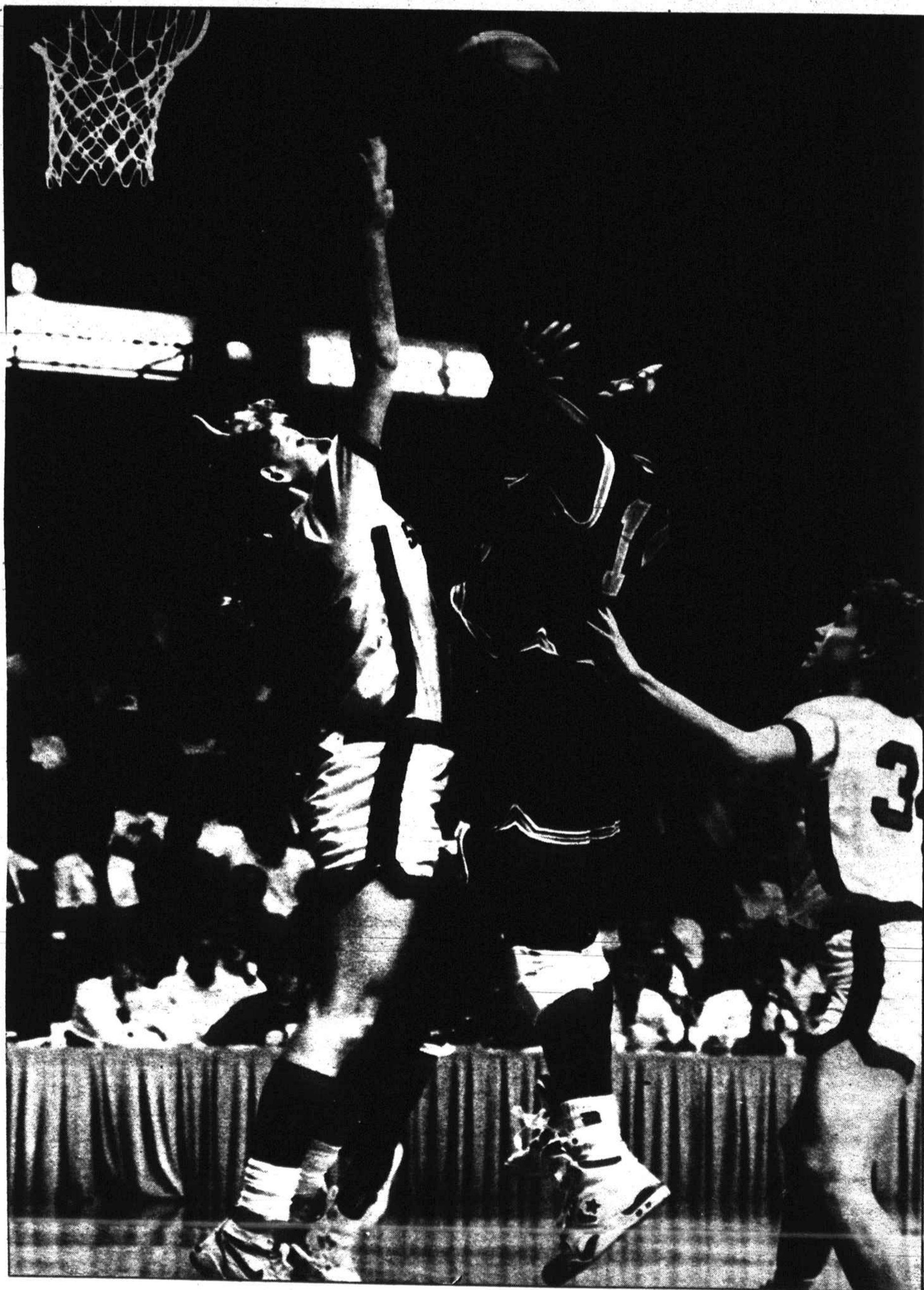
Going into the Division II women's Final Four, Norfolk was undefeated. But tough times confronted them at the big dance and they lost their final two games. Still, they ended the year at No. 4 in the national polls.

"At the beginning of the season, our goal was to make the Final Four," says Sweat, who has 257 career victories over a 10-year period. "Realistically, I felt we could go undefeated in the conference. And once that happened, I saw no reason why we couldn't go all the way."

Norfolk reeled off victory after victory by attacking all opponents with an Army cavalry mentality. The Spartanettes did the job with defense, the baseline-to-baseline kind that forces the opposition to eventually wilt and wave the white flag. Sweat's women forced 39.5 turnovers a game.

Sweat's crew was so effective with this tactic that it elevated their offense to stratospheric proportions. The Spartanettes didn't just win games. They triumphed by margins as wide as any canyon you can find that's west of the Mississippi. During the season, NSU beat teams by an average of almost 32 points a night. On eight occasions, NSU scored over 100 points. They even won a game by a triple digits (143-43 over Fayetteville State is a Division II record for margin of victory). Saunders, Jennife Tanks, Samantha Thompson and DeShonna Anderson provide 63 points a night for Norfolk's ladies.

But in the national semi-finals, Nor-



Tracy Saunders ended her college career with over 2,000 points.

Photo by Louann Stokes