

COVER STORY

COACH RAY LEE...

SMITH'S HOPE

FOR THE FUTURE

The people were coming up to Ray Lee, shaking his hand, giving him hugs. Everybody was smiling in his face. Who were these people, he wondered to himself. He also wondered something else: Where had they been all along?

This was October 1992, and Lee, 33, Johnson C. Smith's football coach, a man who'd never coached a college team before, had just watched his team beat nationally-ranked Glenville State at Memorial Stadium. The win was significant.

It was homecoming, for one, and in the past, Smith's homecomings had ever been pleasant things. The Bulls had lost four of them in a row and had been outscored in them 142-38.

But the '92 season, so far, had been a little different. Smith had been close in games; there were no 80-6 type finals that had so littered Bulls boxscores in years past.

The fans were coming back, too, sensing a renaissance in a team that many had written off for dead. At Smith, fall had become little more than a waiting period for the Bulls powerhouse basketball team to get started. Fans from opposing teams would ridicule Smith fans dur-

ing football games, and the Bulls fans would always reply, "Wait 'til basketball season."

But now, hoops were a long way off. Smith had just beaten Glenville 13-10 in front of about 8,000 fans, one of the Bulls largest crowds in several years. The fans were beginning to believe again. The players, now, most certainly did. They raised fingers high in the air — coaches, players and fans alike. Finally, they all knew it: the Bulls could beat anybody.

"That was the biggest turning point in our season," Lee said.

He says it now, with hindsight, knowing what happened. Lee went on to lead the Bulls on a four-game winning streak, the school's longest since 1970, and a 5-5 record.

This was no longer that same ole Smith that showed up, got blown out, but always had the best hand on the field (fans used to actually come to watch the first half, the band at half-time and then leave). Somehow, Lee had found a way to make a team that had gone 2-16-1 in its past two seasons competitive. This was significant, too.

"What he was doing," said Delano Tucker, Livingstone's head coach and Smith's CIAA conference member, "was unbelievable."

For background, consider these facts:

In the 1990 season, under coach Horace Small, Smith had been outscored 305-95 and finished 0-9. In 1991, under coach John Wright, the Bulls were outscored 291-140 and finished 2-7-1. And after the '91 season, Wright deduced that winning at Smith was impossible. The Bulls had too few scholarships, he said, and morale was too low. He

quietly told friends that "it would

take a miracle," to change the program.

And Wright, trying to spread 12 scholarships among 46 players, felt he had no such miracle. But Lee was a little different.

"I looked at all the negatives as a challenge," Lee said.

Challenges. You try recruiting high school players with just 12 scholarships to give out, and nearly every other recruiter can promise the kid everything north of Egypt.

You end up getting fewer and fewer star players, and you end up losing more and more games. Losing builds on itself. No one wants to play for a losing program, and you try telling a kid that, yes, he can have the opportunity to help turn something around, but before he can do so, he'll have to qualify for financial aid.

So coaching at Smith is tough. There are no secretaries to answer calls and handle problems or specialists to make sure the field is shiny and clean. Coaches do all of that. And when Lee got to Smith last year, this is just some of what he was faced with. All that and this, too:

"I saw a team full of talented players in certain spots and players waiting for someone

to grab them and take them somewhere," Lee said. "Some looking for leadership and guidance and others just looking for someone to sit down and listen to their problems."

Lee talked and Lee listened. He also put a poster of championship rings on the wall in his

office. Every time a player came to see him, he had them look at the poster.

"Why?" he'd say to them. "Why can't we order some rings like those one day?"

The players would always begin to offer an answer but find themselves choking on the words.

"There's no reason you can't," Lee would tell them over and over and over again.

"All I can do is prepare the players I've got to perform," Lee said. "The way you do that is with attitude. If you get your players believing they'll make a play, and that they'll win, their performance will go up. When that happens, you'll win." And Lee hates to lose.

"You know I go to all of the games, and I often think that if those players only knew how he is after they lose, they'd never lose," said Lee's wife, Sue.

SMITH'S FORFEIT CONFUSING

In what could still be a season to remember, Johnson C. Smith coach Ray Lee has had an awful start.

The Bulls were forced to forfeit a game with Morehouse to start the season. Smith is protesting the game.

What happened was this: with the game tied at 14 and eight seconds left, Morehouse kicker Eddie Rhodes lined up a 17-yard field goal attempt. It was blocked by Smith's Kwame Shabazz and the clock expired. The players began to leave the field.

But the referees had thrown two flags: one, an illegal procedure on Morehouse, and the other, an offside against Smith.

The officials ultimately ruled this game a 1-0 forfeit for Morehouse after Smith didn't return to the field for the extra play they ruled to be warranted by the infractions. But Bulls coach Lee said that was never clearly explained to him.

"The ref told me he had offside and illegal procedures," Lee said. "So, I said, Fine that's it. I asked (the official), 'Is that it, is it over?' He turned and walked away." Lee felt that action meant the game was over. Obviously, the officials disagreed.

they met with Morehouse coaches and gave the Maroon Tigers a win.

"I think in the best interest of the schools and the community that you just play (the extra mandated play) and then protect the game," said Morehouse coach Craig Cason.

NCAA football rules secretary John Adams said there are several different scenarios which could occur when those two penalties called and the game continued or the game be over. It really depends, he said, on what the refs called.

In this case, we don't know. SIAC commissioner Wallace Jackson, at press time, hadn't released the officials report nor made a statement on the game. Smith officials had hoped to obtain a copy before making their announcement to protect publicly, but Elliott Robinson, the school's vice president for financial affairs, said the SIAC office hadn't made the report available to them before that time.

Because Morehouse was the home team, the protest letter will be filed to Jackson's SIAC office, not the CIAA office of which Smith is a member.