

Virginia Union has tradition, talent on its side

Will tradition win out again when the CIAA Men's Basketball Tournament tips off this week in Winston-Salem? Or will this be the year that an underdog steps forward to capture the title?

If you are Virginia Union, your hope is that tradition will count for something. The Panthers can boast of their 15 tournament titles, more than any other program in the league.

VUU, which has seven championships in the last 10 years, took home another divisional championship this season when it blasted upstart Elizabeth City 97-71 last Saturday night to take the Eastern Division title by one game.

The Panthers have one of the league's top frontcourt players again this year in the person of 6-9 Chandar Bingham. He follows in a long

line of "big time" pivotmen for Coach Dave Robbins' team.

On the other hand, if you're North Carolina Central your desire might be to finally live up to expectations. The Eagles haven't won a conference championship in nearly five decades.

Coach Greg Jackson's team took first place in the division again this season, taking a tie-breaker over Winston-Salem State and Johnson C. Smith, which both finished with identical 7-3 record divisional records to tie the Eagles. Jackson's team isn't flashy, but finds a way to do its damage.

The Eagles have a history of fading in the tournament. That last time NCCU stood in the winner's circle was 1950, the fifth year of the tournament's existence.

The Eagles also took home the spoils after taking a championship in the inaugural tournament in 1946.

But twice is a whole lot better than none. There are five schools in the league have that distinction.

Livingstone had never won a league game until it pulled off two upsets last season. St. Paul's, which got its first tournament win several years ago, also has never captured a league title.

Neither has Bowie State, which is in the running with those two programs for the fewest wins in tournament history. Johnson C. Smith has made it to the championship game six times, including last season, but has never emerged as the champion.

Other programs are hoping to get back to their onestoried CIAA days. One is Winston-Salem State, which tied North Carolina Central in divisional wins but lost out to the Eagles on a tie-breaker because they lost both regular season games to NCCU.

The Rams showed dramatic improvement this season under Rick Duckett, a former head coach at Fayetteville State. The Rams come into the tournament with an 18-8 record and are in search of 20-win season.

WSSU, which dominated the league during the 1960's and 1970's under legendary Coach Bighouse Gaines, could be the tournament's darkhorse.

The Rams have taken well to Duckett's style and are an exciting blend of veterans and rookies. WSSU has one of the top recruiting classes in the conference, led by Marcus Best. Best, a 6-2 guard from Fayetteville, might be the best freshman

to come into the conference in the '90's. Although not a prolific scorer, Best is among the top defensive players in the conference already. In addition, he is one of the top rebounding guards and an explosive leaper.

Elizabeth City has had some glory days in the past, the last coming during the 1981 season when it defeated Virginia State for the tournament championship. The Vikings have the league's top scorer in William Fitzgerald and a good complimentary player in Marcus Riddick. Barry Hamler, the Vikings' coach, was also awarded Coach of the Year honors for the job he did with ECSU during the '98-99 season.

Johnson C. Smith is hoping that it can win one more game in the tournament than it did last year when it lost to Virginia Union in the championship game.

The Golden Bulls and Coach Steve Joyner have played consistently throughout the season in posting a 19-7 overall record. However, the team has lost several key matchups in the division. Smith, led by the inside-outside combination of Lemans Shingler and Christopher Reese, lost twice to WSSU and once to NCCU. However, they come into the tournament riding the wave of the momentum they gained in defeating NCCU in the final game of the season last Saturday night by a convincing (75-60) margin.

Mike Bernard returned to the CIAA this season after falling out of favor at Norfolk State. At Fayetteville State, Bernard has crafted one of the league's

most patient teams. The Broncos can't be counted out because of their disciplined attack and the fact that they have one of the league's top scorers in Timothy Revels.

St. Augustine's is talented, but hasn't quite reached its stride again after losing venerable Coach Norvell Lee prior to the 1997-98 season. The Falcons captured their first ever CIAA Tournament title two years ago and have LaFonte' Moses, a streaky shooter on their roster.

The biggest enigma is St. Paul's, which might have the most talent of any team in the league. Coach Buck Joyner has the league's top player, Antwain Smith, who was named the league's top player for the third consecutive year.

The Tigers are big and athletic, but don't seem to play well enough in big games. If the Tigers can pull together for four games, they could end up taking home the spoils this season.

Shaw, Bowie and Virginia State have played well on occasion but lack the overall tools to make a run for the championship. Shaw and Virginia State were both hit hard for using ineligible players.

Bowie State has shown signs of improvement, but the Bulldogs are still missing the ingredients for cooking up a league title.

Livingstone, of the Western Division, comes into the tournament with many more wins than it posted a year ago. The Blue Bears, however, will be hard-pressed to pull off the upsets they did during the '98 tournament.



Fayetteville State came through with several key wins and could surprise at the tournament.