

Man behind Mr. CIAA steps out

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The question isn't exactly "Jeopardy!" material.

But ask CIAA basketball fans "who's Abraham Mitchell?" and they'll likely twist their faces in deep thought like contestants on the popular quiz show.

Their responses, however, are more likely to garner giggles than cash and prizes.

"Isn't that one of the assistants for Virginia Union?" a female tournament-goer guessed, incorrectly, as she stood in a concession line last Thursday.

Although Mitchell is a tournament veteran and one of its most visible and "colorful" stars, he is neither a 7-foot center nor the chancellor of one of the 12 CIAA schools.

CIAA fans could spend hours racking their brains and flipping through tournament programs and still be completely clueless.

The truth is that during the CIAA tourney — when alumni and fans of black college sports come from all over the land in one central location for a week of sheer bliss — Abraham Mitchell doesn't exist.

His body and mind are taken over by his fashionable and physically-active alter ego, known to the masses simply as Mr. CIAA.

"We really love him. I look forward to him every year," said Sylvia Haith of Winston-Salem. "I'm going to get a hug, a kiss, an autograph and a picture."

For more than 20 years now, Mitchell has made the annual trek from his home in Suffolk, Va., to the tournament, with suitcases, bags and trunks bursting with bright three-piece suits, shiny shoes and a variety of hats — enough cloths to make a supermodel green with envy.

"I dress well everyday, not just during the tournament," a smiling Mitchell said last week, decked in a off-white suit with matching shoes and umbrella. "I call my fashion, high fashion."

Mitchell's catwalk consists of a series of steep coliseum steps. His fans include throngs of basketball-faithful who think nothing of snub-

bing the action on the court in order to get a photo of Mitchell. His reward, he says, is the fact of knowing that he has made someone's tournament experience just a little better.

"When I get out there sometimes I just get in a trance," he said. "They (the crowd) expect it of me; that's why I do it."

Mitchell — a bachelor who won't give his age — didn't set out to be Mr. CIAA. He didn't plan on making five to seven outfit changes a day and shaking thousands of hands, all while ascending and descending coliseum steps. He never thought that paparazzi-like camera flashes would stalk his every move.

It was during the early '70s that Mitchell — an associate director at a Suffolk funeral home — went to his first CIAA tourney. Although he had attended both Maryland State and Norfolk State universities, Mitchell first started coming to the tourney because his nephew, Peter Mitchell, whom he raised, played on Norfolk State's basketball team.

At a tournament where fans are likely to be sporting sweat suits rather than the double-breasted variety, Mitchell's dapper threads were a rarity.

"This all happened by me just attending the games and dressing," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I wore suits and neckties, and everyone else had on T-shirts."

Over time, as the tournament moved from city to city, Mitchell's fashions began to receive rave reviews as he would make his way in and out of the coliseum. People began to cheer him in the middle of games, and soon they were asking him to pose for pictures and requesting autographs.

And soon, Mitchell began to add to the hysteria: meeting and greeting fans in one of his flamboyant outfits and then reappearing, in Superman speed, with a totally different suit on.

"I'll probably change seven times today," he laughed. "I always make sure that my suit, my umbrella and my shoes match."

Mitchell says it takes him about

five minutes to make a wardrobe change. He usually chooses suits that closely match the school colors of the teams that happen to be on the court as he makes his rounds.

He packs nearly 35 suits for tournament week. Some of the outfits are classics — like his white suit with the dozens of blue stars embroidered on it — and are worn each year. But most are retired and replaced with newer, flashier ones.

"I travel a lot, and I'm always looking for cloths. I'll pick up a piece in Washington when I'm there... maybe something from Atlanta, New York... I design a lot of my stuff, or I'll just buy it and alter it," Mitchell said while two fans stood to his right snapping his picture.

This year Mitchell made his many lightening fast changes in a van provided by a church in his hometown. In the past, he has changed in his car.

Although he is not officially affiliated with the CIAA, Mitchell is provided with a pass every year to the tourney. The various coliseums that have hosted the tournament have also provided him with special parking privileges.

One year, members of the press even provided Mitchell with his own little section of the media room where he could store his cloths.

"I make new friends every year. I don't have any enemies... that I know of," he laughed.

Mitchell says he doesn't even count CIAA Commissioner Leon Kerry as one of his enemies, at least not anymore.

The two men's relationship has been strained over the years. Reportedly, Kerry isn't too happy that a 50-plus-year-old man in jaunty suits garners more attention than the basketball games.

Kerry's and Mitchell's tumultuous relationship came to a head during the 1995 tournament in Winston-Salem. Kerry had Mitchell tossed from the event, accusing him of changing in restrooms inside the coliseum.

"I had just gotten (to the arena) and a security guard said they couldn't let me in," Mitchell said. "It was the most humiliating time. It wasn't

true. I would never change in a bathroom."

According to coliseum officials at the time, there was no policy that prohibited changing cloths in restrooms as long as a person was in a restroom designated for their gender.

Mitchell thinks his ouster was done to ensure that the basketball games took center stage.

After the incident, Mitchell vowed never to return to another CIAA tournament. At the time, he says, he was not overreacting.

"I really wasn't coming back, but then people started writing me letters from all over the country asking me to come," he said.

So come, he did.

When Mitchell returned the following year, he said his pass had conveniently been bumped down from V.I.P status to a regular visitor pass. But he wasn't fazed.

The crowds were just as welcoming. The autograph seekers were just as numerous. And the camera flashes were just as bright as they had been.

"I've been seeing him for so many years, that's why I want to get his autograph," Mickey Outlaw of Durham said as he approached Mitchell. "He's cool. He's professional. If he's not here, it just doesn't feel the same."

Although he works the coliseum steps nearly a hundred times per day, Mitchell says he never gets tired. And while he keeps one eye on the crowd so that they can get their pictures, Mitchell is also watching the game clock.

"I watch the clock so that I'll know (when to change)," Mitchell said.

He usually always makes changes just before half-time, so that he can mingle with fans in fresh cloths as they make a mass exodus to the restrooms and concession stands.

Not surprisingly, Mitchell says he has never seen anyone who has even come close to him in the fashion category.

From a hot pink number he wore during the semifinals, to the bold, floor length fur coat he wore atop a



Mr. CIAA marches up the steps at Joel. The fashion plate has been a tournament staple for 20 years.

white suit during the tourney's final night — he is in a class all by himself.

"No one else can touch me," Mitchell laughed.

Last Saturday, after the Winston-Salem State Rams spanked Elizabeth City, Mitchell bid fans farewell until next year, but it will be much longer before he'll see the city that the tournament has called home for the past six years.

The CIAA will strut into Raleigh for the next three years, taking with it millions of dollars in local revenue, 40,000 devoted fans and, of course, Mr. CIAA.

"I just have enjoyed Winston-Salem, everyone here has just been so friendly to me. Even when the thing happened with Kerry, that didn't change the high standing I have for Winston-Salem," he said.

But Mitchell says he will follow the tournament wherever it goes.

There are already rumors that officials at Raleigh's yet-to-be completed arena will give Mitchell his own dressing room.

It's a rumor that many fans hope is true.

"He deserves his own dressing room with a big star on the door," Haith said.

Outlaw said he is pleased that the next three tourneys will be held in his backyard, but if Mr. CIAA doesn't

show, he says, Raleigh's gain will be a pyrrhic victory.

"If he doesn't come and inaugurate the new stadium, it will not be right. It won't be the CIAA," he said.

Although Mitchell says that he is a little sad once the tournament wraps up, his fanfare doesn't cease once the last basket is scored. In Suffolk, Mitchell is a hometown celebrity, often appearing in local parades and events.

Mitchell says he will soon begin looking at outfits for the 2000 tournament. The new millennium will undoubtedly bring a slew of new color schemes and accessories.

He says that he is not sure how long he will be able to keep up his high energy CIAA act. He admits that once old age sets in, it may be difficult for him to maneuver the rigid coliseum steps.

But as long as he has the energy and as long as people want to see him, Mitchell says he'll be there — hat, umbrella and all.

"The CIAA is the best association between a lot of people that I have ever seen. It's a family reunion in a way because everyone gets along so fine," Mitchell said, as he was being eyed by a small crowd of people who had flanked him. "I do this because it's fun, and I love meeting people."

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