

Press Box

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Through the Deacons first nine games of the season, many people have been pleasantly surprised by the play of Wake Forest. In particular, the play of Howard, a 6-6 Winston-Salem native, has been the most welcome addition.

His coming-out party against Kansas, in which he scored a career-high 21 points against the nation's third-ranked team, put him on the map in terms of national recognition.

Howard did himself one better against Campbell when he scored 22 points.

The people who have watched Howard mature as a player since his first game as a Deacon saw it coming. Others might not have because of the obstacles he had to overcome.

Although Howard enjoyed an impressive freshman season for the Deacons, his coaches and teammates didn't give him an opportunity to display all of his skills. But after a summer of hard work on his ball handling and jump shooting, Howard has rounded into the team's most explosive and consistent player.

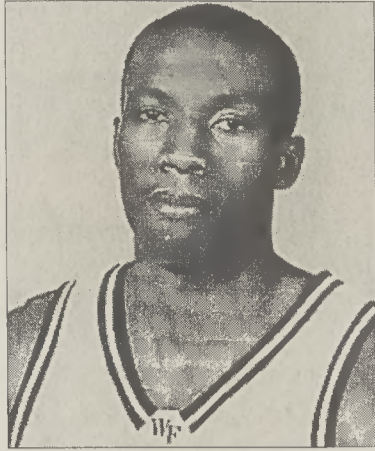
That flies in the face of some skeptics who gave Howard little chance of playing on the ACC level

after his career ended at Glenn High School. At Glenn, Howard learned the fundamentals well under the tutelage of Napoleon and Swandell Cloud. But at 6-6, he was forced to play with his back to the basket for his entire career. Yet, you could tell then that a high school player who averaged a triple double (scoring, rebounding, blocked shots) deserved a chance to play on the top level of collegiate basketball.

To Howard's credit, he made several wise decisions. The first was holding out to attend prep school for a year. That allowed him the time and opportunity to make the adjustment from the front court to a swing position. Another was to solidify his academics so that he would qualify to play on the Division I level.

Many times talented athletes don't make the right decisions for their situations. Howard did, however. He put himself in a situation that would allow him to maximize his ability.

While some might look at his volatile outburst in the Georgia game as a detriment, that might be just what coach Dave Odom and the Demon Deacons need to get their program back to the top of the ACC. A fiery competitor, Howard showed that he's not afraid to back down to anyone. If har-



Howard

nessed and placed in the proper perspective, it might be just what the Deacons need to get past league heavyweights Duke and Maryland.

While Wake Forest has enjoyed its share of success in the ACC in recent seasons, the Deacons have fit nicely into the "nice guys" category. Perhaps the Deacons needed a little toughness. That is not to say that Howard is the only Wake player who exhibits toughness on the court. But he very well could be the most high-profile Deacon to do so. In the end, that could help Wake to hold down a spot in the NCAA's top 10 throughout the season and make a run for the national championship when tournament time and "March Madness" roll around.

Jackets

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for the Frank Spencer Holiday Classic, which will take place at Lawrence Joel Coliseum Dec. 26-28.

Carver, seeded No. 5 in the field, will open up play in the tournament against defending Spencer champion and state 4-A champion R.J. Reynolds.

"Hopefully we'll have had enough practice to where we can play up to the level of our ability," Holt said. "Of course playing the state 4-A champion is a major challenge for us. By that time we'll only have had about two weeks of practice."

The Demons, on the other hand, will bring a well-oiled team into the tournament. Reynolds has played against some of the top competition in the nation, including Oak Hill Academy of Mouth of Wilson, Va.

"They're a seasoned team," Holt said. "They have two of the top players in the state in

Mitchell Baldwin (last year's Chronicle Player of the Year) and Derelle Mitchell. Then the rest of their players are very talented. You look at their point guard, Mike Russell - he's solid; then Teddy Petree - he's outstanding; and then they have a great shot blocker in Jason McDougald. They just have so much. Basically, they return all but one player from a state championship team."

That's not to say the Yellowjackets will be in awe. Last season, Carver gave the Demons fits in the semifinal round of the tournament and nearly escaped with a win. "We really did have our chances," Holt said. "No one really expects us, a 3-A team with not a whole lot of height or depth, to be able to beat them. But the kids we have over here are competitors and they're going to come to play every night."

The Yellowjackets will counter the Demons' size with an athletic bunch, led by Kenny Allison, who might be the most versatile athlete in the county. Join-

ing him along the front line will be 6-3 Antoine Wilkins, who possesses tremendous physical ability. Wilkins scored 43 points in the Yellowjackets' opener this season. Another player who could create matchup problems is 6-3 swingman Charles Sanders. Then there's Veon McHam, a 6-3 swingman who has a great outside shooting touch.

"We have a lot of guys who are very similar in ability," Holt said. "But most of them are just getting their basketball legs under them. If we can come together as a team, we'll be OK. The key right now for us is to just get used to playing with each other."

While Holt said his team would like to make a ripple in the tournament field, his main concern is getting his team ready for conference play. Last year the Yellowjackets came on strong to capture another Piedmont Trial 3-A Conference crown. If they can do that again, Holt said those first few losses of the year won't hurt as much.

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