

Injuries hinder Sheffield

Continued from 3B

Even Sheffield's best moments this season have been tainted. He homered against the Braves on May 13 but suffered a thumb injury three innings later that sent him to the disabled list. His first-inning grand slam against the New York Yankees on June 15 was wiped out by rain. He hit two home runs in one inning on July 12 but strained his hamstring in the same game.

"It's been one of those years," he said with a wry smile. "I do something right, and then something goes wrong. When I hit the grand slam against the Yankees and it was washed away, that typified the season for me. I'm trying to battle through it, but nature is going to have its way."

Ironically, while Sheffield limps along, Florida finally has a winning time. He lobbied long and loud for the Marlins to get aggressive in the free-agent market, and a \$175 million spending spree — capped by his six-year deal — has put them in playoff contention for the first time.

"This is a new experience for

Sheffield," Dombrowski said. "I hope it's one he enjoys, because it's what he has wanted since he joined us."

"I know what it feels like to lose," Sheffield said. "I know what it feels like to have a great season and be disappointed. This game is all about winning. If we do that, that's the only thing that will make me happy."

But if the Marlins are to challenge the Braves, Sheffield must get hot.

Despite his lack of productivity, pitchers remain reluctant to throw Sheffield strikes, which makes it difficult for him to find a groove. Through last week, he had walked 79 times and been hit by 13 pitches, ranking among the major-league leaders in both categories.

The lack of opportunities frustrates Sheffield, and he has complained that borderline pitches go against him because umpires dislike him. Some within the Marlins' organization privately support that contention.

A more obvious excuse for his season-long malaise is injuries. The sore left thumb hampers his powerful swing, and the

hamstring makes it impossible for him to run at full speed, prompting occasional boos from Marlins fans apparently unaware of the injury.

"Evidently they don't read the paper," said manager Jim Leyland, always quick to defend his struggling slugger.

"When they boo me, I start to say, 'I'll sit down. I won't play,'" Sheffield said. "I'm sacrificing my body to play, which I don't have to do. When I get that kind of response, I know I'm not appreciated."

"Even when I had my career year last year, I got booed a lot. They think I'm superman and I'm supposed to do everything."

Because of his lucrative contract, Sheffield feels obligated to play through the pain. The \$61 million man is going for broke. The boos will stop if he starts to hit, and as long as games remain on the schedule, Sheffield knows that he has a chance to salvage his season.

"I've hit 11 home runs in a month before," he said. "I can do it again."

Such a surge could take the Marlins a long way, so they're willing to wait.

Bell rings for N.C. Central quarterback

Continued from 1B

could start as a freshman, but my dad thought I'd be better off waiting a year," Bell said. "He told me he thought it would be better if I went somewhere where I could learn."

Bell has learned enough to earn the starter's job in spring practice. With the season-opening Aggie-Eagle Classic three weeks away,

he knows his performance will have a direct bearing on how far Central goes. The defense, which led the conference in fewest yards allowed, is expected to be solid. So the offense — and Bell — will be under scrutiny.

"I think our season depends on how I play," he said. "Our defense is going to be there. The offense depends on what I do. We have

the same personnel in every position but quarterback."

This is the position Bell has waited two years for. Being the focus of a team's hopes is a quarterback's job, and he's ready to take on the challenge.

"I might be putting a lot of pressure on myself," Bell said. "I don't know what pressure is. I just go out and play."

Grambling sanctioned for infractions

By Ed Schuyler Jr.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GRAMBLING, La. — The NCAA cleared Grambling football coach Eddie Robinson of any violations but placed the university on two years' probation for minor infractions by assistants and the play of two academically ineligible basketball players.

Last week's announcement came as Robinson — who has the most wins of college football coaches with 405 — is preparing for his final season at Grambling State University. After the long investigation into numerous allegations of impropriety, Grambling President Raymond Hicks clearly was relieved that the NCAA didn't impose stiffer sanctions, such as a postseason and television ban or a loss of scholarships.

"Today we probably look like a rose and smell like a rose, but I think that during the (NCAA investigation), we had some harsh experiences," he said. "You go through a painful experience when people question your integrity and your intentions. I said from the beginning that we have made some technical mistakes," he said. "I don't think anybody was trying to put the university in position where we were trying to cheat to get a competitive advantage."

Robinson, 78, had agreed to retire after this season following an effort to force him out last winter in a move unrelated to the NCAA investigation. He has won eight Black College Championships and 17 Southwestern Athletic Conference titles or co-championships in 56 seasons as Grambling's coach, but he had two consecutive losing seasons for the first time the past two years.

"After many, many visits with coach Robinson dealing with this matter, I was convinced he had not done anything intentional to put the program in any danger," Hicks said. "He was the man who built the program from scratch, and for more than half a century it's been part of his life. I could not imagine that being tarnished in any way."

Hicks said the decision by the NCAA not to impose harsher penalties cleared the way for the university to move forward with its search for Robinson's successor.

"Whoever the successor is will come with an understanding that the program has not been jeopardized," Hicks said.



PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Grambling State football coach Eddie Robinson talks to reporters during a press conference at the school. Grambling was placed on probation by the NCAA for violations in its football, men's basketball and women's basketball programs.

dized," Hicks said. "We'll be monitored over the next two to five years by the NCAA. But at least they can come in here and try to convince student athletes to be part of this great program."

In football, the violations included improper recruiting contacts with prospective transfer athletes, improper tryouts and out-of-season practices. The NCAA said all of those resulted from ignorance of the rules rather than a willful disobedience of them.

"I'm happy to get it behind us, and we'll live with the NCAA's decision," said Eddie Robinson Jr., the quarterbacks and receivers coach who was cited for most of the football infractions. "I've always felt the NCAA dealt fairly with me from the start."

In women's basketball, the NCAA said Grambling improperly allowed a student-athlete to practice and receive financial aid during the 1993-94 and 1995-96 seasons after her ACT test score

had been invalidated.

The men's basketball program also was cited for allowing a student to play in five games in 1993 while he was ineligible. The student didn't complete required classes during the previous year, the NCAA said.

Grambling was cited for failing to educate its football coaching staff on NCAA rules governing out-of-season practices and tryouts.

In addition to probation, the women's basketball team must forfeit games in which the ineligible athlete played in the 1993-94 and 1995-96 seasons.

Football coaches must cut the number of visits to recruits in 1997-98, and must get on-campus education about NCAA rules from the school's compliance officer.

The school must also develop a "comprehensive athletics compliance education program" with annual reports to the NCAA during the probation period, the NCAA said.

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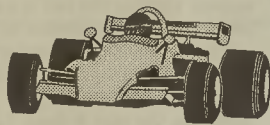
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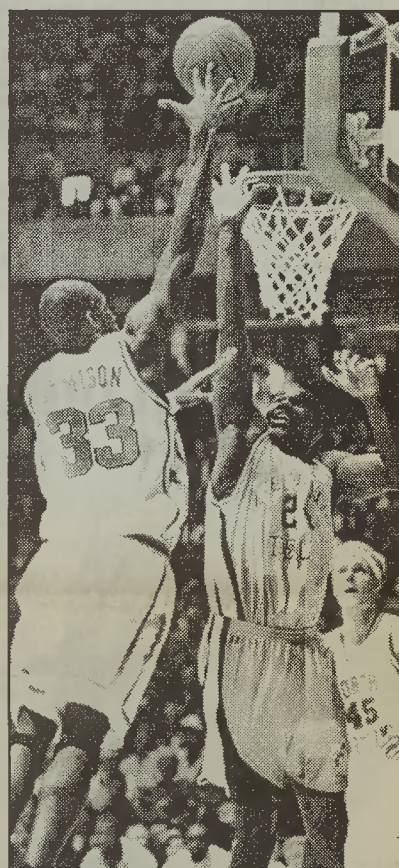


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