

Playing CIAA's Name Game

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Golden Bulls coach Steve Joyner

• Winston-Salem State: Jamal Durham (10.4 points)

"Most people didn't know about him because he was a freshman and he started every game. He's a product of what hard work is all about. A real humble young man who works hard and doesn't complain, and is competing at a high level for a freshman." - *Rams coach Phillip Stitt*

• Virginia Union: Brad Byerson (11.4 points, 7.9 rebounds)

"He's our big man in the middle, a transfer from West Virginia. He's just been an outstanding player for us, and he's stepped in and started every game and been instrumental in our success." -

Panthers coach Dave Robbins

• JCSU: Brittany Sumpter (16.7 points, 5.9 rebounds)

"With her offensive explosion, Brittany allows our young ladies the comfort to be able to do things with a bit more ease because they know she's able to create off the dribble. She's a guard who's had to play the post because of team needs and has been successful with getting herself to the line almost every game."

Vanessa Taylor

• Elizabeth City State: Ben Bridges (15.4 points, six rebounds)

"Ben is not only a good basketball player, he's a young man that is grounded spiritually and that's is where his strength lies. He's our leading scorer, our most vocal player, a leader in the locker room, and a good solid person on and off the floor. Every team that we play against has to deal with Ben." -

Vikings coach Shawn Walker

• N.C. Central: Lisa Richardson (5.7 points, 3.7 rebounds)

"She has finally been productive offensively. She's been able to score in double figures, and she has started to do some rebounding for us that she hasn't done in the past."

Eagles coach Joli Robinson



PHOTO: N.C. CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

N.C. Central women's basketball coach and Charlotte native Joli Robinson built Independence High into one of Mecklenburg County's top programs before leaving for Durham.

Robinson building NCCU for long term

By Bonitta Best

THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

DURHAM — Joli Robinson is coming home. And she can't wait.

Robinson, head women's basketball coach at North Carolina Central, is a Charlotte native and product of Charlotte Catholic High.

When the CIAA announced its basketball tournament would reside in Charlotte for the next three years, no one was more ecstatic.

"Just the idea of going home, I don't get to go home much, especially during the season," said Robinson, who has coached basketball, track and field, softball and volleyball at four different schools in Charlotte. "To have the opportunity to be there for the entire week is exciting."

Former NCCU athletics director William Lide hired Robinson on Aug. 15, 1996. The Eagles had two winning seasons prior to her arrival.

"North Carolina Central was searching for an individual who could establish the Lady Eagles as one of the top basketball programs in the CIAA, both athletically and academically," Lide said during the announcement. "I am confident that we have found the person to accomplish these goals in Joli Robinson."

With little time to recruit, NCCU posted a 5-20 record that year. In 1997-98, the Eagles went 8-19.

But, Robinson was slowly building

her team, and by the '98-99 season, her fruits had ripened.

That year, the Eagles won the Western Division title and posted a 20-7 overall record to become the winningest women's basketball team in school history.

It was just the beginning.

After advancing to the semifinals of the CIAA tournament for the second straight year in 2000, the Eagles were prepared to set the CIAA on fire.

With an all-star lineup featuring two-time player of the year and WNBA draft pick Amba Kongolo, NCCU gave Eagles fans a season they'll never forget: most total victories (25); most regular season victories (22); longest winning streak (16); first undefeated home record (12-0); highest NCAA regional ranking (No. 7 in final poll); first at-large bid to the NCAA Division II tournament; and the first tournament win for any women's sports team in school history.

NCCU lost by two points in the semifinals to the No. 1 team in the country.

"That was a special season, when you're looking at basketball, as far as athletics," said Robinson, a 1977 graduate of Winston-Salem State.

Yet, despite the accolades and accomplishments, a CIAA championship eluded Central.

Fans were confident the next year as Robinson returned most of her team.

NCCU was the only school to make the return trip to the D-II playoffs before falling in the regional championship game. The Eagles were ranked No. 1 for the first time in school history.

Still, no CIAA championship.

In a conference where fans care more about a CIAA title than a national one, does Robinson feel incomplete?

"You want to win that championship as a coach," she said. "You try to do everything you can to put yourself in position to win it, but still I don't try to press on it. Just looking at the things that have taken place during my era here, the championship would be great to go along with the other things."

After three subpar years, the Eagles are back among the conference's elite. They and Johnson C. Smith are about the only two teams capable of dethroning the three-time CIAA champions, Shaw.

While Robinson couldn't be happier "going home," she isn't complaining about where she is.

"I knew the program needed to be rebuilt and that's what I did when I was in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system," Robinson said. "And it's been great. I enjoy challenges, and I've been able to conquer some of those challenges and get us some wins during that time. It's been wonderful."