

J.C. Smith's simple goal: Win and in

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Johnson C. Smith is the hottest team going into the CIAA men's basketball tournament. The Golden Bulls will need to stay that way to get into the NCAA tournament.

Smith, winners of six straight games and the West Division champion, will likely need to win the tournament title in order to advance to the postseason. Despite a 16-6 record (14-6 CIAA) the Bulls aren't ranked in the South region rankings.

"We haven't been ranked in the region all year, so winning the tournament is definitely going to get us in the NAAs," junior forward Ed Rainey said. "That's what we're looking forward to. We're looking forward to winning the CIAA championship, but we're looking at the bigger picture - winning the NCAA basketball championship."



Joyner

This year's draw is wide open. Three-time champion Virginia Union is the favorite, but the Panthers aren't invincible with a pair of losses to JCSU. Bowie State

is explosive, but has difficulty with Union. Upstarts Virginia State, Fayetteville State and St. Augustine's are capable of winning it all, too.

"Now we have to change gears and change focus a little bit," Bulls coach Steve Joyner said. "The pressure comes in, one and done and there is no tomorrow to get something together. We're trying to be consistent attitude wise and in terms of what we're trying to do on the basketball court offensively and defensively. Then we have as much a chance as anybody in the tournament this year."

Smith, which won the 1000th game in school history Saturday with a 61-54 win against N.C. Central, has played past preseason expectations. The Bulls were picked to finish second in the West, but weren't considered a title contender with six first-year players on the roster.

But the newcomers have fit in with returning players like Rainey and all-CIAA guard Maurice Hooper. Against N.C. Central, Rainey, who has been slowed by injuries, came off the bench to score 15 points. Freshman Jerry Hollis, who plays ahead of Rainey, is the league's rookie of the year. To advance, the Bulls will need contributions from everyone.

"It's time," Rainey said. "For me to come back strong, it's so important to the team. I'm one of the veterans. I'm one of the persons (younger players) look up to. It's fun for everybody, but I definitely needed this."

Two weeks ago, Smith was third in the West but the winning streak vaulted the Bulls past Fayetteville State and St. Augustine's. Another unbeaten week, starting Thursday, would bring JCSU the school's second CIAA championship.

"We're trying to make history," Rainey said. "If we come out here as a team and play hard, play Johnson C. Smith-style basketball every day...we possibly can win it."

Said Joyner: "I think the advantage for us is we have to continue to win. We have to get at least to the championship game, but we don't want to just get to the championship game. We want to win the championship game."



PHOTOS/WADE NASH

Ed Rainey (42) and Johnson C. Smith have won six straight games heading into the quarterfinals of the CIAA men's tournament. The Golden Bulls won the West Division but likely will need to win the tournament to earn a bid to the NCAA tournament.

Eagles aim to make final tournament memorable

Continued from page 1C
Smith. It is a stark change from last year when Shaw was the favorite and won the tournament for the third straight year. King, a forward, is already in the history books with the most

points scored in the women's tournament. Still, the senior wants to end her college career on top.

"Records were made to be broken, but it's very important to win the tournament," she

said. The road to title town looks as if it's going through Elizabeth City State this year. ECSU has only lost three games in the conference and they have the CIAA player of the year, Celeste

Trahan at center. ECSU also has the defensive player of the year in guard Deanna Price.

Central and ECSU split the regular-season series, with both teams winning at home.

A Bull market for Smith women

Continued from page 1C

of our scoring came from our veterans," said head coach Vanessa Taylor. "We're really excited about getting to this point and meeting Shaw before the championship and having the opportunity to move ahead."

Taylor said that Smith's approach to the tournament is one game at a time. "When you begin the tournament, you begin at 0-0. Now, we're 2-0."

The Golden Bulls are playing some of their most consistent basketball of the season. Taylor said the team is coming together at the right time.

"This year, as a team, has taught us many lessons. We've had to deal with many different line ups and it's forced us to really depend on each other," she said.

The Bulls have also leaned on the strength and scoring of senior guard Brittany Sumpter. She scored 23 points in the victory against Shaw.

"I know it's very vital for me to play big time," she said. "During tournament time, I have no time to take off. Me playing big like I did tonight is very important."

It's also going to be important for JCSU to protect the ball against Elizabeth City State Friday at 3 p.m. ECSU won both regular season meetings, with Smith committing 53 turnovers.

"We have to prepare mentally and physically for the next game," said Taylor. "We have to step up our rebounding effort and our defense and we've been working on that."

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