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NATIONAL

By Donnie R. Tuck

The Howard University basketball team's trip to California last March, to compete in the first round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Western Regional playoffs, represented more than just a 3000-mile odyssey to Los Angeles. It was the culmination of a 10-year dream for the university and the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC).

The MEAC was born in 1970, with Delaware State, Howard, Maryland-Eastern Shore (UMES), Morgan State, North Carolina A & T, North Carolina Central and South Carolina State as its original members. One of the league's main objectives was to upgrade itself from a Division II conference to Division I status.

In the summer of 1979, UMES, Morgan State and North Carolina Central withdrew from the conference, opting instead to remain in Division II. However, later in the year, Florida A & M University and Bethune-Cookman College announced their intentions to join the MEAC, thus enabling the league to continue its quest for Division I classification.

That recognition came on June 8, 1980. And, a month later, the NCAA approved an automatic berth to the MEAC to compete in the 1981 basketball tournament.

The Bison's 3-Thousand-Mile Odyssey

Howard had won the 1980 conference tournament with ease. However, with neither the NCAA nor the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) beckoning, the Howard Bison went home to sulk and wait for the 1980-81 season.

With seven of the top eight players returning from a team that finished 21-7 in 1979-80, Howard was not only the preseason favorite to repeat as champion of the MEAC, but was also rated the number one Black college team in the nation. (Sheridan Broadcasting Network poll). One national basketball publication had the Bison picked as one of the top 30 teams in the country. However, Howard was guilty of having read too many of its press clippings.

To begin, the Bison opened its campaign on the road with three straight losses to Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) teams. Howard regrouped and pulled off four straight wins, two at home and one away (against cross-town rival University of the District of Columbia).

However, Howard was undone four days later by conference rival North Carolina A & T, 85-72, in the finals of the Aggie Holiday Classic. For three weeks, Howard was inactive. Then, on January 9, the second season—conference play—began.

At home, Howard struggled to a 64-62 victory over North Carolina A & T in triple overtime, thanks to two last-minute free throws by guard Bernard Perry. The following night, the Bison breezed to an 83-70 win over South Carolina State, another conference foe. But the Bison's applecant was upended by the Campbell University (3-6 at the time) squad, 55-54.

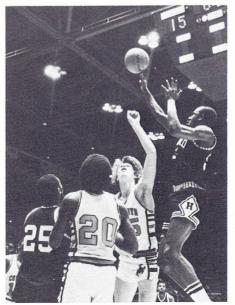
Two non-conference wins over West Chester State and Baptist College fol-

lowed the Campbell loss, but so did the nemesis of all athletic teams—injuries. Second-leading scorer and leading rebounder Larry Spriggs was beset by back spasms in the West Chester State game, and point guard Rodney Wright played only three minutes of that game after dislocating his right shoulder. Wright missed the Baptist College game, but both players were ready for the journey to Bethune-Cookman four days later.

The Bison downed Bethune-Cookman, 66-56, for a 3-0 conference mark. Again, Spriggs injured his back severely and missed the following night's game against Florida A & M in which the Bison lost badly, 91-71. A week later, with Spriggs back for action but hobbling from a bad foot, Howard fell 59-58 to A & T, dropping to 3-2 in the league, 9-7 overall. A night later, without Spriggs, South Carolina State surprised the Bison with a 78-72 win. With these three losses, Howard's road record fell to 3-8.

The Bison returned to the homecourt for inspiration and revitalization. A good stand in February began with a weekend sweep of Bethune-Cookman (77-67) and Florida A & M (76-64), and a week later, Fairleigh-Dickinson, (80-74). With a possible tie for the conference lead and a first round MEAC tournament call hanging in the balance, Howard traveled to Delaware State with great promise. But the Bison, fighting from all 11 points down with five minutes remaining in the contest, fell to Delaware State, 76-74.

And, with two games to go in the season, Howard saw the sanctity of its home-court violated with a 23 point blowout suffered at the hands of a smaller but very quick Towson State University team.



Forward James Ratiff taking a jump shot against the Cowboys.



Forward Larry Spriggs slamming home a dunk at Pauley Pavilion.

Sensing a chance at the conference title and the NCAA playoff bid slipping away, the Bison responded with home victories over-Delaware State (76-62) and the University of North Carolina-Wilmington (69-62) to close the regular season.

One More Roadblock

The first contest of the 1981 MEAC Tournament in Winston-Salem, N.C., was Howard against Delaware State. It was a game that would be close down to the final 10 minutes of the second half. At that point, the Bison, with an extreme height advantage, broke open a 44-41 battle with 11 unanswered points and went on to win, 67-53. Spriggs, who earlier that day was named the MEAC's Player of the Year, led the team with 17 points. He also had 14 rebounds as Howard led 55-27.

Against the Florida A & M Rattlers, Howard edged one step closer to the NCAA playoffs. After seeing a 73-67 lead with 1:35 remaining in the game whittled to 75-73 with one second left, the Bison once again rode the heroics of Larry Spriggs to victory. The 6' 8" senior blocked the opponent's last opportunity to tie the score harmlessly out of bounds, ending the contest and setting up a championship showdown with the A&T Aggies.

"Can we play three days in a row like this?" Coach A. B. Williamson asked rhetorically. "We can, and we will. We're going to win."

The Bison's backcourt, oft-maligned during the course of the season for its inconsistency, was the hero of the championship game against the Aggies. Rodney Wright, a 5' 10" junior, and 6' 5"

sophomore Bernard Perry connected on three pairs of free throws in the final 47 seconds (on all three occasions with the Bison leading by one) to give Howard a 66-63 victory, its second consecutive MEAC title, and its automatic ticket into the NCAA playoffs.

"Where are we going?," one player asked.

"I dunno," said another.

"You'll probably go to the Eastern Regionals in Charlotte (N.C.)," someone else offered.

When the official word came, the players and the coaches went wild. The Bison (17-11) was to play Wyoming, on Thursday, March 12, at 9:30 p.m. in the first round of the West Regional at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion.

"L.A.! L.A.!" boomed Spriggs, voted the tournament's most valuable player for an unprecedented third straight year. "We've been doing a lot of traveling on the East Coast and down South. But this is trrraveling!"

"Eat your heart out, D. C.!," exclaimed teammate James Ratiff.

Celebrity or Notoriety

Of the 48 teams qualifying for the NCAA playoffs, probably none other created as much of a stir nationwide as Howard did.

First of all, with the Bison's selection, the Washington area had an unprecedented three teams (Georgetown and Maryland were the other qualifiers) in the playoffs.

Secondly, given Howard's 17-11 record, compiled against a schedule of predominantly Black college teams, a number of sportswriters lashed out at the NCAA for its selection process.

But given the Bison's new celebrity status, all the local media as well as the national media, became interested in knowing about Howard University and how the team felt about going to the playoffs.

The Game

It was evident from the outset that the Howard players were uptight. The Wyoming Cowboys had jumped off to an 8-0 lead, which undoubtedly had many of the more than 12,000 spectators thinking that Howard was surely overmatched. But the Bison gained its composure and cut the deficit to three points, 16-13, with 9:44 remaining in the first half.

Moments later, forward Larry Spriggs had seemingly narrowed the gap to one with his slam dunk. However, the officials called a charging foul against him and disallowed the basket. The Cowboys rout was underway.

The Bison quickly got into foul trouble against the taller, more physical Wyoming team, and coupled with an 8-30 (26 percent) shooting in the first half, trailed 35-23 at the break.

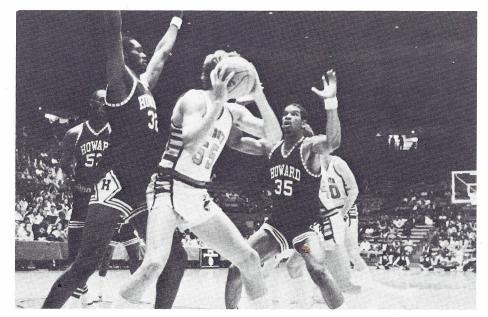
The Bison had become the favorites of the crowd in the first half. But despite the support of the fans and the admonitions of Coach Williamson and his assistant Cy Alexander, the Bison fell far behind. In the end, the scoreboard read: Wyoming 78, Howard 43. What a loss!

The Aftermath

In the pressroom, Williamson summed up his team's poor showing this way: "The fact that this is our first appearance in the NCAA playoffs and the mystique of Pauley Pavilion finally caught up with my players."

The players, embarrassed and hurt by their poor performance, dressed as quickly as they could and departed out into the night with nary a word to anyone.

Perhaps junior forward Lawrence Norfleet said it best: "We wanted to win too badly. We didn't take our time. It's a frustrating experience, but on the positive side, it's a learning experience. It will be valuable in the future."



A Wyoming player meets the Bison frontline.