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The Bison's 3-Thousand-Mile Odyssey

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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 pre-season 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 appiecart 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 homecourt violated with a 23 point blowout suffered at the hands of a smaller but very quick Towson State University team.

By Donnie R. Tuck

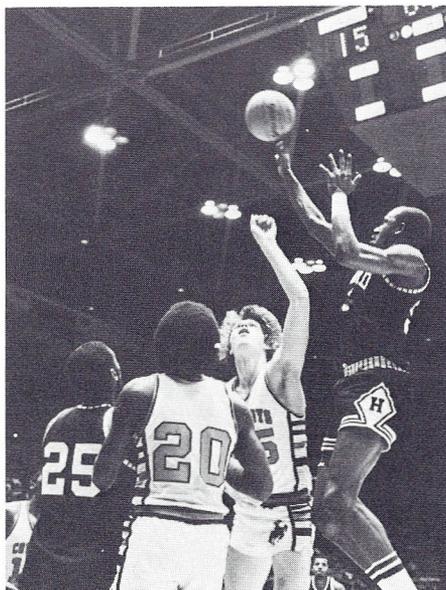
The Howard University basketball team's trip to California last March, to compete in the first round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Western Regional playoffs, represented more than just a 3000-mile odyssey to Los Angeles. It was the culmination of a 10-year dream for the university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

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Forward James Ratiff taking a jump shot against the Cowboys.



Forward Larry Spriggs slamming home a dunk at Pauley Pavilion.

