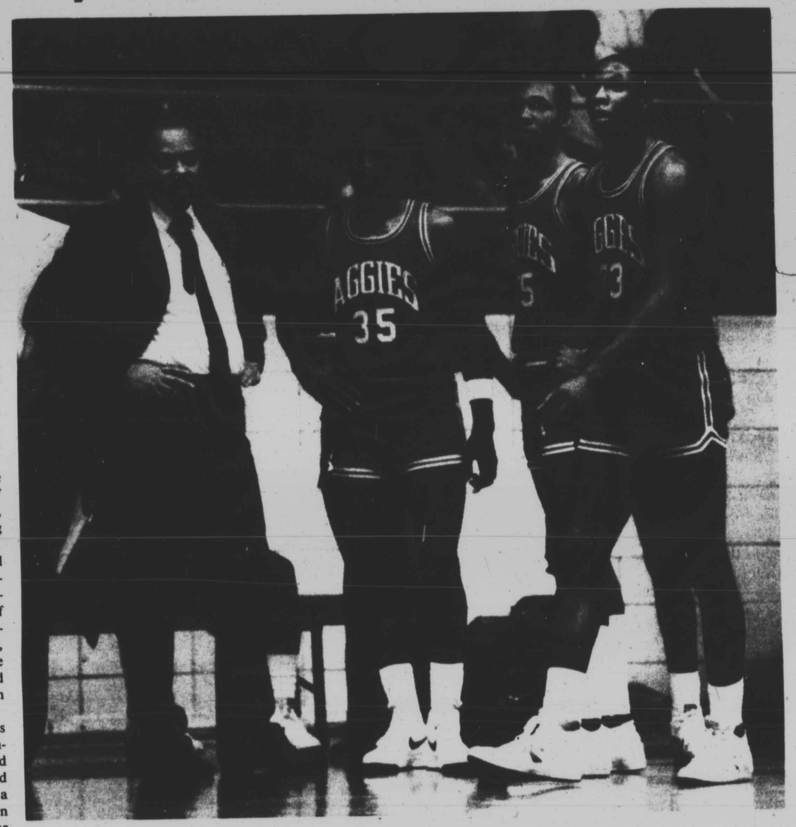
COMMENTARY

Things certainly aren't like they used to be

By BARRY COOPER
Syndicated Columnist



North Carolina A&T's Don Corbett (left): Bothered that some of his fellow black college coaches helped N.C. State prepare for his team (photo by Brian Branch-Price).

For many black college athletic programs, life one step from the big time has been little more than guilt by association.

When the National Collegiate Athletic Association created Division I-AA seven years ago, the idea was to give some not-ready-for-prime-time schools a league of their own. Many of the top black colleges jumped at the idea. Grambling went for it, and so did Florida A&M, Jackson State and a couple dozen others.

Has the move been worth it? Probably not. Seven years later, many of the black college teams in Division I-AA are over their heads in debt and hardly able to field competitive teams except in football. Futhermore, some of the harsh business practices of the larger schools have rubbed off on many of the black colleges, and life in black college athletics is not nearly as congenial as before.

Those are harsh realities that we would normally associate with some of the larger, money-grubbing schools, but that kind of an attitude is rubbing off on some black colleges.

With the move from Division II and into the higher classification, black college athletics has become a cold-blooded business. The spirit of cooperation that once made black college athletics unique has disappeared, having been done in by a desperate need to fund $3 million budgets and satisfy the requirements of Division I-AA.

More and more black college teams are succumbing to the pressure. Tennessee State won every game it played last football season and seemed headed for the Division I-AA playoffs and a possible national championship. Then a not-so-funny thing happened. The day before the playoff teams were to be selected, Tennessee State officials revealed that 14 of the school's players had been ineligible to participate during the season, either because of academics or because their eligibility had expired.

Alabama State fell into a similar trap. It was recently learned that about a dozen of that school's players performed this season even though they were ineligible. Alabama State even went so far as to allow the players to perform under false names, in hopes of keeping their true identities from opposing teams as well as the NCAA.

Of course, it is possible that teams such as Alabama State and Tennessee State would break the rules regardless of what divison they were in. But it appears that the pressure to win is getting out of hand for some black colleges.

Not only are some black schools starting to break the rules, but some are walking around with their noses pointed to the heavens. Because it is not chic for them to lose to Division II teams, many of the black schools in Division I-AA now shun some of their former rivals.

It wasn't long ago that handshakes were enough for black college teams, but now dogged negotiations and lengthy contracts are needed to schedule a game.

Perhaps this is good. Perhaps we now live in a day of dog-eat-dog, where every school must fend for itself, regardless of its fellow institutions. Still, the most glorious days for black college teams appear to have passed. Something is missing.

Former Florida A&M football Coach Jake Gaither, one of the winningest coaches of all time, remembers when things weren't so complicated.

"I think there are a lot of things that have accounted for what has happened," Gaither said. "I think the fact that black schools in Division I-AA are gradually moving in with three or four white schools on their schedule has a lot to do with the way things are now. It has gotten to the point where I an concerned about the perpetuation of black colleges in athletics. If we keep on doing away with our tradition, what are we going to have left?"

Gaither, now 79, points to the Orange Blossom Classic as an example of unhealthy change. When Florida A&M was a Division II school, the Classic was a premier football game, played at the end of every season. FAMU was always the host team, and a black college was selected as its opponent.

Gaither remembers those days with fondness. "Every year," he said, "we would have one of the top-ranked

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BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS REVIEW

FEBRUARY 1985

A publication of the *Winston-Salem Chronicle*

And a supplement to these newspapers:

Atlanta Voice
Baltimore Afro-American
Baton Rouge Community Leader
Carolina Peacemaker
Carolina Times
Charleston Chronicle
Chicago Metro News
Daytona Times
Houston Forward Times
Jackson Advocate
Mobile Beacon
Norfolk Journal and Guide
Pee Dee Observer
Pittsburgh Courier
Richmond Afro-American
Speaking Out
Washington Afro-American
Winston-Salem Chronicle

(Black College Sports Review is distributed in Charlotte, N.C., By Knight Publishing Co.)

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North Carolina A&T guard Jimmy Brown (photo by Joe Daniels).