COMMENTARY

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teams in Division II. Well, the NCAA would write us and invite us to play in the playoffs. They must have written us 10 or 15 times. Every time I'd say, 'No, thank you. We'd rather play in our Orange Blossom Classic.'"

You are right if you get the idea that the Classic was special to Florida A&M and its fans, many of whom traveled from around the country for the game. It was also special to all of black college football.

"It was," said Gaither, "to blacks what the Rose Bowl was to whites. Black schools are not going to be invited to compete in the Gator Bowl or the Sugar Bowl, the Orange Bowl or those 20-odd other bowl games."

The Classic is still alive, but breathes only because of a respirator. When FAMU moved to Division I-AA, it had to scrap the old Classic concept, and now the game is just another regular-season game. It is no longer an event, no longer anything to get excited about.

The demise of the Classic is another example of how black college athletics is losing its identity. The proliferation of predominantly white schools on black college schedules is contributing to that, as well as a general lack of cooperation among many black college coaches.

When North Carolina A&T played powerhouse North Carolina State in basketball this season, A&T Coach Don Corbett discovered that some black college coaches had given State information on how to beat A&T.

"We have got to be a little more together," said Corbett. "I can't tell you how demoralizing it is when we go to play a school like North Carolina State and they have gotten videos on us from other black schools. By the same token, we looked around and tried to get some (information) on N.C. State and couldn't get anything."

Of course, A&T -- a member of Division I-AA in football and Division I in basketball -- lost the game, but that was to be expected. The alarming thing is that black schools aren't working together. And if the schools will not cooperate in virtually every area, from scheduling to recruiting players to sharing coaching secrets, then how are they to survive in these competitive times?

FAMU's Gaither remembers having opposing coaches over to his house for dinner the night before a game, and said they even pulled out a chalkboard and traded ideas.

Things don't work like that anymore -- at least not among the black schools in Division I-AA.

Corbett feels that black college teams in Division I will continue to struggle until they develop more cohesiveness.

"We have got to hang and hang until one of us can break through," he said. "Then, hopefully, that will have a domino effect on the rest of the black schools."

That day may be long in coming. There seem to be moves in the works that will keep all Division I-AA schools -- whether they be black or white -- from being able to compete with the larger institutions.

First, there was the successful drive to force smaller schools off television and thus prohibit them from sharing in that wealth. Also, at the last NCAA convention, a measure to increase the number of Division I-AA football scholarships from 70 to 75 was defeated.

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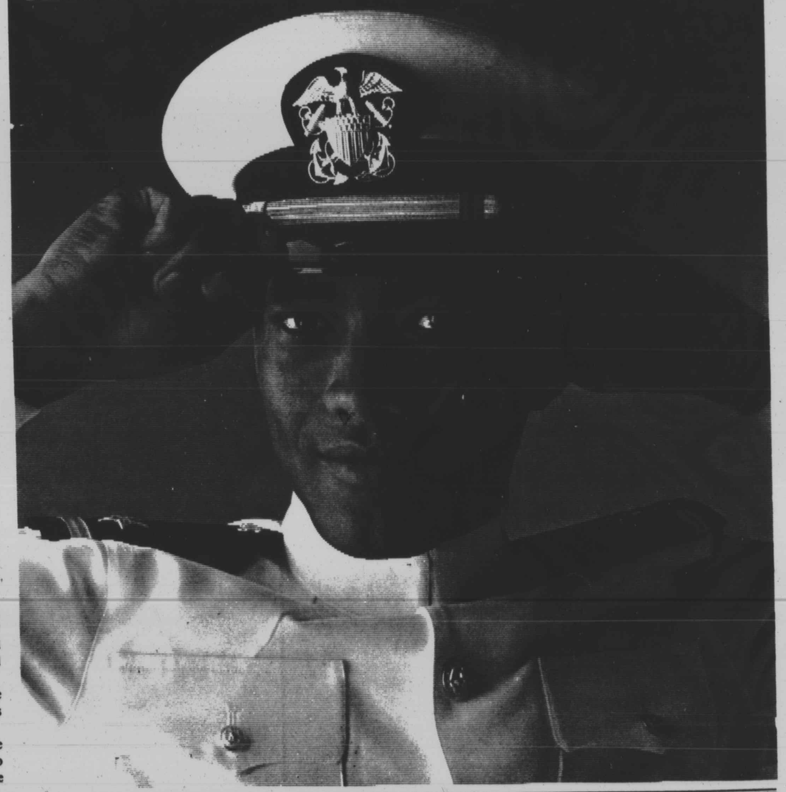

COVER STORY

Howard's Robert Jones expresses himself pointedly to A&T's Claude Williams during a recent game between the MEAC's top two teams (photo by Brian Branch-Price).

Put Up Or Shut Up

Black college basketball's playoff contenders know February is the money month -- time to put up or shut up in the drive for the NCAAs.

By SAM DAVIS

Haul out the brew, popcorn and No-Doz.

In less than a month, the post-season bonanza known as the NCAA basketball tournament will be in full swing and, with any luck, several black college teams will make their bids for national championships in Divisions I, II and III.

While black college teams aren't expected to make much of an impact among the big boys in Division I, in which only the winners of the SWAC and MEAC conference tournaments are assured of bids, quite a few will likely make their presence known in the Division II and III title chases.

Powerful Virginia Union, the number one team in Division II basketball and the only unbeaten team in the country, is without question the national favorite.

Paced by 6-9 giant-killer Charles Oakley, who averages 23.8 points and 18 rebounds per game and small forward Jamie Waller, who scores at a 20.7 clip, the Panthers look indestructible, riding high with a 23-0 record at press time and looking head and shoulders above the rest of the competition in both the CIAA and all of Division II.

Of the black Division I teams, Alcorn State, which beat Houston Baptist 79-60 and lost a heartbreaker, 57-56, to Kansas in the NCAA Tournament last year, is a prime candidate to make it back to the NCAAs.

Currently, the Braves are the frontrunners in the SWAC with a 15-5 overall record and 8-1 SWAC ledger. The Braves hope to make their fourth straight trip to the Division I NCAA Tournament and fifth in the last six years. However, upstart Southern University is hot on Alcorn's trail, having given the Braves their only conference loss of the season.

And since the regular-season winner in the SWAC doesn't receive an automatic NCAA berth, says Alcorn Coach Dave Whitney, he won't take anything for granted.

"The conference tournament is really like a new season," Whitney says. "Southern is going to be the team we have to beat. Although we expect them to challenge us, someone else could spring a surprise."

Despite Alcorn's fine overall record, Whitney, whose team is led by senior guard Michael Phelps and 6-6 forward

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