BASEBALL

Against all odds: Black teams scuffle for talent

By DAVID BULLA
Review Staff Writer

How well black college athletic directors know that good things come in small packages.

Take Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines, athletic director and basketball coach at Winston-Salem State.

Almost 20 years ago, Gaines sold his modest program to basketball messiah Earl "Black Jesus" Monroe, who bought the sales pitch. Before Monroe left the Winston-Salem campus for an outstanding career in the National Basketball Association, he had delivered the Rams to an NCAA college division championship.

Or take Eddie Robinson, the football coach at Grambling State. Robinson has guided the little Louisiana college to a 320-106-15 record in 42 years. This season the Tigers need to win only four games to make Robinson the winningest coach in the history of NCAA football.

In the process of fashioning his impressive record, Robinson has won nearly a score of black national championships.

The bottom line is that both schools developed championship-caliber programs despite the handicap of limited financial resources.

While Gaines and Robinson have been able to perform these feats in basketball and football, no predominantly black school has produced similar success in baseball. Grambling and Jackson State have had the most prosperous black baseball programs. The last three seasons the Southwest Athletic Conference has received automatic bids to the NCAA Division I playoffs.

But the SWAC representative has yet to win a game.

Before the NCAA began awarding an automatic bid to the SWAC, no black college had been to the Division I playoffs.

Black schools had fared a little better when they were playing in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. They were able to make the playoffs, but no black school ever won a national championship.

The reasons are many, but the most significant are: (1) baseball's tempo is too slow for the realities confronted by contemporary black Americans, who now reside in an upbeat, technologically-oriented suburban land; (2) the supply of talent is limited for the most part to leftovers from football and basketball, and (3) pitching, considered by almost all experts of the game to be its most important facet, is in small supply.



Jackson State's Earl Sanders is a rarity: A strong pitching prospect at a black school (photo by Mark Gall).

To the coaches of black college baseball teams, the most immediate reason is the lack of pitching. Late in the 1985 season, NCAA stats showed Alcorn State leading the nation in batting.

Yet no black college was in the top 32 in earned run average.

Coach Chuck Hinton's Howard program is the most successful in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference. But to have the most successful program in the MEAC neither guarantees you a berth in the NCAA playoffs nor a winning season.

This year the Bison won the MEAC regular-season title before losing to Bethune-Cookman in the tournament. Hinton's club, which includes a handful of players who have legitimate shots at professional careers, finished with a record of 23-25. It compares favorably with Hinton's 324-322 record in 16 years at HU.

A former major leaguer, Hinton possesses a sizable store of baseball experience. As a result, his is the voice of common sense. He realizes black schools face severe handicaps in trying to field teams competitive with established programs.

"We find that most of the black kids who have the good arms don't want to pitch," Hinton said. "They want to hit; they want to play every day. They don't want any part of pitching and the name of the game is pitching."

Hinton, whose best players include Jerry Davis (now with San Diego) and Milt Thompson (with Atlanta), should know. He split 11 major-league seasons between the Washington Senators and Cleveland Indians, clubs doomed to mediocrity because of lean pitching staffs.

Norfolk State's Marty Miller, who guided the Spartans to their ninth Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship last month, sympathizes with Hinton.

"We've always had a good offensive ballclub," Miller said. "Our problem is we've never been able to find those top-notch pitchers.

"You have to have a couple of pitchers who are stoppers, who can come in and really carry the load. The problem is Division I schools are after those players. Normally, we have to take pitchers who are not quite as good as Division I prospects."

Despite this, Miller's 1977 team actually pitched five consecutive shutouts. Miller is not sure, but he believes this to be a college record.

"How could that happen?" he asked rhetorically. "It was a case where pitching and defense came together. But that's rare; to me it's historical. It certainly isn't the norm.

"But most kids want to go as high as they can on the college level. It's difficult to recruit them because everyone is looking for that type of pitcher."

Melvin Gilliam, who coaches Division I Florida A&M, said this season's pitching staff was not armed adequately enough to compete at that level.

"This year we had the defense and offense," said Gilliam, whose team posted a 17-41 record. "The pitching let us down. It's not always the case, but it is the rule.

"It's tough to recruit the type of pitching you need to compete in Division I with financial aid as your only lure. You've got to be able to offer scholarships. That's a bad situation for any coach who wants a contender in Division I."

Gilliam inherited the FAMU program from Costa Kittles, who made the Rattlers perennial powers when they were in the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. FAMU now is an also-ran independent in Division I. Gilliam said he plans to tone down his schedule next season, although he cannot go too far.

"You cut off the Division I teams and it becomes impossible to make the playoffs if you field a decent team," said Gilliam. "The NCAA guidelines are such that you have to play enough Division I teams to be eligible for postseason play. So you can't go too far. It would be better if we were in a conference, but the SWAC is the only black conference that currently gets an automatic bid."

FAMU's beefy '85 scheduled included Florida, Jacksonville, South Florida, Central Florida, Stetson and Florida International.

Howard's Hinton, who annually makes a trip south to play such Division I programs as Georgia Tech, The Citadel and Georgia, says there's more to black college baseball's unsatisfactory state than pitching alone.

"Most of the quality athletes play football and basketball," Hinton said. "It's amazing. We have our share that come out of black colleges and make it in the pros, but they are few and far between."

Hinton has sent many players to the pros and two to the big leagues in Jerry Davis of the San Diego Padres and Milt Thompson of the Atlanta Braves. Rozier Jordan, who played for Howard from 1981-84, was the Cleveland Indians' eighth-round draft choice and is playing for the Waterloo Indians of the Class A Midwest League this summer.

A list of the 650 players on today's major-league rosters shows a total of 21 from 13 predominantly black colleges. Considering that black schools have played only six games in the NCAA Division I tournament, their three-percent contribution to the current supply of major league talent is not so unrespectable.

"You have to realize a large number of black schools don't field baseball teams," Norfolk State's Miller said. "That's why the number seems so small. But we have produced some quality players."

Florida A&M, for instance, has sent Hal McRae, Tim Raines, Andre Dawson and Vince Coleman to the majors. They would form the nucleus of a representative major league team, even if McRae is near retirement.

There are also several young players of promise from black schools, including St. Louis' Coleman. Some of the best of the rest are Boston pitcher Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd (Southern), Atlanta outfielder Milt Thompson (Howard), Los Angeles pitcher Ken Howell (Tuskegee), San Diego outfielder Jerry Davis (Howard) and Montreal infielder Razor Shines (St. Augustine's).

Miller makes a good argument for the viability of better baseball pro-

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