COVER STORY

Having a Delta Devilish good time in the big time

By DAVID BULLA
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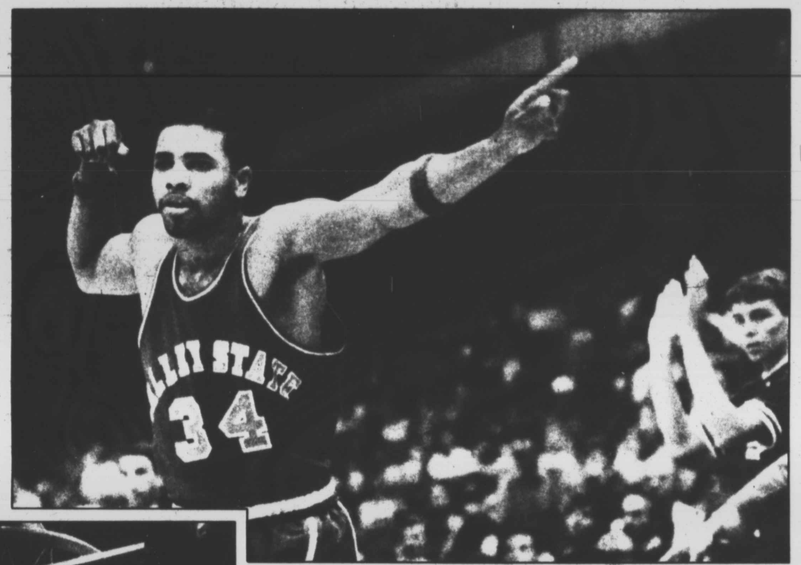
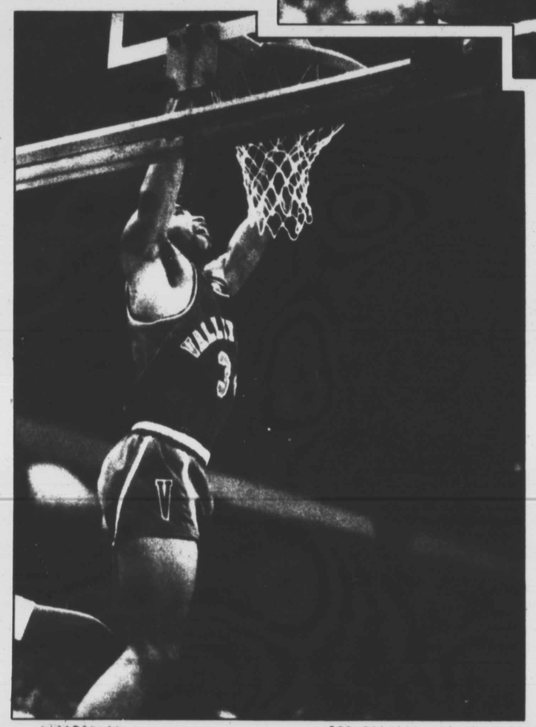
A DECADE FROM now, most people won't remember the 1985-86 Mississippi Valley State basketball team.

The Delta Devils finished no better than third in the Southwestern Athletic Conference and history rarely remembers third-place teams.

Yet, the 8,328 spectators who saw the Delta Devils at the Greensboro, N.C., Coliseum March 13 will fondly remember the collection of Mississippi basketball bandits who nearly stole immortality. The Valley, which peaked at the end of the season by winning nine straight games including the SWAC Tournament final, earned the last seeding in the NCAA Tournament and the right to play top-ranked Duke, eventually the national runner-up, in the first round of the East Regional. As it turned out, the Delta Devils' performance against the Blue Devils in Greensboro was the high point of their season.





Coleman pointed the way toward an upset with inspirational play and leadership (photos by James Parker).

Coach Lafayette Stribling's team did not pull the biggest upset in the history of NCAA basketball, but MVSU came, oh, so close. Despite losing 85-78, the Delta Devils earned universal respect as a team that belonged in the NCAA Tournament. At the same time, Stribling became a media darling who wooed the press as gracefully as North Carolina State's gregarious Jim Valvano.

The objective of Stribling's convincing act before the klieg lights was to improve MVSU's recruiting.

"I don't have much money to spend on recruiting," Stribling said. "I do most of my recruiting by telephone and I get the players nobody else wants."

Against Duke, the Delta Devil coach was doing his recruiting by television and his nobodies were becoming somebodies in Greensboro.

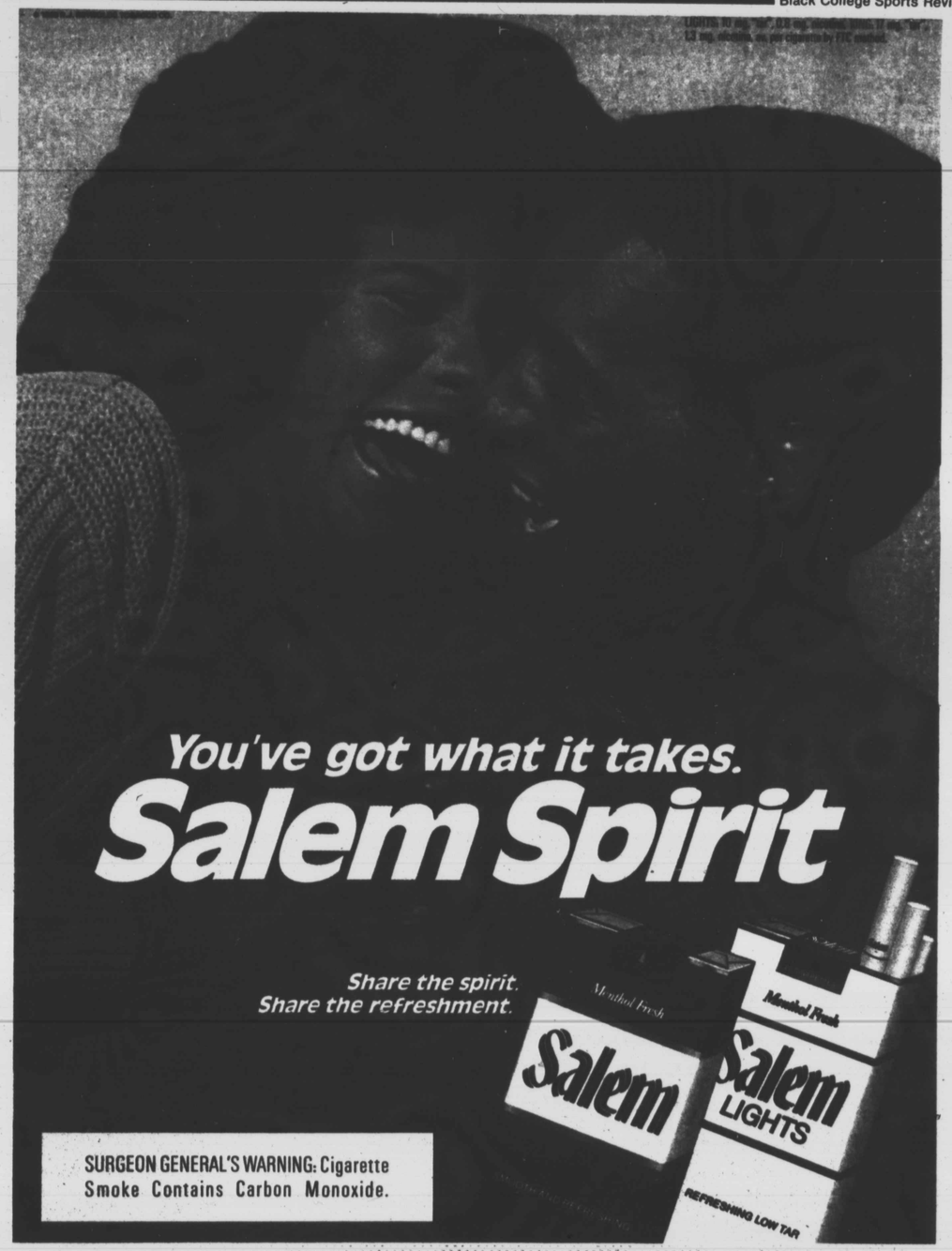
"Today the whole world was watching the tube," he said as reporters flooded him after the game. "Now the world knows Mississippi Valley State is around. Guys are going to want to come to Mississippi Valley State."

Because of their unfavorable seeding, nobody except Stribling expected the Delta Devils' rare appearance on the tube to be so valuable. By contrast, MEAC champion North Carolina A&T's 71-46 loss to Kansas in the Midwest Regional probably didn't win any recruits.

At best, Stribling's unassuming team had saved the NCAA a major embarrassment. Valley beat Prairie View A&M (5-24) in the SWAC championship game, preventing the Panthers from taking the worst-ever record into the NCAA Tournament, had they won.

MVSU itself carried an unremarkable 20-10 mark into the contest with the Blue Devils. Among its 10 losses was a 65-64 setback to a Division III school, Lemoyne-Owen. But, as Stribling pointed out, Lemoyne-Owen was good enough to beat the national runner-up in Division III.

So Stribling remained confident throughout the days leading up to the NCAA Tournament opener, never conceding that his team would simply be overmatched against Duke. Moreover, it seemed Stribling was happy to be getting all the attention that comes with making the media-saturated national tournament.

"We're not going in there with the attitude we can't win," he told

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