Devilish good time

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reporters. "We respect all, but fear none."

When the Delta Devils took the Greensboro Coliseum floor, they approached the Blue Devils with that same unfearing attitude. The result was a hard-fought game that saw MVSU build leads as high as 19-12 and 44-37 before Duke pulled ahead in the last 11 minutes. Even with most of its starters on the bench, MVSU would not let the Blue Devils make it a runaway. In fact, the Delta Devils stemmed the tide and cut a 10-point lead in half in the last two minutes.

While Duke, which advanced to the Final Four, held on for victory, Stribling's team had won the imagination of the media and the hearts of the fans. Writers talked about what good copy "The Valley" made and fans congratulated individual Delta Devil players, greeting them like long-lost relatives.

Before Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski could spotlight the positives in his team's unexpectedly tough first-round game, he conceded that Duke had been confounded by the Delta Devils.

"They did a lot of devilish things that bothered us," Krzyzewski said, pun intended. "The story of the game is that they played much harder than we did. But in just a few critical points, we knew how to win."

Equally important was the loss of four MVSU starters to fouls, including rebounding and scoring leader Mark Coleman. The 6-foot-3 Coleman, only a second-team all-SWAC pick, angled his way through Duke's defense like a miniature Terry Cummings and finished with 24 points. He also had six rebounds, four assists, two blocks and as many steals. His effort had Duke's Johnny Dawkins, the winner of the Naismith Trophy, calling Coleman a "6-3 Walter Berry." The Coliseum fans gave Coleman a standing ovation when he fouled out.

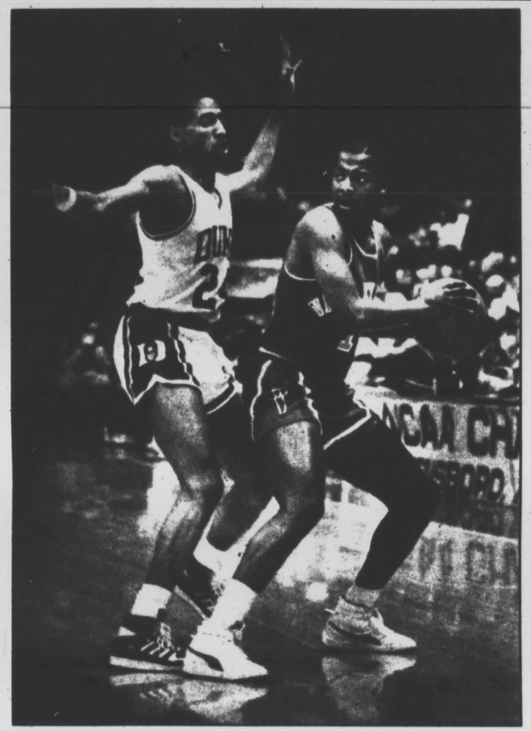
The self-assured Stribling himself was amazed when he started to ponder how close the SWAC's third-best team came to beating the Atlantic Coast Conference's best.

"We got the seven-point lead and had to take a couple of players out," he said. "We were a few things away from winning. We needed a couple of breaks and didn't get them."

Take away the all-America guard and Duke might have lost in the early rounds of the NCAA Tournament for the third straight year.

"He didn't do much in the first half," Coleman said of Dawkins. "But once he got going, he was on a roll and he's a good ballplayer."

Mississippi Valley's Mack Ferguson also got on a roll in the second half, scoring 14 of his 18 points. Ferguson was proud that he and his teammates had created a good impression in the school's first NCAA Tournament appearance.



Valley guard George Ivory totaled 14 points against Duke and superguard Johnny Dawkins (photo by James Parker).

"We didn't embarrass anyone," said the 6-3 Ferguson, who made nine of 12 from the floor. "In fact, we played them good. I think we proved we can play with the big schools. They were saying the SWAC shouldn't even be here, but we showed that we belonged."

The SWAC has a creditable record in the NCAAs. SWAC teams, which hail from institutions that are much smaller and poorer than most of Division I's 289 schools, are 3-7 since the league first put a team in the tourney in 1980. Coach Davey Whitney and Alcorn State are largely responsible for that record. The Braves are 3-4 in tourney games, their four losses coming to established powers LSU, Houston, Georgetown and Kansas. Most of the games have been reasonably close, the SWAC's wins coming by an average 77-66 score, its losses by an 83-71 margin.

By contrast, the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, the other Division I conference of historically black schools, is winless in six NCAA Tournament games.

While the Delta Devils put a scare into the top-ranked Blue Devils, they also earned Krzyzewski's respect.

"Mississippi Valley is a good basketball team," the Duke coach said. "I was hoping at halftime (MVSU led 40-37) that we could come back and win by one. So I guess winning by seven was very good.

"Their pressure was excellent and they had good overall team quickness. I also thought their overall team play was extremely positive. I mean, they were as loose as they could possibly be."

For MVSU's Coleman, Ferguson and Joe McKinley, the loss to Duke represented the end of an era. All three had played on the same team at Forrest Hill High in Jackson, Miss., where they won a state championship together.

But nothing they'd done compared to the trip to Greensboro.

"That's the first time we've ridden on a plane for a trip," Ferguson said. "About three of the guys had never been on a plane before.

"Listen, this was the most exciting game in my life. That was the best team we've ever played. Ole Miss and Mississippi State won't even play us. We can't even get Delta State (a Division II school) to play us. We did play Missouri pretty well (81-67 loss) earlier in the season, though.

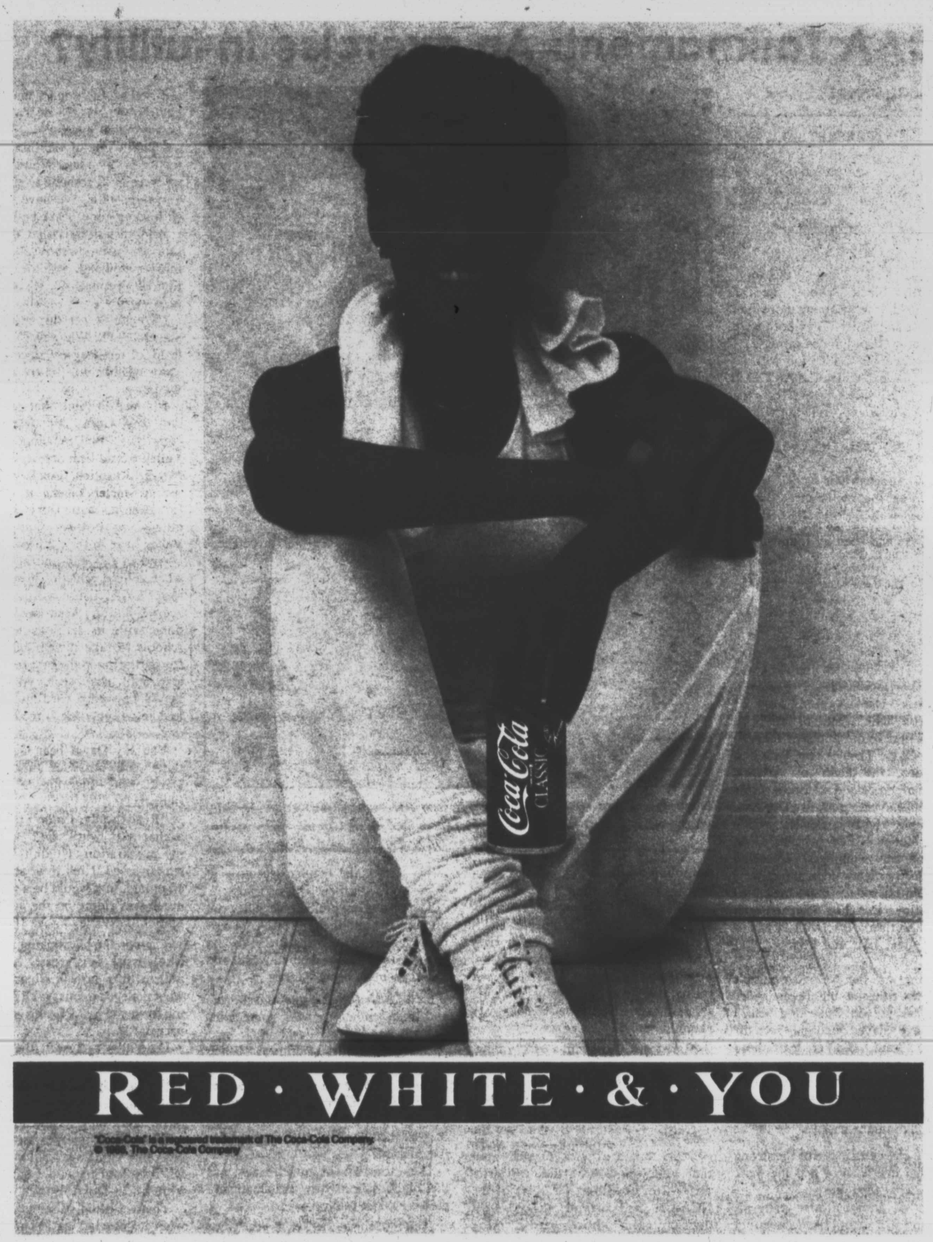
"We haven't had foul trouble like this too much. But if we didn't have four starters on the bench, I know we would have been very close."

All of this late-season success ironically might mean the end of the Stribling era at MVSU. Several schools with coaching vacancies have asked to talk to the third-year coach. One of them is SWAC rival Jackson State.

One reason other schools are showing interest in Stribling is his ability to transmit his confidence to his players. Indeed, there was no distinct feeling that MVSU had actually lost to Duke. It was as if the Delta Devils had found some middle ground between winning and losing.

"We got together after the game and told everyone we didn't lose -- that was just on the scoreboard," Coleman said. "We can hold our heads up high."

They also hoped to do more than rub elbows with the high and mighty. After the game, the Mississippi Valley players waited around the Duke locker room and obtained autographs from Dawkins and point guard Tommy Amaker, held to four points, one assist and six turnovers. One MVSU player asked Krzyzewski to send him an autographed team picture if the Blue Devils went on to win the NCAA championship.

This was a case of the NCAA Tournament bringing together the haves with the have-nots and each side had learned something. Duke's players, who come from one of the wealthiest, most prestigious colleges in the country, learned not to underestimate any opponent in the NCAA tourney. Mississippi Valley's players, who attend a college only 36 years old and

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