COMMENTARY

NCAA Tournament: An exercise in futility?

By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Columnist

THE NCAA BASKETBALL tournament is supposed to be the greatest show on earth. And indeed it was.

It provided us with some memorable moments and some memorable performances before Louisville defeated Duke for the title.

But for North Carolina A&T and Mississippi Valley State, the only historically black schools in the 64-team field, it was nothing more than an exercise in futility. They both were beaten before they jumped center.

The NCAA did a nice job with its brackets, seeding Valley and A&T 63rd and 64th, respectively. In effect, the powers that be who operate out of Mission, Kan., were saying, "You can come to the party but you can't dance."

"I told reporters our biggest honor was winning the conference tournament," said Chuck Prophet, Mississippi Valley's acting athletic director. "What we're doing here, we're getting paid for it. In so many words, they tell you to do the best you can and take your money and go home."

Since they were being paid, the NCAA figured it could do to them what it pleased and it did. And what the NCAA did to Valley and A&T was nothing short of sinful.

It took the Aggies out of Greensboro, N.C., site of the East Regional first round and sent them to Dayton, Ohio. Then it sent Valley to Greensboro, the heart of Atlantic Coast Conference and a stone's throw from Duke's campus in Durham, N.C., to play the Blue Devils.

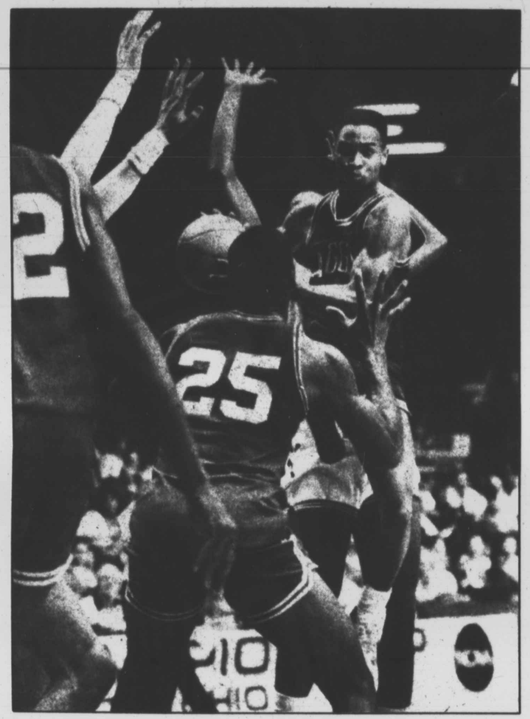
That Valley came within seven points of the winningest collegiate team in history is a minor miracle.

It would have been more logical to put Valley in the Southeastern Regional and send the Delta Devils to Baton Rouge, La., and keep A&T at home.

In doing so, the NCAA wouldn't have done either a big favor. A&T would have played Duke and Valley would have played Georgia Tech or Memphis State. But at least both would have been in friendlier environs. That's the least the NCAA could have done for a pair of teams that were 5,000,000 to 1 underdogs to win the tournament from the outset.

It was a classic example of the strong doing what they wanted and the weak suffering what they must.

"From an administrative point, it was tough for a school like Mississippi Valley to face the No. 1 team," said Valley's Prophet. "It was a tremendous thing for them to do that to us, in that team's home state."



North Carolina A&T's Thomas Griffis maneuvers against Kansas in this year's NCAA tourney (photo by Joe Daniels).

Valley and A&T being seeded as low as they were was an injustice in itself. The Aggies were 22-8. Valley was 20-11. Valley was 18-9 against Division I opponents and had a 73.88 power rating. A&T was 18-8 against Division I opponents and had a 68.65 power rating.

Marist was 17-12 with a 69.27 rating. Brown was 14-11 with a 67.76 rating, and Drexel was 16-11 with a 68.91 rating. All were seeded higher than Valley and A&T. Something doesn't compute.

Detractors are quick to point out that Valley and A&T didn't register their victories against members of the NCAA's card-carrying, heavyweight division. But those card-carrying heavyweights will only play schools like Valley and A&T on their own terms during the regular season -- at home and with their own officials.

The results are predictable. They run up the score and then the NCAA Tournament committee looks at the Valleys and A&Ts of the basketball world and brand them as being inferior.

"You have to get a quality schedule and then come up with some wins against the bigger schools," said Alcorn Coach Davey Whitney. "When you play those schools, you're fighting the odds. It's usually a no-win situation. Most teams have winning records at home. But the money crunch is on. So we schedule them at their place for the guarantee."

Then tournament time comes and the black schools are systematically paired against the top seeds.

That's been the case each year since the field was expanded to 64 teams. In 1985, Southern University had to play top-ranked St. John's and A&T met Georgetown. There doesn't appear to be any relief in sight.

"That's one of the things you have to live with," said Whitney. "Before we were in it, somebody else was 32nd and then 48th. We have to come up with some good basketball teams."

And just how is that done? Black schools are already being badly outrecruited and, with the implementation of Proposal 48, it's going to get even worse.

"We don't get the best basketball players," said Whitney. "There's very little difference in coaches. We all know what to do. But we have to have the players."

It's nice to think that on any given day any team can defeat another regardless. But to think Mississippi Valley would beat top-seeded Duke or North Carolina A&T could beat second-seeded Kansas is going a bit far. Kansas and Duke spend more money on postage than A&T and Valley have in their athletic budgets.

And in this day and age, money is what college athletics in general, and the NCAA Tournament specifically, are all about. What the NCAA has done with its pairings is tell black schools to take the $167,000 they get for appearing in the first round and get lost until next year. At that time, they'll be seeded 63rd and 64th again and get another big -- for them -- payday.

You say David beat Goliath so all things are possible? Just remember David was shooting a sling, not jumpers.

"Realistically, I didn't think we had a chance to win," said Prophet. "In my preparation, I didn't want to get embarrassed. I felt if we stayed within 10 points, that would be a victory. Too much was riding on the game to let a school like Valley knock (Duke) off."

There is the big sticking point of the whole issue. It is grossly unfair to put athletes in a no-win situation. Is that what college athletics is all about, playing to stay close? Playing not to be embarrassed?

For Valley and A&T, the sad truth is yes. Playing to win is a joke.

ESPN analyst Dick Vitale has been known to blow a lot of smoke on a lot of different subjects and he has offended more than one person in the process. But Vitale was right on the money when he said he would quit his job if Valley beat Duke.

That wasn't idle chatter. Vitale knew what he was talking about, even if he rubbed some people the wrong way.

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Totten: Snubbed?

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scoring passes. "If Totten went to a big school, he would have won the Heisman Trophy," Cooley said.

Third, critics say Totten has trouble reading defenses. "I think a lot of that is incorrect," Totten responded. "I think I can read defenses very well."

Totten set numerous Division I-AA records, among them marks for most total offense yards per game, with a 325.2-yard average; most games gaining 400 or more yards in a career (13); highest yard average per play (7.2), most points responsible for in a career (946), most yards gained in a game (621), most yards gained in a season (4,572), most touchdown passes in a game (nine), most touchdown passes in a career (139), most touchdown passes in a regular season (56), and most completions in a game (46).

With that in mind, then is Totten, no pun intended, on the NFL's blacklist? There are other quarterbacks -- Tom Ehrhardt (ranked eighth) of Rhode Island and Bubba Briser (11th) of Northeast Louisiana -- rated ahead of Totten, who is ranked 12th among quarterbacks in Mel Kiper's "1986 Draft Report." But they played, as Totten did, on the small-college level.

Is it a black-white thing, and is being a black quarterback from a predominantly black school in the Deep South an obstacle? "Not really," Totten said. "A quarterback is a quarterback. Why label him ... black or white if he's getting the job done?"

Last year, Pittsburgh Steelers Director of Player Personnel Dick Haley said, "I don't think there's any unusual pressure (for black quarterbacks nowadays). It's a matter of making the conversion to the pros from Mississippi Valley."

Cooley fumed, "This kid (quarterback Dave Krieg) at Seattle came from a small school (Milton College, which no longer exists). Neil Lomax (St. Louis Cardinals) came from a small school (Portland State). Now they say Totten can't play.

"They said something was wrong with Richard Dent. He was an eighth-round draft choice (from Tennessee State) with the Bears, Now he's an all-pro. They said something was wrong with Everson Walls (Dallas Cowboys cornerback who played at Grambling). Now he's an all-pro. It's embarrassing, man. It's awful. They (the pro teams) get them (black-college players) cheap, then they make all-pro.

"They said Jerry Rice couldn't block and couldn't go deep. But look at him now (with the San Francisco 49ers)."

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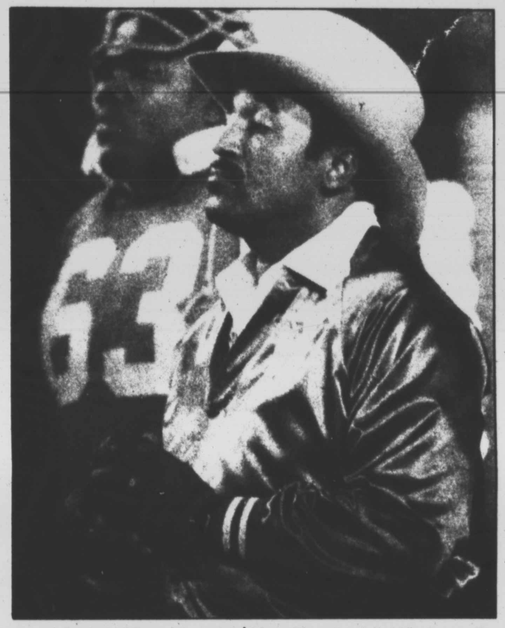

Archie Cooley: If Totten had played for a big school, he'd have won the Heisman Trophy (photo by Mark Gail).

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turned at the combine workout when he twice clocked under 4.6 (in the 40)," Kiper says.

Cofield is "the type of player who looks like a high pick in the computer, but has to learn to better utilize his skills on the football field," the report says. "Not real instinctive, failing to read/react as well as you would prefer. Often gets caught up in traffic, and is not a form tackler."

Wayne Dillard (6-foot-2, 228) from Alcorn State runs a 4.79 40-yard dash with a 5.8 rating as the 21st-ranked outside linebacker. He's a "productive linebacker with the Braves, possessing good size, average speed and improving strength," the draft report says. "Rose to the occasion in the big games, coming through with a number of top efforts during his college career. Worked hard to improve his skills in coverage, but is still deficient in this area. Could make the grade as a reserve at linebacker; should also be a real headhunter on special teams."

Eddie Anderson (6-foot-¼, 193) of Fort Valley State runs a 4.57 40 and registers a 6.5 rating as the No. 15 safety. "He's a virtual unknown out of the small-college ranks who has climbed up the charts within the last two months," the report says. "Outstanding athlete with great straight-ahead speed, top strength and incredible leaping ability. Ran under 4.6 at the combine workout, and was clocked at 4.48 late last season. Had the top vertical jump of all the defensive backs at the New Orleans combine, while impressing onlookers with his upper body strength."

Tennessee State's Gilbert Renfroe (6-3, 188), runs a 4.72 40 and is rated 5.5 as a quarterback. The 22nd-ranked quarterback in the Kiper report, Renfroe completed 188 passes in 395 attempts (47.8 percent) with 15 touchdown passes and 12 interceptions in 1985, his first season as a starter. He also ran for six touchdowns.

"Gilbert Renfroe will be drafted before Willie Totten," said Tennessee State SID Stephens. "First of all, we ran a pro-set offense. He can throw long and short with accuracy."

Other players from black schools who may or may not be drafted include:

- Victor Hall (6-2¼, 222), tight end, Jackson State, 4.89 speed in the 40, 5.8 rating, 20th-ranked player at his position.
- Robert Goins (6-foot-¼, 191), safety, Grambling, 4.72 speed, 5.5 rating, 31st-ranked at his position.
- Robert Kearney (5-11, 185), safety, North Carolina Central, 4.65 speed, 5.0 rating, 41st-ranked at his position.
- Riley Walton (6-3¼, 221), tight end, Tennessee State, 4.75 speed, 5.0 rating, 27th-ranked at his position.
- Darren McAllister (6-6½, 266), defensive tackle, Prairie View A&M, 5.38 speed, 5.0 rating, 27th-ranked at his position.
- Merlon Jones (6-1½, 229), inside linebacker, Florida A&M, 4.79 speed, 5.0 rating, 33rd-ranked at his position.
- William Tolbert (6-2½, 234), outside linebacker, Alabama State, 4.95 speed, 5.0 rating, 29th-ranked at his position.
- James Harris (6-2, 208), safety, Grambling, 4.84 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Doug Maddox (6-0, 193), safety, Langston, 4.73 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Willie Brown (6-1¼, 222), outside linebacker, Florida A&M, 4.88 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Darrell Woods (5-9, 177), cornerback, Jackson State, 4.6 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Carlton Thomas (6-0, 187), cornerback, Elizabeth City State, 4.67 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Vernon Moland (5-9¼, 173), cornerback, Alabama A&M, 4.71 speed, 4.0 rating.
- James Polk (6-9, 330), defensive tackle, Grambling, 5.55 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Lavelle Moore (6-2, 268), guard, Grambling, 5.12 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Lorenzo Clark (6-2, 300), guard, Mississippi Valley State, 5.38 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Kelly Arthur (6-3½, 252), defensive end, South Carolina State, 4.96 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Reginald Carr (6-2½, 268), defensive end, Jackson State, 5.35 speed, 4.0 rating.
- King Green (5-10¼, 218), fullback, Bethune-Cookman, 4.81 speed, 4.0 rating.
- Sebastian Brown (5-11¼, 177), wide receiver, Bethune-Cookman, 4.73 speed, 4.0 rating.

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