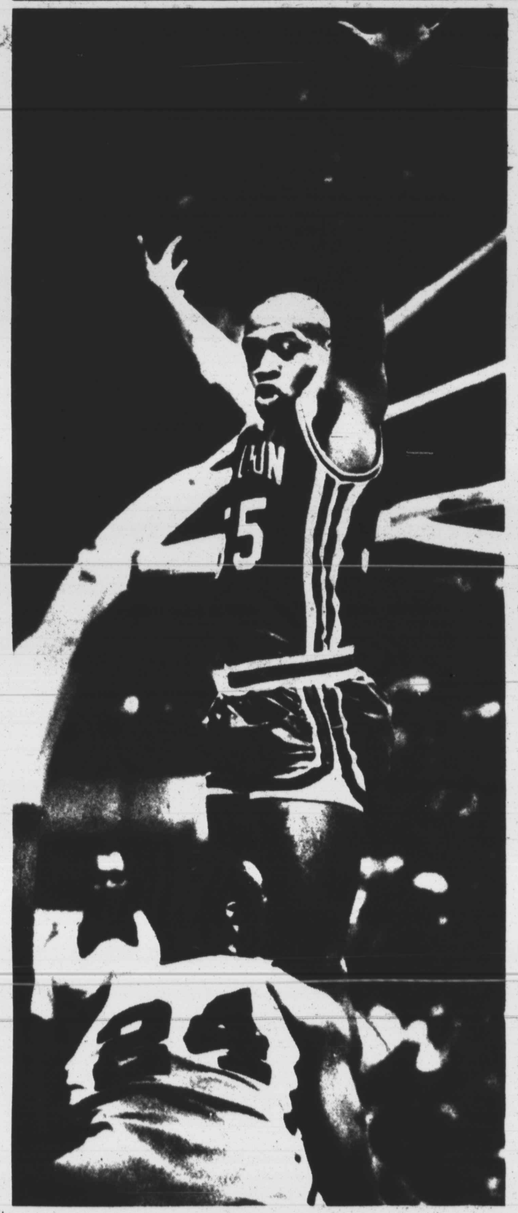
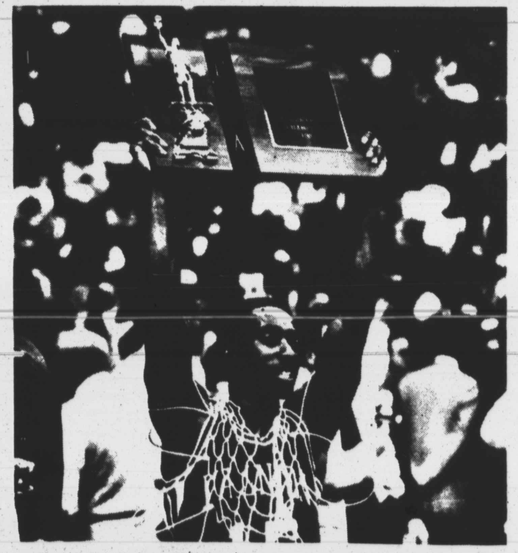
COVER STORY



Rising to the occasion

Panthers don't pussyfoot around in CIAA tourney final



By DAVID BULLA
Review Staff Writer

A IS for Albert and T is for Tony, both of whom proved Virginia Union is no phony and restored the Panthers to the throne of the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association.

Early in the 1986-87 season, Union was a house divided, and Coach Dave Robbins commented that not only a few seniors but some of his freshmen had a touch of senioritis.

Part of his comment probably was directed toward senior guard Tony Dallas, a three-year starter for one of the most successful NCAA Division II programs in the land, and 6-foot-4 freshman Albert "A.J." English, a former prep phenom from Wilmington (Del.) Howard High. English came to Union highly recommended, as Delaware's Player of the Year, but he wasn't living up to his advance billing.

Union played below its own lofty standards throughout the season and finished second to Norfolk State in the CIAA's Northern Division. When the Panthers drove from their North Lombardy Street campus to the Richmond Coliseum for their CIAA Tournament opener with Livingstone Feb. 25, the Panthers possessed a 20-6 record, one that most teams would envy -- but not Union, which had been to the Division II playoffs seven times in the last decade (winning the national championship in 1980). A loss in any of the first three rounds would put the Panthers on the borderline of the playoff picture. An early knockout from the tourney would probably keep all-America forward Jamie Waller, all-America candidate Greg Williams and Dallas out of the NCAA Tournament field for the first time in four years at the Richmond school.

Despite some extremely close calls in the quarter- and semifinals that had CIAA fans asking, "Will the real Panthers please stand up?" Robbins' charges put the doubters to shame by sweeping through four games en route to their eighth conference championship.

Dallas and English took their turns at center stage in the '87 version of the Richmond Review. Yet, neither Dallas, the senior from Virginia state prep power Martinsville High, nor English was particularly impressive in first- and second-round wins over Livingstone (115-82) and North Carolina Central (56-55). Waller was the star in those games, scoring 33 points against the Bears and 21 against the Eagles, including the game-winning tap off a free throw miss by teammate Terry Davis.

Neither Dallas nor English would start in the game that would seal their place in CIAA Tournament legend, Union's 71-70 overtime win over Winston-Salem State. But they would combine for 22 points, all after halftime against WSSU, which led 40-22 at the break as the Panthers scored only four points over the last 7:34 of the half.

English provided the motivational spark and leadership as the Panthers made a gradual second-half comeback. He capped that rally with a 15-footer with three seconds left that tied the game at 60 and forced an overtime.

"We didn't ever give up," said English, who scored all of his 14 points after intermission. "We decided we'd just chip away, be patient, not try to get back all at once."

With the Panther defense intensifying and the Rams running as much clock as possible, Union sliced the lead in half with eight minutes to go. The Panthers were still nine behind with 4:49 left before Waller and seldom-used Melvin Harwell (31 points in the season) made back-to-back jumpers for a 55-50 WSSU cushion.

After Ram forward Terry Nance dunked, Dallas sandwiched a pair of three-point field goals around a free throw by WSSU's Gary Cromartie to bring Union within 58-56. Then Waller made a follow shot with 1:04 for a 58-58 tie.

But Alexander Hooper, the Rams' all-CIAA forward, made an awesome baseline move with 21 seconds remaining on the Coliseum clock. Those would be the last two of 27 points for Hooper -- and the last two of his extraordinary career, which included the jumper that ended Union's national championship aspirations two years ago when Charles Oakley was the national Player of the Year.

"Hooper was nearly behind the backboard when he shot that one," Union Assistant Coach James Battle said. "He's that kind of shooter."

But 18 seconds later English proved what kind of prime-time performer he can be, picking up a loose ball as time ran down and canning a soft jumper

UNFORGETTABLE -- AS USUAL

Facing page, clockwise from the top right, official Larry Rose flees the court following the controversial Union-WSSU overtime finish, VUU's Doug Cromartie celebrates, and teammate Barry Williams goes for a Ram fake. Right, Norfolk's Matt Henson crashes inside for two over Union's Terry Davis in the finals (photos by James Parker).