SHOWDOWNS

A&T hurts Howard's feelings -- again -- in MEAC

By DAVID BULLA
Review Staff Writer

THE 10th annual "HUAT Invitational" turned out to be no different from most of the previous nine, as North Carolina A&T defeated Howard University 79-58.

As in eight of those previous nine HUATs (Howard's Unnerving Annual Trip or, if you prefer, the Howard University-A&T championship), the Aggies frustrated their arch-rival, as usual, when it really counted. Yet, the manner in which the Aggies beat the Bison was somewhat atypical. For the most part, there have been only close encounters in the HUAT Invite (alias the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Basketball Tournament) between the two, with the Aggies winning six of those titles by an average margin of 4.7 points. By contrast, there have been three blowouts, with an average margin of 19.7 points -- and this final at the Greensboro (N.C.) Coliseum was one of them.

A&T won this, its 12th MEAC title, with a nearly perfect second-half performance against the Bison, who have won only one head-to-head meeting with A&T in tournament final history. The Aggies played solidly on defense, forcing 11 Howard turnovers, and efficiently on offense, shooting 84 percent en route to their sixth straight conference championship and NCAA Division I Tournament bid.

The Aggies, winless in their last five NCAA first-round appearances, drew the No. 15 seed in the Southeast Regional and tried to break that streak against second-seeded Alabama, the Southeastern Conference regular-season and tournament champion, in the first round at Birmingham, Ala.

Aggie forward Claude Williams, who had 13 points, 13 rebounds, four blocks and three steals against Howard, said that the strong defensive showing complemented his team's accuracy from the field in the title tilt's final 20 minutes.

"Our second-half defense was the difference in the game," the Rochester, N.Y., junior said. "That enabled us to control the tempo and get the shots we wanted on offense. When we take our shots, we make them."

A&T Coach Don Corbett knew that Howard (25-5) probably had its best team of the decade, and he was quite worried about this latest HU-A&T final. After all, the Bison had won the regular-season MEAC championship. Corbett said, after a 73-65 win over South Carolina State in the semifinals, that A&T would have to execute to near perfection to beat Howard, and that's exactly what the Aggies did in the second half of the championship game.

"It was so important for us to play the kind of game we played tonight," Corbett said. "Howard is a good team and had an outstanding season. They deserve to play somewhere in a postseason tournament.

"We've worked awfully hard to win the championship six straight times, but you have to be fortunate, too."

Fortune had little to do with the Aggies rolling to another fat NCAA paycheck (estimated to be $200,000 this year). The seeds of this championship were planted two weeks earlier when the Bison captured a 71-67 overtime win in Washington in the wildest, wackiest finish in the MEAC's 16-year history. In that game, Howard guard William Stuart made a basket with five seconds left to give his team a 60-59 lead. As A&T frantically tried to call a timeout under the Bison basket, HU's George Hamilton touched the ball while stepping over the end line. Jeff Bradford, one of the game officials, called a delay-of-game technical against Hamilton with three seconds left on the clock. Aggie point guard Thomas "Ice" Griffis made one foul shot to tie the game. As the Aggies and Bison huddled around their respective coaches, Bradford determined that the delay-of-game technical required two free throws and Griffis, the conference's best foul shooter at 86 percent, returned to the charity stripe and converted for a 61-60 lead. All the Aggies had to do was complete the timeout and run the remaining three seconds off the clock.

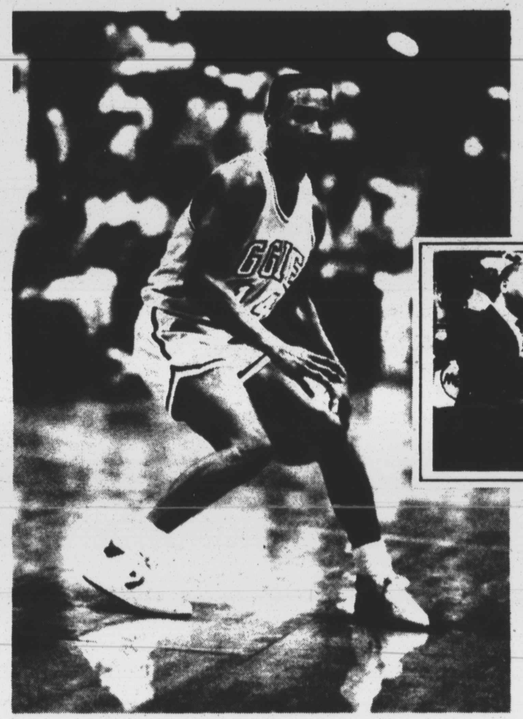
However, Howard Coach A.B. Williamson argued vociferously with Bradford that his call was incorrect. Moreover, Larry Hill, the MEAC supervisor of officials, left his seat in the stands of Burr Gym, accompanied by Howard Athletic Director William Moultrie. Hill, who appeared to be toting a rulebook, advanced to the official scorer's table and overruled Bradford, deleting the 61st point under A&T's name on the scoreboard. Corbett argued in vain with Hill before the Aggies missed a three-point try at the buzzer and Williams fouled out eight seconds into the overtime. The Bison went on to register the four-point extra-period victory and win the league's regular-season title by a game over their arch-rival.

A&T received some postgame consolation the day after the loss in Washington when Hill admitted that he had made a mistake, and that, in fact, the Aggies' second free throw was exactly what the rulebook stipulates in that situation.

Yet MEAC Commissioner Ken Free would not overturn the game decision, saying there was no precedent for such action. To all of this, Corbett responded by saying, "We tend to set precedents in the MEAC, especially for stupidity." Williamson, an A&T alumnus, had little sympathy for Corbett and the Aggies. He said, "It seems that Howard and A&T always have been involved in controversial games and it was about time for us to win one. We've come out on the losing end of a lot of controversy in Greensboro, so I don't feel sorry for A&T in the least."

The Aggie athletic department, with the support of Chancellor Edward Fort, would not let the issue die. Athletic Director Orby Moss sent a let-

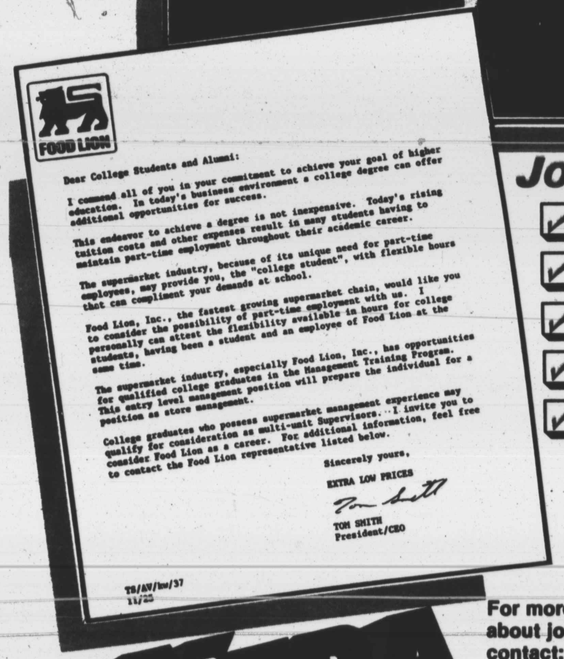
Please See Page 13



THE LITTLE GUARD THAT COULD

Above, when big man Claude Williams faltered, Aggie little man Thomas Griffis, the tourney MVP, took over. Inset, Griffis gets a hand from Coach Don Corbett (photos by James Parker).

Take their word for it.



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