Photo by T-Lee

Bighouse drew a large crowd as the center of attention after capturing career victory No. 800.

COACHING LEGENDS

'House' gets No. 800, now wants league title

The long wait has finally ended for basketball coaching monarch Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines.

In late January, the Winston-Salem State mentor won the 800th game of his college coaching career when his Rams downed Livingstone College, 79-70 in Salisbury, NC. Only the late Adolph Rupp of Kentucky has won more often at the collegiate level -- 875 wins in 41 seasons.

Photo by T-Lee

Gaines has a developing team that needs consistency to beat the CIAA's best. Above, the coach lectures freshman point guard Lorenzo White during a time-out.

"I was glad to finally get that over with," Gaines said. "Now we can really concentrate on doing well in our division as we get ready for our conference tournament."

It's rather strange that Gaines and Rupp, two coaches who seem to have so many things different about them, do have some things in common. The winning record is one element of that common ground. The other is that Rupp coached at Kentucky and Gaines grew up in Paducah, Ky.

In Rupp's prime, Kentucky was the powerhouse mainly because other major schools weren't putting a lot into their basketball programs. The emphasis was on football. Furthermore, Rupp was known as a die hard racist. He never recruited a black player until he was ordered to do so late in his career by the Kentucky president.

Gaines, on the other hand, was denied his shot at landing a major college coaching job. However, he benefitted from the ACC and SEC dragging its feet on integrating their squads. As a result, Gaines, like other black college mentors,were able to recruit the best black players because the white schools wouldn't have them.

During that span before integration, Gaines was able to build dynamic teams capable of playing with anyone in the country. And so it seemed somewhat ironic that his brightest moment finally arrived in a setting very familiar to the legendary coach.

The final minutes of the Livingstone game dragged on for what seemed like a millenium. The small gym was packed to the brim. Livingstone students were highly spirited -- partly because they wanted to hex WSSU, and partly because they wanted to witness sports history being made right before their own eyes.

The Rams eventually took control of the game in the second half after playing sluggish the first half. But the Bears kept fighting back, burying three-pointers as if their lives depended on it.

Gaines kept pacing and watching, his head swiveling back and forth between the game clock and the court as if he was viewing a tennis match between Yannick Noah and Ivan Lendl. When the game ended, he took a deep breath, wiped his brow, and showed outwardly that he was relieved to reach the magic mark that had been anticipated for so long.

Immediately afterwards, "Bighouse" was literally mobbed by the media and fans when the final buzzer sounded. Questions poured from reporters' lips, non-stop. The most frequently asked question (you guessed it): -- "Are you going for 875? What about 900?"

Gaines, who is 66, has said that he will likely coach indefinitely as long as his health permits. But in his mind, surpassing Rupp is not his prime motivation.

"Hey, if you can get enough of the right bunch of kids, winning 75 games over three or four years isn't that much of a task," he says matter-of-factly. "We've got six people right now who are the kind of players we need to win consistently. Next year, we'll only get better if we can get some help on the inside."

The significance of Gaines' achieve-

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