Staff Photo

Gaines feels that he still has some good coaching years left in him.

Bighouse

From Page 5

ment hasn't been lost in the shuffle as the coach works to mold his developing team into a CIAA contender. And though Gaines prefers be on the low key side, he has thought often about snaring No. 800.

"It was sinking in all the time," he admitted. "The only thing that disappointed me was having to keep putting it on hold."

The Rams didn't get a lot of help on their way to No. 800. Winston downed Livingstone for No. 799. But neither North Carolina Central or Norfolk State (Winston's next two opponents) wanted any part of being the team that would play the role of the school that gave up the next victory. Central prevailed 64-54 in a game that WSSU was clearly juiced up for -- they were at home, had the chance to get the milestone for coach, and Black Entertainment Television aired the game live. Two nights later, however, the Rams faltered on the road as Norfolk blitzed Gaines' troops, 76-56.

Since the end of December, Gaines has been descended upon by the sports media in tidal wave fashion. *USA Today, Sports Illustrated,* and ESPN all joined the party in doing their journalistic pieces on "Bighouse." Incidentally, *Sports Illustrated* will run a major article on the WSSU coach in the magazine's annual pre-season basketball issue next October. Ralph Wiley, a senior writer for *SI* who is an alumnus of Knoxville College, authored the article.

The attention generated by Gaines' quest was akin to what transpired with Grambling football coach Eddie Robinson when he broke Paul "Bear" Bryant's record for all-time college coaching wins in 1985.

As early as three weeks before Gaines reached the milestone, TV camera crews, broadcasters, sportswriters and photographers shadowed his every move -- in practices, in the dressing room before the start of games, during the games and afterwards.

Wired for sound, every utterance from Gaines became distinguishable. The media swarm bordered on being almost unbelievable. It's not that the media attention was unwanted -- just unexpected. After all, when you're Division II, the media doesn't exactly knock on your door constantly.

"The coverage we got was a positive factor for black college basketball, our conference and the school," Gaines added. "At least people know we're here and what we're doing. Before then, nobody took a look at us very much."

Please See Page 14

COVER STORY

From Centerfold

The NBA's chief scout says that he will strongly recommend that English be named to play in the East-West All-Star Game, which pits the top college seniors against one another in a contest that will take place the Thursday prior to the start of the NCAA's Final Four in Denver next month.

Will get opportunity

English, he continued, will also get a chance to showcase his wares at the pre draft camp for college players which will be held in Chicago. In addition, A.J. is scheduled to participate in the Portsmouth (Va.) Invitational, another prestigious gathering that allows players the chance to enhance their marketability in the draft if they perform well.

Players coming from smaller schools always have question marks about them regarding their skills. Those questions arise because the level of competition that small college players face is viewed as being on a lower level than the major colleges. In that instance, many observers will say that yes, the guy has talent, but can he make the successful adjustment to the big-time?

That line of thinking doesn't matter as far as Blake is concerned.

"He won't have to make that much of an adjustment," Blake points out. "He's been playing in maybe the best Division II conference in the country, so that will help him plenty."

Jones Cup stardom

Even though English caught the eye of pro scouts as a sophomore, he really bolstered his reputation nationally during the summer of '88 when he played for the U.S. select team that won the Jones Cup International Basketball Tournament in Tapei, China.

The Jones Cup competition is part of the U.S. Olympic development plan. The players who are chosen are seen as the creme de la creme among college freshmen and sophomores. This youth movement is designed to provide the younger American players with sufficient international exposure to get them ready to play for the U.S. in the next Olympic Games. In this instance, some of the players (if not already graduated) will likely play in the 1990 World University Games and get a shot at making the Olympic team for the '92 games in Barcelona, Spain.

Prime-timin'

English was a starter and team co-captain of a group that featured some of the biggest names in prime-time college hoops -- Felton Spencer (Louisville), Greg Anthony (University of Nevada-Las Vegas), and Billy Owens (Syracuse) -- just to name a few.

But that's just the beginning.

A.J. averaged 22 points a game, led the American team in three-point shooting, and was one of three U.S. players to be chosen all-tournament.

According to reliable sources, there were more than a few NBA scouts who felt that English was the best of that bunch.

English's performance in China confirmed what Union opponents have known for quite some time. He is, one of the best.

"With the help of the good Lord," said English, "I've been able to develop my skills and play really well against anybody. The Jones Cup helped out because it opened up some eyes and gave me more national exposure a little sooner than I thought."

Bighouse plays a role

Ironically, it was a CIAA opposing coach who was responsible for getting English on the American team. Winston-Salem State coach Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines was the head coach for the U.S. that year and he lobbied the Jones Cup Player Selection Committee to issue A.J. an invitation to attend the team's training camp. This happened after many of the players who were initially chosen, opted not to compete in the Jones Cup.

"The China tournament let English know that he could play with the very best in the country," said Gaines. "He's about as complete as any kid you'll find in the country. I compare him with the crowd (of major college players) that you always see playing on national TV."

Gaines, however, does feel that English will have to make more of an adjustment for the NBA than some people feel. He is quick to acknowledge that one of A.J.'s major pluses is having played four years for a Union team that plays a scrappy, pressure-type of defense, which requires players to possess a lot of speed and quickness.

But at the same time, the legendary coach notes, English will have to get accustomed to going up against the very best night in and night out. "There's no question about his skills and ability to play against the best," Gaines added, "but even in the CIAA, some nights he doesn't get a real test."

Has seen it all

True, but that doesn't mean that teams haven't pulled out all the stops to try and slow English down. Talk about different ploys and tactics -- A.J. has seen just about everything conceivable -- including the experience of being constantly hammered as if the contest was Roller Derby instead of basketball.

"I'd have to say that I've seen everything but the kitchen sink," English says. "But come to think of it, some have even removed the kitchen sink and thrown it at me. In my mind, they can't do anything with me. They have to foul me because they know I'm going to score."

English's final college season has been one where he has been unleashed at the offensive end. In previous seasons, the Panthers have always had a strong inside game, so coach Robbins has preferred to methodically pound the ball inside the paint as the staple of the offense.

Last year, for example, Union had 6-9 center Terry Davis who averaged 22.3 points and 11.9 rebounds a game while power forward Roosevelt Wallace added 11.5 points and 7.6 rebounds each night.

With that kind of inside production, Union didn't have a need for English to score 30-plus points a night.

Teaming with Walker

But this year, Union's front line isn't what it usually is. As a result, English and point guard Jonathan Walker shoulder the burden of putting most of VUU's points on the board. Going into the late stages of the season, the pair has collectively averaged over 50 points a game.

"We had to give our guards the green light," explains Robbins. "We don't have a good inside game, so we need them to carry us and that's what they've done."

Adds English: "That's been a big difference for the team. This is the first time that we've gone with a guard oriented offense. We're living and dying by the jump shot. But Jonathan and I are enjoying it. This is right where we want to be in our senior year."

When all is said and done, the nation will know much more about Virginia Union's premier guard. He's been so dominant that some sportswriters are referring to games that he plays in as English lessons.

Come to think about it, that's right on the mark.

And so is A.J.

-Craig T. Greenlee

CIAA ROUNDBALL

Heading down the stretch, it's Central and Norfolk

CIAA teams are in the gun lap in the race for division titles and a good seed for the upcoming conference tournament in late February.

North Carolina Central, the defending national champion, was sitting pretty as the lone frontrunner in the Southern Division, with Winston-Salem State, Shaw University and Johnson C. Smith all trying to make up ground as tournament time draws near.

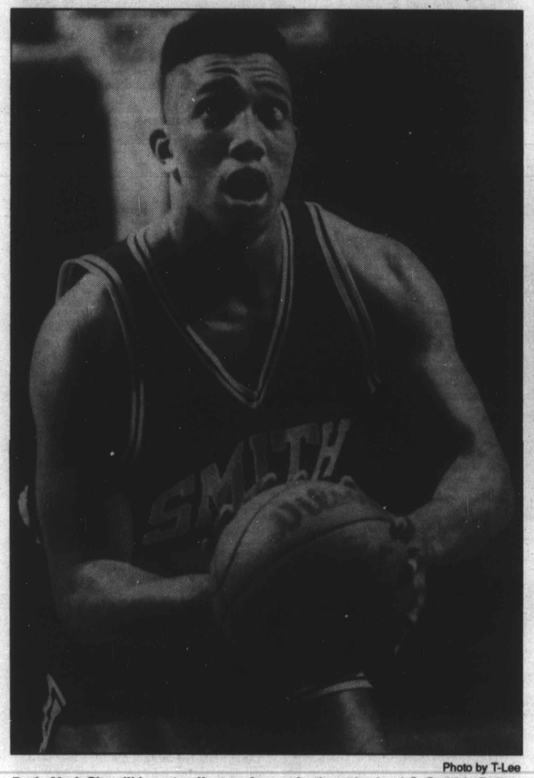

Photo by T-Lee

Burly Mark Sherrill is a steadfast performer in the paint for J.C. Smith's Bulls.

In the North, it's a two-team battle between Norfolk State and a very surprising Virginia Union team. Hampton's Pirates, who held a two game edge over Virginia State for the third spot in the division, may have an outside chance of doing some damage at the conference playoffs in the next couple of weeks.

In looking at the league's top schools, it's apparent that for most teams, defense is what wins when it comes to CIAA play. Central and Norfolk, for example have been ranked among the top defensive units in Division II all year. For the Eagles, this is especially important since they lead the nation this season as they did last season.

Here's how the teams are looking in the South and the North.

SOUTHERN DIVISION

North Carolina Central is right on target to snatch the CIAA tournament trophy. The Eagles (16-2 overall, 12-2 in the league, and 7-0 in the South) are an extremely difficult bunch for anyone to handle. Norfolk (58-57 in double overtime) and Union (76-61) are the only teams to have gotten the best of coach Michael Bernard's crew this season.

When you talk about NCCU, you think in terms of defense and team, not individuals.

In 17 games, the Eagles have allowed only 960 points (56.5 ppg average). Opponents are shooting just 40.8 percent from the field and 25.9 percent from three-points territory against the burgundy-clad Birds.

In order for Central to win, they must play sound team defense -- something they do better than anybody else. If they don't, they're in trouble because they don't score a lot of points. The team's 68.1 ppg scoring average is the league's second least productive.

Winston-Salem State has used the hoopla surrounding coach Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines' journey to reach victory No. 800 as a motivational tool. Looking back at January, you have to say that the ploy worked. The Rams were 7-3 last month.

Still, WSSU has been plagued by inconsistency. If they can ever achieve a balance of inside and outside scoring, they could raise a lot of eyebrows in Norfolk.

Shaw's Bears (15-7, 9-7, 6-3) have their share of talent. But like the Rams, they haven't been able to put it all together against the CIAA's elite teams. They lost to Union by 10 (97-87) and Central has defeated them twice. The second time, NCCU sneaked by with a 58-55 verdict.

In Sheldon Owens, the Bears have one of the premier players in the league. Owens (24.3 points and 10 rebounds a game) makes this team a cut above average.

But in the final weeks of the regular season, the Bears had to do without their prime guy. He sprained an ankle and was expected to be out of action until the start of the tournament.

Johnson C. Smith has enough talent to make a difference in who eventually wears the tournament crown. The Golden Bulls (13-8, 8-6, 5-3) had won eight of nine games before they fell 91-89 to Winston-Salem State.

Beefy Mark Sherrill (24.2 ppg, 9.9 rpg) is a true bruiser in the lane. But the Bulls also have a solid backcourt duo of Reggie Torrence and Columbus Parker. Torrence (8.1 apg) mans the point position and is the league's top assists man while Parker nails the opposition for 21 ppg as the shooting guard.

NORTHERN DIVISION

There's not a lot one can say about this division except utter the words Norfolk State and Virginia Union.

The Spartans, coached by Charles Christian, rate as one of the favorites because they have a solid combination of offensive firepower and tenacity when it comes to stopping folk defensively.

Christian, by the way, picked up his 300th career win when NSU routed Winston-Salem, 76-56 on Jan. 22.

Norfolk is almost as good defensively as Central (yielding 63.5 ppg), but they do have an edge on the Eagles because they score more (75.1 ppg).

Jerome Coles (17.9 points and 10.9 rebounds a game) is the go-to guy. But guard Darren Sanderline provides ample offensive support and Clint Wright gets the job done on the glass to complement Coles' efforts on the boards.

NSU should feel right at home for the tournament since they will play in front of a home crowd.

Union should be called the surprise team of the season. With no inside game and pair of guards that people call "Salt n' Peppa" -- A.J. English (33.4 ppg) and Jonathan Walker (20 ppg), the Panthers have rolled to a 22-1 mark, a slate that has exceeded everyone's expectations.

Coach Dave Robbins is the first to admit that this year's team has over-achieved. The Panthers can't afford to rely on the inside game for victories like they usually do.

Only Norfolk has stood in Union's way. They downed Union, 87-86 on VUU's home turf as English scored 49 points.

These happenings should make for a very intriguing CIAA tournament.

-Steve Zimmerman

Tournament Update

Dates & Format: The 1990 tournament will be held Feb. 21-24 at the Norfolk Scope in Norfolk, Va. All 14 teams in the league will participate in a single elimination format.

The Northern Division and Southern Division winners receive first round byes. The remaining seven teams in each division will be seeded against their counterparts in the opposing division based on how the teams finished in their respective divisions at the end of the regular season. The tournament winner gets an automatic bid to the NCAA Division II playoffs.

Picks for Final Four: North Carolina Central, Norfolk State, Virginia Union, Shaw University.

Favored Team To Win It All: North Carolina Central.

Darkhorse Pick For Championship: Shaw University

Ticket Information: No tickets available. Tournament has been sold out since November.