COVER STORY

TOTAL VICTORY!

North Carolina Central puts on awesome display in NCAA finals

Move oyer Duke, North Carolina and North Carolina State. You have some company joining you now -- North Carolina Central.

Yep, that's right. Central -- the smaller school that is located within a short drive of those ACC roundball powerhouses.



Photo by The Magnificent Eye

Coach Michael Bernard was able to instill a sense of cohesiveness among the Eagles. His team continued to win in spite of losing their top player, Derrick Leak, to an injury in January.

Central rocked the college basketball world when they totally derailed Southeast Missouri State 73-46 to win the NCAA Division II basketball championship in Springfield, Mass. -- the birthplace of hoops.

The Eagles (28-4) turned the Indians (27-6) every way but loose in the process. They shut down a Southeast team that had been scoring an average of 85 points a game and picked their defense apart with precision on offense. During the regular season, NCCU was the nation's tops in scoring defense, giving up a Scrooge-like 55 ppg on the average.

It was, to say the least, a totally dominating performance by coach Michael Bernard's club.

"When we go out on the floor, there is one thing we do and that's play man-to-man defense from buzzer to buzzer," said an exuberant Bernard. "That's our forte. We live and die with it. That's our philosophy and I like to think we play it very well."

Southeast Missouri will attest to that. The Eagles' defensive efforts took them completely out of their game. Central's defense was so effective that the Indians hit on just 32.7 percent of their shots for the game. The Indians' high scoring forward Ray Pugh (18.4 ppg) was limited to a mere three points and all of those came from the free throw line. Antoine Sifford was largely responsible for that.

In the meantime, Jeff Hayes and Miles Clarke were busy making life miserable for Southeast guards Earnest Taylor, Dwayne Rutherford, and Mike Lewis. Taylor and Rutherford found the NCCU defense to be nearly impenetrable and Lewis had the clamps put on his three-point shooting touch. Lewis, by the way was No.6 in the nation in three-point shooting, converting 50 percent of his attempts. But on that night, the only thing he could hit was the front of the rim. He shot 0 for 5 and scored only one point.

Rutherford wound up being the only Southeast player scoring in double figures with 11 points. Taylor was next with eight.

Central took control of the game in the first half and the Indians never regrouped. Early in the contest, Rutherford and Taylor were able to go to the hoop and dish off to teammates for easy baskets. But as the game wore on, the vices of the Eagles' defense began to tighten and the guards had nowhere to go.

As a result, Southeast could get just one shot at the basket and when they did, those shots were always contested. And during the last five minutes of the first half, Central's defense took on a defiant personality, holding the Indians scoreless during that span.

To add insult to injury, Central scored four quick points within a matter of seconds on a sequence that gave an early indication of what kind of night it was going to be for the Eagles -- a team that played like it was in tune with every thought wave of coach Bernard.

Here's the scene: With seven seconds left, Fred Bennett attempts a three-point shot that misses everything. Hayes grabs the errant shot and lays it in. A second later, he steals the inbounds pass from Rutherford and gets another lay-up as the buzzer sounded. Central rushed into the dressing room with an impressive 42-20 lead at the half.

The Indians were in a depressed frame of mind.

Southeast coach Ron Shumate was subdued and humbled by what the Eagles did to his team. He has guided the Indians to the Division II playoffs in 10 out of the last 14 seasons. Having scouted Central in the semi-finals, Shumate had an uneasy feeling that his team was in for a rough night -- especially if they weren't able to generate much offense.

"We played hard, but we shot terribly," Shumate said. "And there's one reason for it. Central made us change our shots. I don't remember any team that I've coached in all my years, including five years of high school, that was held to 46 points. And there's a reason for it. Central is a great team and deserves to be national champion."

Central's opponents have developed a total loathing for their playing style. The Eagles, you see, are very seldom in a rush to take a shot. Teams hate to play them because they are known to use all of the 45 seconds shot clock in order to get the shot they want.

NCAA Division II All-Tournament Basketball Team

Miles Clarke	North Carolina Central	Guard
Earnest Taylor	Southeast Missouri State	Guard
Maurice Pullum	California-Riverside	Guard
Dominique Stephens	North Carolina Central	Forward
Antoine Sifford	North Carolina Central	Forward

Division II Championships Most Valuable Player
Miles Clarke

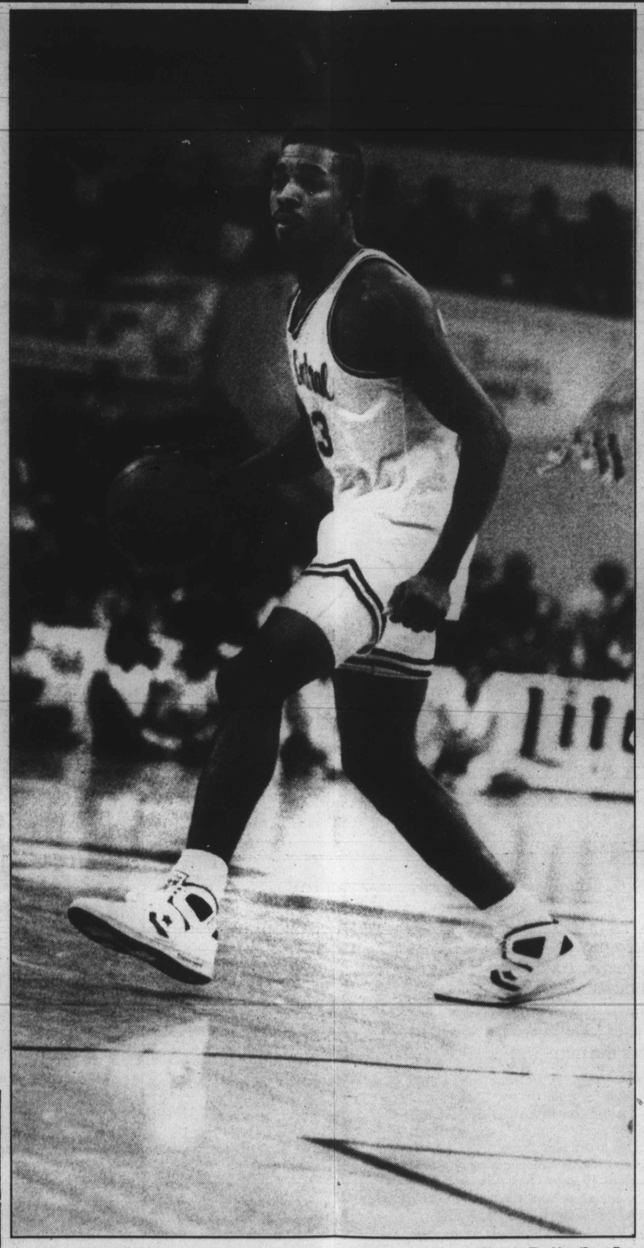


Photo by The Magnificent Eye

Miles Clarke got out of his sickbed to give Central an MVP performance during Division II's Elite Eight.

That approach slows the tempo of a game down considerably, and for an uptempo team, it's pure torture.

The thinking on the Eagles' side of the court is to hold opponents to a maximum of 30 points per half. When that happens, the brain trust believes that NCCU can score enough points to win. That philosophy worked well this season. And except for horrible shooting against Union in the CIAA finals, the plan worked extremely well.

That doesn't mean that Central has sand bags weighing heavily on their feet. On the contrary, the Eagles will run if the opportunity presents itself. And during the Elite Eight (Division II's version of the Final Four), they surprised some people by running a few fast breaks of their own. For the most part, though, they stayed with the game plan that got them to the nationals. Slow it down on offense. Be very stingy on defense.

"I basically believe in a ball control offense, but if we have the chance to break, we'll break," Bernard pointed out. "That's the type of offense I grew up with from all the coaches I played for. I just believe in a very fundamental system and the players believe in it, that's the key. We won with a system."

Central also won because of a very gutty performance by Clarke, who was voted the championship MVP. Clarke's story is intriguing because at one point, it was very questionable if he would even play. His physical condition upon arrival in Springfield was more appropriate for admission into an Army MASH unit. He was suffering from a fever, hip pointer, and a sore throat that was so raw, he couldn't eat any solid foods.

Clarke's time in Massachusetts was limited to the court and his hotel bed. He didn't have the stamina to practice or take in the sights around town with the rest of this teammates.

But on the court it was a different story. In three games, he averaged 18.3 points and performed his usual handiwork as the Eagles' premier defensive player. Out of a possible 120 minutes of playing time, Clarke was on the court for 118, only coming out for the final two minutes in the championship finale when Central had blown the game open.

"To play for a national championship is a dream come true," said Clarke, who transferred from Fayetteville State two years ago. "It's a great opportunity and something that I'll never forget. And since we got that far, I had to do as much as I could. It was something that I always wanted. I figured that as long as I could walk and my arms were OK, I'd make it. All I had to do was block everything else out and just play my game."

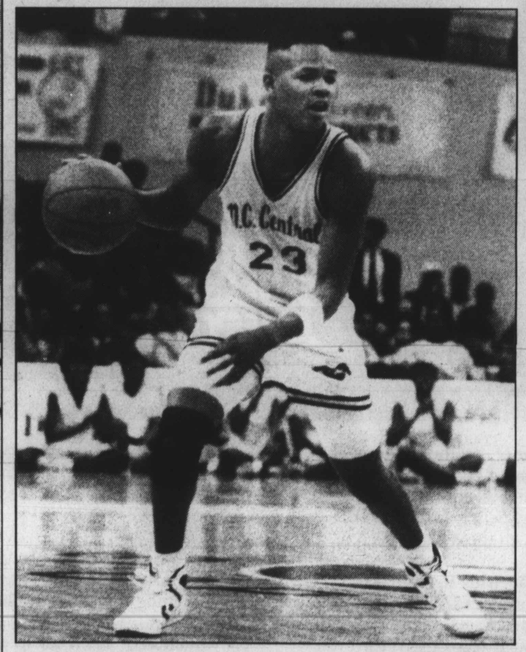


Photo by The Magnificent Eye

Antoine Sifford was too much for the Indians to handle. He repeatedly got inside the paint to score and create havoc for Southeast.

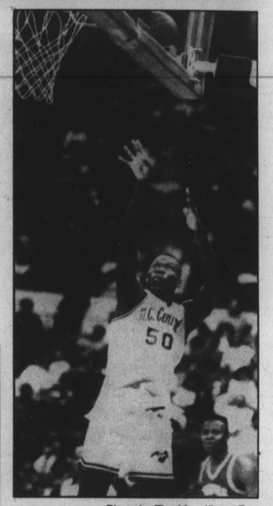


Photo by The Magnificent Eye

Dominique Stephens had a career best type of game vs. Jacksonville State in the semis, scoring 22 points and blocking four shots.

Clarke, an Augusta, Ga. senior, came into the playoffs eager to avenge a sub-par showing in the CIAA Tournament. The Eagles needed his scoring desperately in the finals vs. Virginia Union, but he wasn't able to oblige. Clarke's absence on the floor was a prime factor why Union routed Central by 20 points to win the CIAA.

"The CIAA was a key for me going into the playoffs," Clarke was quick to say. "I was really disappointed with how I played. I should've been playing my best and it hurt us because we weren't getting the perimeter shots down and that's my job. I felt like I let the team down. But that experience taught me to keep playing hard no matter how bad things get for me. So by the time the playoffs started, I knew I had to score, so I went on a scoring spree."

Clarke wasn't alone in terms of getting hoops when they were needed. Sifford, a swingman, who is really more of a shooting guard, turned out to be the wild card player in the finals. Southeast could never find anyone to match up with him. Ditto for Dominique Stephens.

At 6-4, Sifford had the size and quickness to post-up the smaller opposing guards (all are 5'10"). As a result, he had a field day, pouring in 21 points and grabbing nine rebounds. The smaller defenders had little choice but to foul Sifford once he got posi-

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