

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

For Charleston, It's Time for the Big Dance

After Perfect Southern Conference Run, No. 16 Cougars Seek Better NCAA Seed

March 6, 1999



By Rick Nelson

CHARLESTON, S.C. -- John Kresse had a bold idea for his 20th season as head coach at the College of Charleston: Join a new conference, set up the toughest schedule in school history and see what happens.

So far, the Cougars haven't missed a beat.

Charleston (28-2) stormed through the Southern Conference with a 16-0 regular season record, won the conference tournament to gain its third consecutive NCAA tournament bid, moved into the national rankings for only the second time (the Cougars are 16th this week) and has built a 25-game winning streak that is second-longest in the nation behind Duke's 26-game streak.

The streak -- the Cougars' third of at least 20 games in the past four years -- began appropriately enough on Dec. 5 with one of the school's biggest victories, a 66-64 upset of then-No. 3 North Carolina at Charlotte Coliseum.

The students and everyone else around the city responded by gobbling up every ticket this season at the 3,500-seat John Kresse Arena. The school announced plans in January for a new 6,500-seat arena that also will bear Kresse's name.

"It can't get any better than this," said Kresse, a former assistant to Lou Carnesecca at St. John's who is 493-120 in the only head coaching job he's ever held. (He is 191-41 since the school moved from NAIA to NCAA Division I in 1991-92.)

"Every year the program seems to grow with fans and national exposure," Kresse said. "I'm excited, but I'm also a little dreamy because I feel like we're at a high point right now."

Their ability to move even higher still may depend on what view the NCAA Division I men's committee takes today of their success. The committee sets the 64-team field and the pairings for the NCAA tournament, and for the Cougars' three previous appearances, it never has seeded them higher than 12th. While that hasn't mattered much -- the Cougars are 1-3 in the tournament and never have lost by more than 10 points -- they wouldn't mind a little better position. (Most of the nation's better teams almost certainly would prefer a different first-round opponent.)

"Two years ago I felt we were wrongly placed as 12 seed and should have been much higher," said Kresse, whose team proved it by defeating fifth-seeded Maryland and nearly upsetting eventual national champion Arizona. "Last season we were a 14 and that was right on. Now I hope I'm not being too optimistic, but I really think we belong the 5, 6 or 7 category."

From 1993-94 to 1997-98, the Cougars ruled the Trans America Athletic Conference, running up an 80-6 record in TAAC play. They made three NCAA tournament appearances -- one as an at-large team.

But Kresse and his Cougars set themselves apart and gained their renown as giant-killers with a simple formula: Schedule a national power or two during the regular season and see if you can pull off an upset.

The plan worked to perfection in 1993 with an 84-67 win at then-No. 8 Georgia Tech. Since then, the Cougars have knocked off Alabama, Penn State and North Carolina Charlotte. They won at Tennessee in the 1996 National Invitation Tournament and beat then-No. 21 Stanford and Arizona State to reach the title game of the 1996 Great Alaska Shootout.

In December against the Tar Heels, senior guard Danny Johnson -- who transferred from Clemson -- provided the exclamation point by making a game-winning follow-up basket with one-tenth of a second left. The school, with an enrollment of about 11,000, quickly put together a video of the victory in time for the next home game.

"Many stay close, but very few mid-level programs can get over the edge and defeat those teams," Kresse said.

The win over the Tar Heels also seemed to give the Cougars some direction this season. They suffered one of their worst losses under Kresse in an 84-63 blowout by Georgia in the first round of the Preseason NIT, then played well Dec. 1 in a 77-75 win over Massachusetts. But they were flat again in a 55-44 loss to South Carolina. However then came North Carolina -- and then the streak.

The key ingredient, Kresse said, is the team's eight seniors, four of whom start. "The balance, experience and confidence of this team has been exceptional," he said. "They've gotten themselves ready in the last few years to have the experience and know-how to win these games."

Seven players have led the team in scoring this season, a list that includes sophomore center Jody Lumpkin, a transfer from Rice, and redshirt freshman Jeff Bolton, who chose Charleston over Syracuse.

But senior forward Sedric Webber, the 1998 TAAC co-player of the year, was named this season's Southern Conference player of the year after averaging 13.9 points and 7.4 rebounds per game. Senior forward Carl Thomas scored 20 in the win over North Carolina. Jermel President, a four-year starter at guard, led the league in free throw shooting at 90 percent and is steady under pressure. So is point guard Shane McCravy, another senior.

The Cougars also are among the nation's leaders in scoring defense, using a stifling man-to-man to hold opponents to 58.6 points per game on 38.9 percent shooting. They aren't a particularly tall team, but they have outrebounded opponents by 6.3 per game and they average 6.5 blocked shots per game.

"They're a veteran team," Chattanooga Coach Henry Dickerson said. "They don't get rattled."

On Jan. 30 at Davidson, the Cougars stormed back from a 15-point deficit with 6 minutes 34 seconds left for an 84-80 win. And in the Southern Conference final, the Cougars overcame an 11-point deficit to beat Appalachian State, 77-67, even though Webber was in foul trouble and finished with six points.

After the game, Kresse brought all eight seniors and Lumpkin to the podium where their postgame news conference was held.

"They're just so athletic," Wofford Coach Richard Johnson said. "Just when you think you've got the right people covered, someone else goes on a tear."

And the players just keep getting better. James Griffin, South Carolina's Mr. Basketball in 1997, transferred from Wake Forest to Charleston last month. Kresse compares Griffin to Johnson, who joined the Cougars after failing to get the playing time he wanted at Clemson.

"Years ago, we were able to get some sleepers like [Atlanta Hawks guard] Anthony Johnson, who weren't recruited by the higher-caliber schools," he said. "What he and others have done for the program has allowed us to go after guys like Jeff Bolton and Jody Lumpkin."

These days, Selection Sunday parties are almost an annual rite, and talk centers around seeding and brackets in the NCAA tournament. Meanwhile, Kresse worries about keeping the momentum.

"Even with all of this, sometimes I wonder if we can keep it up," he said. "I'm a little like a kid in a toy store, just a little befuddled by it all."

CAPTION: College of Charleston Coach John Kresse hugs Sedric Webber after 28-2 Cougars topped Furman, 85-63, to win Southern Conference tournament.