

Mean Green Season Recap Part FOUR

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The Sun Belt Tournament got underway on February 28th. Games were to take place on the higher seed's home floor for the first round(not counting the three byes for division champs and next best conference mark) with the eight remaining teams moving onto Lafayette.

North Texas, as the 5th seed hosted Louisiana Lafayette the 12 seed in this initial round contest. Kendrick Davis jumped out of the box with a huge effort, putting up 21 points in the opening stanza(on his way to 24 for the evening). The Mean Green got up by 19 points midway thru the first half, but the Ragin's Cajuns cut it to 9 before the break. Lafayette continued their charge after intermission, pulling to within 4, but from there Harold Stewart spearheaded a run to put the game away. When the buzzer sounded we had reached the 20 win plateau for the first time in nearly 30 years.

Between the Wednesday game, and the trip to Lafayette for the remainder of the tourney Coach Jones had his team practice cutting down the nets. This was just one of the many buttons JJ was able to push along the way.

Next up was the 4 seed - the War Hawks of Monroe. ULM had led the Western Division through most of the season, but a late tailspin forced them out of one of the byes. Still, they figured to be a formidable opponent. We looked bad out of the gate as ULM jumped on us. Kendrick Davis was ill, and we seemed lost without him. The War Hawks took a 12 point lead into the break. Harold Stewart once again led a 2nd half run, this time getting us back in the game, before finally taking over the lead with 8 minutes remaining. The teams traded baskets, and dreams, in a dramatic stretch run as clutch shot after clutch shot was drained on both sides. Ben Bell(in a huge game for our Point Guard) stole the ball at the end of regulation thwarting a ULM attempt at the win. Free basketball yet again! In the extra session, we dug down deep and pulled away, hitting our free throws at the end. In Davis's near absence Calvin Watson led the team with 19, but once again Stewart off the bench was the true story as his double double proved critical to the cause.

MTSU upset South Alabama, so we got a break drawing the 9 seed in the conference semi-final. Much like the game in Denton earlier in the season, North Texas led through most of the contest. KD sat out the game but Bell once again came up huge, with 15 points pacing the squad. Sturns and Watson both chipped in with 11, as North Texas weathered several Blue Raider rallies. In the end though, MTSU only led in the opening moments, and we knocked off MTSU 59-52. This tied the most wins in school history, dating back in the glory years of Coach Bill Blakely. We were now just one win from the Big Dance. But to do so we'd have to knock off the ASU Indians, who we were 0-2 against on the year.

The Tuesday clash would have a national audience on ESPN2. Calvin Watson seemed to know the spotlight was on as he came out shooting lights out. He would have 24 by game's end leading the Mean Green. We led through most of the 1st half but the Indians closed to within 1 at halftime. Early in the second half NT pushed the advantage to 6, but ASU responded, eventually taking a short lived one point lead. Ben Bell took over from there as a junior point guard scored 7 of our next 13 and threw a stunning alley-oop pass too Rich Young, to seal the victory. Final Score NT 83-75. The Mean Green were going to the NCAA Tournament!

Over the next week we were the toast of the DFW market. The NCAA selection announcement drew a huge crowd as our team and fans went nuts when we drew the Memphis Tigers in New Orleans. All the local news agencies ran stories on the Mean Green, whether they be newspaper, television, or radio. The National media did features on Rich Young's military service and the Dallas Morning News had daily video diaries, that gave excellent insight into the team. It was a wonderful time to be part of the Mean Green nation.

Game day finally arrived. Most experts gave us little chance, and honestly this was deserved. Only four times had a 15 seed defeated a 2 seed in the Tournament. We'd have to play a perfect game to get it done. For awhile we did just that. The Mean Green jumped on Memphis at the start as we were hitting everything we threw up. We kept a tenuous hold on the lead through over half the opening 20 minutes. We were the "Look in" game at several

points in the coverage as CBS would break away from other regionally significant games to show footage of a David going toe to toe with Goliath. Memphis used a late 14-2 run to take a 9 point lead into the break. We refused to wilt after the break staying within striking distance. The turning point occurred about 7 minutes into the stanza when Calvin Watson missed a dunk and Memphis responded with a run to push the lead to 17. Despite closing the gap under 10 on a couple of occasions, but we could not get over the hump. The final score was Memphis 73-58, in a game that was probably closer than the margin showed.

North Texas finished the season at 23-11, marking a program high water mark for wins. Obviously the great squads we had in the 60's and 70's didn't play as many games, but this was still a historic season by the Mean Green. It was only the 2nd time in school history we reached the "Dance"; and only the 5th time we had reached 20 victories. In my 20 years of following NT basketball, I truly believe this was the best team (and most talented) we've seen. Kendrick Davis, Rich Young, and Calvin Watson each put their stamp on the North Texas basketball program that will be remembered for some time to come.

However, we still have much of the nucleus returning for next year. JJ has seemingly gotten some great additions for our '07-08 campaign, so the future appears brighter than ever. Will our W's down low continue to develop? Will Harold Stewart live up to the promise he teased us with at the SBC tournament? Will the "Thrill McCoy's" play integral roles? Is Collin Dennis's jumper as good as advertised? Can Mangrum return from his shoulder surgery and dent the regular rotation? Will Tristan Thompson live up to his billing? If even half of these questions are answered in the affirmative we are gonna be in for a helluva ride. I can't wait for next season. Go Mean Green!