

BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS



Virginia Union Sports Photo

VA. UNION BATTLES TO THE WIRE

NO SHAME IN SECOND: Senior guard Ashley Smith shoots vs. Ashland in NCAA Div. II title game in Columbus, Ohio.

WALKER OUT AT GRAMBLING, TAYLOR AT NCCU; MEAC, CIAA, SWAC CROWN BOWLING CHAMPS

POSTSEASON TOURNAMENT RECAP

NCAA DIV. II BASKETBALL - WOMEN NATIONAL SEMIFINALS

Virginia Union 86, California Baptist 81

COLUMBUS, Oh. – Atlantic Region champion, CIAA member Virginia Union, roared back from double-digit first-half deficits to knock off 2nd-seeded Cal Baptist 86-81 Wednesday to advance to the championship game of the NCAA Div. II women's basketball tournament.

The Lady Panthers (28-4) took on undefeated and top seeded Ashland (36-0) in Friday's 7:00 p.m. championship game that was carried live on the CBS Sports Network (see Top Story). Ashland defeated Harding 90-77 in the other semifinal.

Just as they did in a quarterfinal win over Columbus State Tuesday, it was the second half that was the difference for the 6th-seeded Lady Panthers in the semifinal match-up. They outscored the Lady Lancers 47-33 in the second half after trailing 48-39 at the break.

Five-five senior guard Ashley Smith, playing off the bench as she has all season, was the catalyst as she darted in and around the Cal Baptist defense. She went for 20 of her game- and career-high 28 points in the second half to fuel the comeback. She also had five rebounds, three steals and two assists.

Smith, who started only two games this season, spent most of her time playing behind VUU and CIAA scoring leader, junior guard Brittany Jackson (18.4 ppg.) who has not played since VUU lost in the CIAA Tournament semifinals. Gilbert dismissed Jackson from the team following that tournament. Smith has become the Lady Panthers' key weapon from the guard position including scoring 14 in the Elite Eight win Tuesday over Columbus State.

VUU's frontcourt stalwarts, 6-2 senior Lady Walker and 6-foot junior Alexis Johnson, controlled the paint. Walker was unstoppable inside with 18 points and a game-high 19 rebounds. Johnson scored 20 points and pulled down nine boards. They, along with freshman guard Kishona Sutton's nine boards, spurred the Lady Panthers to a 68-39 edge off the glass and 56-24 advantage in points in the paint.

Point guard Rejoice Spivey, who had a crucial basket that put VUU up three at 82-79 with just under a minute left, led the Lady Panthers with five assists.

Cal Baptist (35-3), champions of the Big West conference and the West Region, came in on a 32-game winning streak and seeded second behind Ashland.

VUU took its first lead since early in the game when Walker cashed in the first of two free throws with 1:49 left in the third quarter to go up 58-57. Walker's lay-up basket with 3 seconds left sent the Lady Panthers into the final period up 62-60.

Courtney Nelson, who finished with a team-high 24 points for Cal Baptist, canned four 3-pointers in the fourth quarter, the last giving CBU a 79-76 lead with 2:32 to play.

Smith came right back 14 seconds later to drive for a lay-up and pull VUU within 79-78. After Nelson missed on a drive to the basket, Johnson put VUU up for good at 80-79 on a 12-foot jumper from the right side with 1:45 left. Nelson misfired on a 3-pointer, VUU rebounded and worked the clock down before Spivey drove left across the lane and put in the clutch left-handed lay-up to give VUU a 82-79 lead with just under a minute to play.

Cassidy missed on a lay-up attempt with 47 ticks left. The Lady Panthers brought the ball up but turned it over in the front-court with 27.5 seconds left giving CBU what would be its final chance. But Diaz, with a clear path to the basket, missed a lay-up attempt. Johnson rebounded and passed to Smith who was fouled and sank both free throws with 20 seconds left for an 84-79 margin. Diaz scored the Lancers' final points on a lay-up with 14 seconds to go. Walker's free throw with :03 seconds left provided the final margin.

UNDER THE BANNER

WHAT'S GOING ON IN AND AROUND BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS

BOWIE STATE, ALABAMA STATE, MDES TAKE BOWLING TITLES:

The CIAA Women's Bowling Championship extended into the eighth round of bracket play before Bowie State overcame their position in the lower bracket to upset Fayetteville State for the 2017 title in Chesapeake, Va. Sunday.

The championship is the Bulldogs' third consecutive and seventh in school history. BSU's Ashley Wade and Sierra Davis were tournament co-MVPs.

Alabama State defeated Texas Southern in two championship matches, 4-2 in both, to claim the first SWAC Bowling title in program history on Sunday in Arlington, Texas.

ASU sophomore Haley Young was named the championship match's most valuable bowler.

Maryland Eastern Shore won the 2017 MEAC Bowling Championship on Sunday with a 4-1 win over North Carolina A&T in the championship final at the AMF Lanes in Chesapeake, Va. MDES picks up its ninth MEAC title all-time and its fourth in the last five seasons.

Two-time reigning MEAC Bowler of the Year Thashaina Seraus was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Performer, and Kayla Bandy was named the Most Outstanding Coach.

Va. Union ladies fall in D2 title game

LUT WILLIAMS
BCSP Editor

COLUMBUS, Ohio – The ladies of Virginia Union University, who staged second-half comebacks to knock off second and third seeds and get to Friday's NCAA Div. II national basketball championship game, could not pull it off a third time as they fell to top seed and undefeated Ashland University, 93-77.

Ashland (37-0) were just too efficient and relentless for the sixth-seeded Lady Panthers (28-5) to overcome. The Lady Eagles shot 52.6% from the field, 50% (11 of 22) from 3-point range and canned a sparkling 20 of 22 (90.9%) free throws to keep VUU at bay. Ashland had a remarkable 24 assists on 31 made baskets.

"It's just tough to kind of figure out how to slow down this Ashland team," said second-year VUU coach AnnMarie Gilbert.

"We tried a little zone, we tried a little man (-to-man defense), we pressured a little bit, but they push tempo so well. They just get it out of the net and they go. They run on makes and misses and they find each other. Just when you think you've got them cornered, a skip pass occurs and another skip pass occurs.

"It's a team that plays a different style that any team that we've faced. It's not so much that they are fast afoot, they are extremely efficient. They're hard-nosed and don't take a play off. They're just a well-oiled machine. Kudos to them on an outstanding season."

But VUU did not go down without a fight. Though never leading at the end of any quarter, the Lady Panthers battled and took leads in the first and second quarters and never trailed by double digits until the last play of the third quarter when AU's Maddie Dackin's made two free throws to send the Lady Eagles into the final quarter up 68-58.

Between the last 1:34 of the third quarter and first 2:21 of the fourth, VUU went scoreless until Alexis Johnson's 3-pointer cut the lead to 75-61. The 11-3 Ashland run all but ended the Lady Panthers' chances.

The game was played before a raucous capacity crowd of 2,200, about 2,000 of them rabid Ashland fans who filled the arena at Ohio Dominican University just 82 miles from the school's Ashland, Ohio campus.

VUU's undoing was its inability to slow down the Eagles, a bevy of misses in close on the offensive end and a 5-of-15 performance at the charity stripe. "All the little things we did for us to get here, we just failed in some of those areas today," said Gilbert.

Johnson, a talented 6-foot junior forward,



Photo by Steven Gaitner, HBCU Gameday



A TOUGH OUT: Virginia Union senior center Lady Walker (c.) is flanked by junior forward Alexis Johnson (l.) and Lady Panthers head coach AnnMarie Gilbert (r.) as they address the media after VUU fell to Ashland 93-77 in the NCAA Div. II women's national championship game Friday in Columbus, Ohio. Walker had 19 points and 12 rebounds while Johnson led VUU with a game-high 28 points. Both Walker and Johnson were named to the all-tournament team. Gilbert has led the Lady Panthers to back-to-back Elite Eight appearances. VUU fell in the national quarterfinals a year ago.

led VUU with a game-high 28 points canning 12 of 24 shots from the field including 3 of 4 from behind the arc. Six-two senior center Lady Walker scored 19 points and had a game-high 12 rebounds in her last game in a VUU uniform. Both Johnson and Walker were named to the all-tournament team.

"The ball just wasn't going into the basket," said Johnson. "Those are easy shots we usually make but tonight they just weren't falling."

Ashland evenly distributed minutes between eight players and had five score in double figures led by 19 points from freshman Jodi Johnson. Junior Laina Snyder, named the tournament's most valuable player, added 17 points. After posting a 21-18 rebounding edge in the first half, VUU was out-rebounded 37-34 for the game.

"We played come-from-behind in the two previous games but I just knew we couldn't get down to Ashland," said Gilbert.

The Eagles, champions of the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and Midwest Region, won each of its three games in the Elite Eight by double-digits and had not trailed prior to meeting the Lady Panthers.

"But we fought," said Gilbert. "We were never really in it but never totally out of it. I'm just proud of the statement we made."

After losing in the CIAA Tournament's semifinal round, the Lady Panthers regrouped and took the Atlantic Region title for the second straight year to earn a return trip to the Elite Eight.

"I'd also really like to say how proud I am of our young ladies," said Gilbert. "Our goal was to make it to the Elite Eight and see how far we could go from there. I'm just so proud of the run and the journey it took to get here."

"People know about Virginia Union. We are a program on the rise. We're rebuilding. We're a program that won a national championship in 1983. We're back!"

"We weren't that good my first two seasons," said Walker. "It took for us to get coach G (Gilbert), one of the best coaches in the country, for us to get back here. Since she set foot on the campus of Virginia Union University that's been her mindset."

"It was a learning experience," said Johnson. "We're just going to come back stronger and learn from our mistakes."

BCSP Notes

Howard's James "J-Byrd" Daniel reportedly to transfer - Maybe not!

Citing an unnamed source on a Twitter post Monday night, ESPN College Basketball Insider Jeff Goodman said Howard senior guard James "J-Byrd" Daniel III, the top scorer in the 2015-16 NCAA Div. I season who played in just two games for the Bison this season, will play his final year of eligibility elsewhere.

Contacted by phone early Tuesday afternoon by the BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS PAGE, Daniel said he is not necessarily transferring.

"Howard is one of my top choices," said Daniel who is graduating from Howard in May but will have another year of eligibility based on his short stint on the court this season.



Daniel



"I'm more or less weighing my options," Daniel said. "Howard is still in consideration."

As to whether he talked with Goodman, Daniel said "Not me personally. I've just put my name out there. I'm open to everything."

Daniel sustained a high sprain to his left ankle in the preseason that kept him out of all except two games in January for Howard this season. He scored 24 points in a 78-66 home loss to Florida A&M on Jan. 4 and 10 points in a 66-48 loss at Columbia three nights later.

Daniel said Howard head coach Kevin Nickelberry, who recruited and has coached him in all of his four years at Howard, was aware of his decision.

"Coach Nickelberry and I have a wonderful relationship," Daniel said. "He's one of the best coaches I've ever been around. Of course, he knew first."

In a BCSP story a year ago, Nickelberry said his toughest recruiting job over the past three seasons has been convincing Daniel to stay at Howard. It appears he may have to do it again. Attempts to reach Nickelberry before press time were unsuccessful.

Daniel, a 5-11 guard from Phoebus High School in Hampton, Va. led all scorers in the nation a season ago with over 27 points per game. He also led all Div. I players in free throws made and attempted, was fourth in total points and fifth in total field goals. He was the 2015-16 MEAC Player of the Year and 2016-17 preseason pick by league coaches to repeat with that honor.

In the 2013-14 season, Daniel became the first freshman to lead the MEAC in scoring when he averaged 21.0 points per game and was named the conference's top freshman.

He is already Howard's all-time leading scorer with 1,933 points. Daniel trails only Tom Davis of Delaware State (1987-91) as the MEAC's all-time leading scorer with 2,275 points.

Shawn Walker not retained at Grambling

Just when it appeared Grambling State men's basketball had turned a corner under third-year head coach Shawn Walker, it was announced last week that his contract would not be renewed.

Word first came via Walker's Facebook page last Wednesday when Walker posted: "My time at GSU has come to an end. My contract is NOT being renewed and it's time to start a new journey."

Grambling spokesperson Will Sutton confirmed to HBCU Sports that Walker was dismissed.

Also in the Facebook post Walker said: "And just to make things clear ...NOTHING happened. I did nothing wrong ... this was a decision made to just go in another direction. I thank all of the good folk at GSU and its community for an opportunity to serve in this capacity. I achieved quite a bit ...and wish the new coach nothing but success. The business of college basketball has been good to me. 23 years. First time for everything."

Walker led Grambling to a 16-17 record this season with a 10-8 Southwestern Athletic Conference mark that was good for third place in the 10-team league. The 16 wins were more than the program had accrued over the last five seasons and were the most wins in a single season since 2000.

Walker's first two teams at Grambling finished 2-27 and 7-24, 9-51 overall as he struggled to consistently retain players he recruited. His first team was winless at 0-18 in SWAC play in the 2014-15 season. His second squad was 4-14 in league play.

But things had apparently turned around this season. The Tigers made it to the SWAC Tournament semifinals before losing a close game to top seed and eventual champion Texas Southern, 62-57.

He finished with a three-year record of 25-68 at Grambling.

Walker played from 1991-94 at Elizabeth City State of the CIAA and coached the ECSU women's team in the 2001-02 season and was men's head coach at ECSU from 2002 thru 2014. He compiled a 196-172 mark as men's coach at ECSU. He made three trips to the CIAA Tournament finals and won the school's first tournament championship in 26 years in 2007.

Taylor out leading NCCU Lady Eagles

DURHAM, N.C. – North Carolina Central University will not renew the contract of women's basketball head coach Vanessa Taylor, the Department of Athletics announced Thursday (March 23).

"I would like to thank Coach Vanessa Taylor for her years of service to North Carolina Central University. Coach Taylor worked hard to grow our program," said NCCU Director of Athletics Dr. Ingrid Wicker McCree. "However, at this time, we will look to new leadership for our women's basketball program."

In five seasons as head women's basketball coach at NCCU, Taylor led the Lady Eagles to a win-loss record of 33-113. This season's team finished with an 8-21 overall record and was 7-9 in the MEAC regular season finishing 10th in the 13-team league.

Associate head coach Kendra Eaton will serve as interim head coach and oversee women's basketball operations until a head coach is hired. A national search for a new head coach will begin immediately.



Taylor



Walker