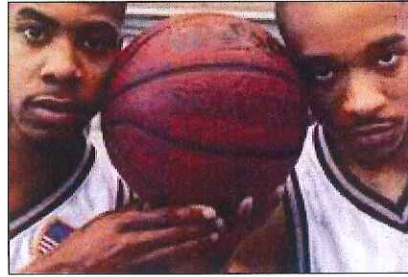


# Eagles smell upset

Story by Alonzo McMullen and Mike Williams

Photo's by Mike Feimster and Rashaun Rucker

With the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association Tournament now at hand, the focus of N.C. Central men's team is the big prize: the CIAA Championship.



The first step was taken Wednesday with a 62-55 win over Virginia State. Tonight they face the very talented Shaw Bears.

Micheal Noel, left, and Shawn Ray, right, hope to lead the Eagles deep into this year's CIAA tournament.

(Photo: Rashaun Rucker/Echo Photo Editor)

The Eagles will be led into the tournament by leading scorer Shawn Ray. The tournament will be held at the Raleigh Entertainment and Sports Arena and will be a homecoming for Ray--junior was born and raised in Raleigh and attended Athens Drive High School.

At Athens Drive, Ray played four years on the varsity basketball level. In his four years, he was honored in being named in the top 100 freshmen, top 50 in the State his junior and senior years and made All-Conference all four years in basketball and football.

Going into this year's tournament, Ray feels confident in the men's team this year. "We got to feel good and get some momentum going," he said. "Once the tourney begins, we just got to get out there and play our best ball for those four days." Despite the team being young, he feels that the whole team needs to come focused and ready to play.

"If we bring our 'A' game every night, there should be no reason why we can not win," said Ray. Since the Eagles are low in the conference standings, one may think that the other teams in the CIAA will overlook them. But Ray feels otherwise because of some of the wins they had during the season.

"Every team in the tournament is not going to sleep on us because we already have beaten some top teams in the season, he said."

Beating some top teams in the division and conference is exactly what they have done. Against Winston Salem, the men's team traveled to Winston Salem and beat the Rams at Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum in a close match-up. They also beat cross-county rival Saint Augustine's College twice, not to mention their triple overtime win over Johnson C. Smith. Ray believes that they can win it all. He said they have grown in the second half of the season and learned to play off of each other.

A big part in that learning process was because of their transfer point guard, Michael Noel. Noel is a junior transfer from Surry Community College in Dobson, NC. Noel is originally from Winston Salem, where he also played ball for Reynolds High School.

When Noel started playing for NCCU this season, it was his first time playing in the talent-filled CIAA. "This conference is much tougher than the Western Tarheel Conference," Noel said. "I have to work harder and play wiser in this conference than I did before."

Going into the tournament, Noel said he feels a little nervous but he still said he will get it done.

"In order for us to come and win it all, I will have to be a leader out on the court along with Shawn." He continued, "I will have to control the game, the tempo, distribute the ball and be aggressive if we are going to have any chance at all."

Noel has had up and down performances during the season but he has picked it up during the latter part of the year. His performance at Winston-Salem and Saint Paul's are proof of that. His scoring was down against Saint Pauls, but in both games he was able to control the tempo for most of the conteSaint

Now that he is accustomed to the competition in the CIAA, he feels good about the competition that they are up against and he feels more confident about the team as a whole. "Shaw was our toughest opponent we have faced, but we can still beat them."

Noel enjoys playing under Coach Phil Spence and with teammate Shawn Ray. "Both of them have helped guide me this season," Noel said. "Coach Spence gave me the freedom and Shawn guided me with some words of wisdom from his past experience in the CIAA tournament," he said. "We will win the tournament, no doubt about that," Noel said. "We are the underdog, but will come and kill all the odds and win it all. We have faith in God and he will guide us."

Although the team has come together toward the end of the season, Coach Spence has pulled a fair share of that load. When Spence suffered a stroke back in December, he was sidelined for a few weeks.

"Coach Spence being out and coming back set an example of toughness for us to follow," said Noel. "Coach has really been a great inspiration for us on and off the court."

The team responded with a win against Bowie State when Spence made his return and since then their intensity and confidence levels.