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Basketball

by Mark Simpson-Vos, 2006

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Part iv: Basketball and Civil Rights

Men's college basketball in the state underwent another dramatic transformation beginning in the late 1960s, when previously all-white college teams began recruiting black players. Prior to and after racial integration, North Carolina's African American colleges attracted numerous outstanding collegians. Cal Irvin [7] at North Carolina A&T, John McClendon at North Carolina College (later North Carolina Central University [8]), and Clarence "Big House" Gaines [9] at Winston-Salem State University [10] established extremely successful programs. Gaines coached Winston-Salem State to the NCAA Division II National Championship in 1967.

Given the popularity and prominence of ACC basketball, when North Carolina's Big Four began recruiting African American athletes, it marked a sea change. Wake Forest [11]'s Norwood Todman became the first black scholarship player to take the court when he joined that school's freshman team in 1966. Then, in 1967, UNC's Charlie Scott [12] became the first African American to play varsity basketball in the ACC; he went on to lead the program to back-to-back Final Four appearances in 1968 and 1969. In 1971 Wake Forest's Charlie Davis became the first African American player to be named ACC Player of the Year.

After several decades of decline, women's basketball received a new spark in the state when the U.S. Congress passed the Education Amendment Act [13] in 1972. The law, popularly known as Title IX, mandated increased spending on women's collegiate athletic programs and led to the development of scholarship basketball programs on most of the state's college campuses. The majority of North Carolina's high schools followed suit and began to support girls' teams again. Many credit Title IX with the success of women's college basketball in North Carolina and the United States today. North Carolina's ACC and other teams have been some of the strongest in the nation. The UNC women's basketball team, coached by Sylvia Hatchell, won the 1994 NCAA women's championship, and N.C. State head coach Kay Yow [14] coached the U.S. Olympic women's team to the 1988 gold medal. Duke University [15]'s women's team under coach Gail Goestenkors reached the NCAA Final Four in 2002 and 2003. Many of the state's female college players have gone on to play professionally in the United States and overseas.

While the story is less well known, basketball has also proven to be a major source of community pride among the Lumbee Indians [16] in the southeastern region of the state. The college gymnasium at Pembroke State College, for many years the only four-year college in the nation for American Indians, hosted a basketball league for local athletes. The most accomplished Lumbee basketball player was John "Ned" Sampson, who Duke All-American Dick Groat once called the best athlete he had ever competed against. Sampson went on to become head coach at Pembroke State College [17]. His players there included his son, Kelvin, a four-time letter winner who went on to a successful career as a head coach at the University of Oklahoma.

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