

SLEEPERS, SPOILERS & DARK HORSES

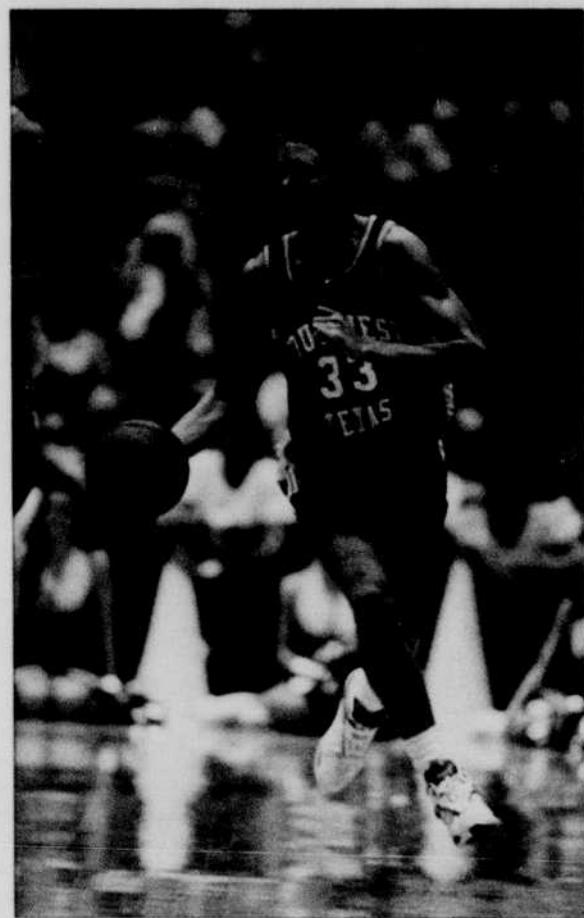
**Small-conference teams find glory, glamour,
prestige and sometimes victory
in the NCAA tournament**

By Shad Powers, *The State News*, Michigan State U.

NCAA



Former Southwest Texas State coach Jim Wooldridge with Bobcats Lynwood Wade, Russell Ponds and DeJuan Brown.



Southwest Texas' Richard Hastings: Pride of San Marcos, Texas.

The NCAA post-season has long been a time for college basketball's Goliaths to strut their stuff. North Carolina, Duke, Michigan, Indiana, Kansas and Kentucky take trips to The Big Dance for granted.

But March Madness can't be played without those small-conference Davids, who are becoming more and more dangerous each year. For schools like Rider, New Jersey, Virginia, Liberty, Loyola (Maryland), Central Florida and Southwest Texas State, just getting into the Division I Men's Basketball Championship can turn their entire program around.

"For the big schools, their goal is to advance in the tournament," Loyola sophomore Darius Johnson says. "But for schools like us, the goal is just to make it to the tournament."

Johnson's squad did just that last year, winning the Metro Atlantic Conference championship game and traveling all the way to Sacramento, Calif., to face Arizona.

"It made the whole school recognize that the basketball team deserves some credit, too. It's usually just soccer and lacrosse around here," Johnson says.

The second-seeded Arizona Wildcats made fairly quick work of the 15th-seeded Loyola, but Johnson took home a souvenir he'll treasure forever.

"One of the T-shirts I got while I was down there had all the teams on it, like Arizona, Louisville and Minnesota, but Loyola just stood out.

"It feels great every time I wear it," Johnson says.

The town of San Marcos, Texas, was abuzz last March when the beloved Bobcats of SW Texas State won the Southland Conference and earned a trip to the NCAA tournament.

"The week before the tournament, we had 5,000 or 6,000 people come to watch us practice," SW Texas State head coach Mike Miller says. "That's more than we've had in some games.

"Being in the final tournament is an experience that