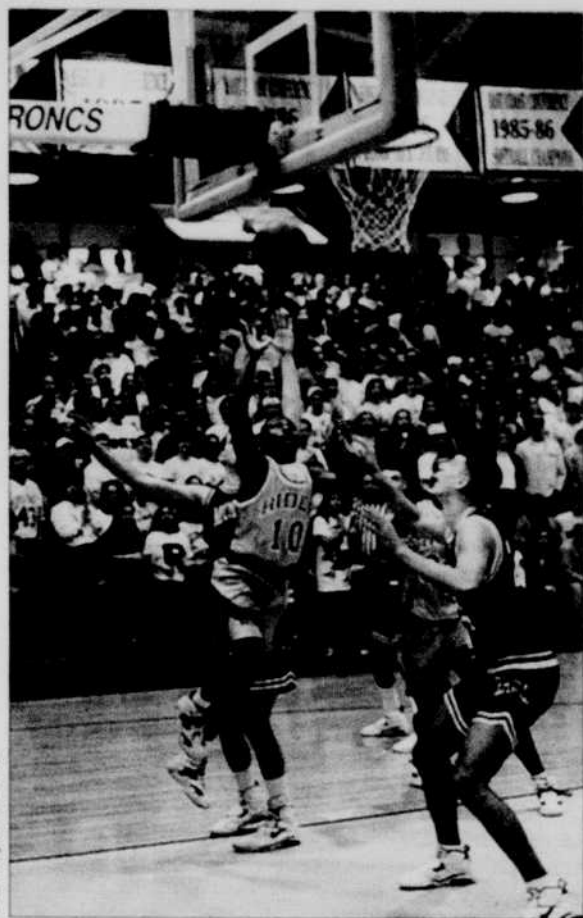




The 15th-seeded Rider Broncos nearly upset No. 2 U. of Connecticut in last year's tournament.

everyone needs to have at least once," Miller says. "The alumni and people around campus are still talking about our trip. It was more than I ever imagined."

The toughest task in the entire tournament last year belonged to the Liberty Eagles. Liberty, a school of approximately 6,000 students, was sent to Maryland to play the No. 1 team in the country, North Carolina.

The Liberty squad, like several other teams whose fates are sealed by the NCAA tournament selection, sat together and watched as the names were listed and brackets were set.

"They showed Liberty under North Carolina, and everyone cheered. I was like, 'What's everybody so happy about?'" Eagle forward Jason Dixon says. "But then I decided, if you're going to play someone, they might as well be the best."

"It's a great feeling, being in the big show. It's something you can't describe in words. There's a tingly feeling about it, and you can't sleep at night."

Liberty made it to the tournament by winning the Big South Conference championship. Right after they won that, odd things started happening, Dixon says.

Student support started coming from all angles. "People who I didn't even think watched basketball were wishing us luck and congratulating us. That made us feel special," Dixon says.

Dixon, who had four points in the Eagles' 71-51 loss to the Tar Heels, says being in Maryland with legendary teams like North Carolina, Indiana and Temple made him feel like he was at a whole new level of basketball.

He says his school and program jumped to another level, too.

At Central Florida, the men's basketball team surprised everyone when it earned its first trip to the NCAA grand finale in 1993.

Although the Golden Knights were ousted by the top-seeded Purdue Boilermakers 98-67 in the first round, the trip has had a lasting effect on the school.

"It was an outstanding experience for our fans, our city and our university," head coach Kirk Speraw says. "The school got all kinds of new recognition."

For a small school like Central Florida, such a trip is invaluable for recruiting.

Speraw says good athletes like the idea of coming to Orlando to go to school, but since the Golden Knights had never been to the Promised Land, many talented players have shied away from attending. This year, that isn't happening.

Many naysayers believe that the champions of these small conferences shouldn't even be in the tournament, because they aren't truly among the top 64 teams in the nation.

Those pessimists think that the seventh- or eighth-place teams in a "power" conference like the Big Ten or Atlantic Coast Conference should get the spots currently "wasted" on these smaller schools.

To those who agree with this philosophy, say hello to Rider and Murray State.

The 15th-seeded Rider Broncos made the short trip from Lawrenceville, N.J., to Uniondale, N.Y., last season to face Connecticut in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

From the East Coast Conference, the Broncos (who had also made it to the tournament the year before) came dangerously close to knocking off the high-ranked Huskies. They say they rightfully belonged in the field of 64 and that these smaller teams should not be taken lightly.

"It was like a dream come true to play on national TV and play well," Rider guard Deon Hames says. "Two years before, I was watching these guys on TV, and I was overwhelmed. Now I'm playing against them and holding my own. It's exciting."

The near win by Rider would have tied the biggest upset in tournament history. On two occasions, a No. 15 seed has beaten a No. 2 seed in the first round. In 1993, Santa Clara knocked off Arizona, and in 1991, Richmond beat the almighty Syracuse Orangemen.

Ever since the NCAA tournament went to 64 teams in 1985, a No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed. But it almost happened on one fateful day in 1989.

It was the battle of the MSUs as top-seeded Michigan State matched up against 16th-seeded Murray State from Murray, Ky. Murray State had a reputation for upsetting the big boys. As a No. 14 seed, the team had beaten North Carolina State the year before and had made the tournament out of the Ohio Valley Conference in five out of six years in the late '80s and early '90s.

It was a mismatch on paper, but heart can carry a team a long way.

"Even today people see my Murray State sweatshirt and tell me they remember us almost beating Michigan State," says Scot Sivills, who was a freshman on that Murray State team.

"One thing that we had going for us was the crowd," Sivills says. "There were about 15,000 people there, and dad gum if they weren't all cheering for us."

"We went in with the attitude that we could compete with these guys."

It took some last-minute heroics, but Michigan State did prevail by four points in overtime. How does it feel when the so-called automatic win becomes anything but?

"As the game went on, we weren't thinking 1 vs. 16; we were thinking survival," says Michigan State head coach Jud Heathcote. "We did not play inspired basketball, and they should never have been seeded 16th."

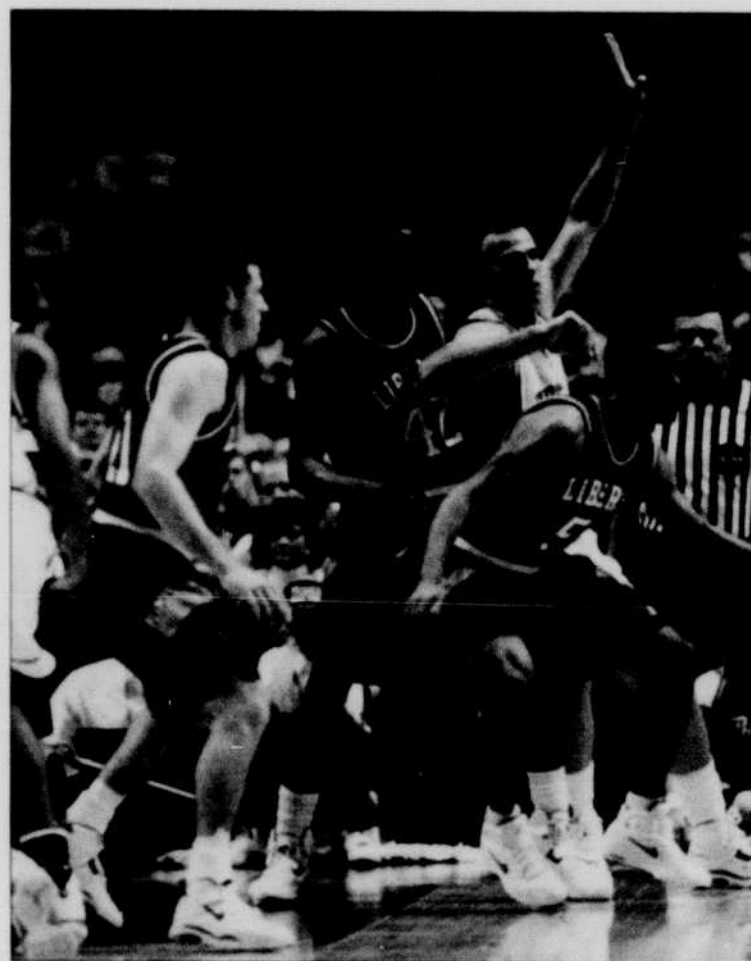
Sivills says even to this day, when he sees former Michigan State Spartan Steve Smith, whom he played against in the NBA and on the Dream Team, he thinks back to the day when his college team almost shocked the world.

"We built our program and our tradition from playing in the tournament," Sivills says. "It don't matter if you're a Murray State, a Michigan State, a Kentucky or whatever. You can beat any given team on any given day."

A growing number of small-conference schools share that philosophy and are gaining the confidence not just to make it to the tournament — but to slay a few giants as well.

"It's a great feeling, being in the big show. It's something you can't describe in words. There's a tingly feeling about it, and you can't sleep at night."

JASON DIXON
Eagle Forward



Liberty got the toughest first round assignment in the tournament vs. No. 1 North Carolina and Eric Montross.

Jeff Raymond, Liberty U.