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NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT Fear the Virginians!

Teams from state have pulled off a number of tourney shockers

By Ed Miller

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David Johnson called from Hamilton, Ontario, where he was conducting a basketball clinic. The former Maury High School and Hampton University forward coaches a girls high school team in Charlotte during the season and trains young players in skills development the rest of the year.

Business is good teaching the basics – shooting, passing, dribbling. But if Johnson was inclined, there's an advanced maneuver that he, among all the players in the 75-year history of the NCAA tournament, is uniquely qualified to teach.

Call it the Hampton Hoist.

Johnson's perfectly executed – knees bent, chest out, back arched and head tilted back in upset-induced bliss – lift of his coach, Steve Merfeld, after the No. 15 seed Pirates beat No. 2 Iowa State in 2001 is one of the tournament's enduring celebratory images.

Merfeld raised his arms and kicked his feet like a delirious toddler. Viewed 12 years later, Hampton's rejoicing makes the "Harlem Shake" look like a minuet.

It's tourney time, which means Johnson will be seeing it again, no matter where work takes him. It was Hampton's shining moment, one of many produced by Virginia schools over the decades. Neighboring states North Carolina and Kentucky have 21 national championships between them. Our fair commonwealth?

We specialize in upsets. That's not a bad thing. For many, they are the tournament's defining element.

Half of the six 15-vs.-2 upsets in tourney history were pulled by Virginia teams, including the first: Richmond's win over Syracuse in 1991. Hampton followed a decade later. Then came Norfolk State's win over Missouri in 2012.

A pair of 14 seeds – Old Dominion in 1995 and Richmond in '98 – knocked off Villanova and South Carolina, respectively.

All were streaks across the tournament sky by teams that were back home by the end of the first weekend, but only after leaving indelible marks.

Other Virginia upstarts enjoyed longer journeys, pioneering feats of deep-bracket navigation by smaller programs. George Mason planted the mid-major flag in the Final Four in 2006. Virginia Commonwealth followed five years later with its own improbable run.

Even the last Final Four showing by one of the state's major conference schools – Virginia in 1984 – had an underdog feel. The Cavaliers, who that season were only beginning to adjust to life without Ralph Sampson, finished 6-8 in the ACC, but made it all the way to the national semis.

As a state, Virginia was late to the party. The NCAA field was just eight teams from 1939 to 1950. It expanded to 16 in 1951 and 24 in 1954. Virginia Tech was the first to go dancing, in 1967.

Two wins that year landed the Hokies in the Elite Eight.

U.Va. didn't make an appearance until 1976. Five years later, led by seniors Jeff Lamp and Lee Raker and the 7-foot-4 sophomore Sampson, the Cavaliers won the ACC and reached the Final Four, where they fell to North Carolina.

Winning the final third-place game in tournament history didn't provide much consolation, but it did establish the Cavaliers as the answer to a trivia question.

Virginia returned in '84 without the pressure of expectations. The Cavaliers made Elite Eight runs in 1983, 1989 and 1995.

For most of the past 25 years, though, the enduring memories have been made by the little guys.

Dick Tarrant practically patented a style of upset at Richmond, where he coached from 1981 to 1993. It was stealthy – the hit job opponents never saw coming from the tweedy, easy-to-underestimate Spiders. In addition to wins over Syracuse and South Carolina, Richmond beat defending national champ Indiana in 1988 as a No. 13 seed. The Spiders knocked off Georgia Tech to reach the Sweet 16.

“We’d change defenses to try to make the other team stop and probe,” Tarrant said. “Make a 40-minute game a 30-minute game.

“We’d avoid breakdowns in man-to-man, breakdowns in our zone. We didn’t take bad shots. We were able to stay in games by being disciplined.”

That discipline extended to postgames.

Watching a video of the final moments of the Spiders’ win over Syracuse, it’s striking how low-key the celebration was, particularly by today’s over-the-top standard.

The horn sounds and a pair of Richmond players embrace at mid-court. Other Spiders walk from the bench to shake hands with their Syracuse counterparts. Tarrant allows himself a couple of quick fist pumps.

“We’d shake your hand and then go celebrate like hell – in the locker room,” Tarrant said.

Such a style does not earn a place in the annual Madness montages shown each March – and probably more so in this anniversary year.

To do that, a player has to do something like Johnson did at Hampton.

Johnson was a freshman who told his brother before the game that he hoped to play enough to get some TV time.

He played just a minute.

After the game, he stormed onto the court. There was Merfeld.

“Nobody was celebrating with him,” Johnson said. “So I picked him up.”

Merfeld’s reaction made the moment and Johnson got his wish, getting on TV then, and every March since.

Ed Miller, 757- 446-2372, ed.miller@pilotonline.com



CBS

HAMPTON In an image from video, then-Hampton coach Steve Merfeld gets a lift from player David Johnson after the Pirates' 58-57 win over Iowa State in an NCAA tournament game in 2001.



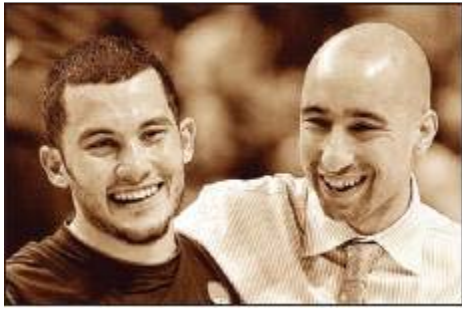
DOUG MILLS | AP FILE PHOTO

RICHMOND Then-Richmond coach Dick Tarrant celebrates with player Ty Evans after the Spiders beat Syracuse 73-69 in 1991.



WIN MCNAMEE | GETTY IMAGES FILE

GEORGE MASON Tony Skinn enjoys an 86-84 overtime win over Connecticut that sent the Patriots to the 2006 Final Four.



JIM PRISCHING | AP FILE PHOTO

VCU Joey Rodriguez and coach Shaka Smart take in the Rams' Final Four run in 2011. VCU opens tourney play tonight.

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