

Gamecocks hungry for the Big Apple

BRYAN JOHNSTON Staff Writer

The USC basketball team is one game away from taking a trip to the Big Apple. With a win tonight against Alabama, the Gamecocks will advance to the semi-finals of the National Invitation Tournament.

One positive for tonight's game is the Gamecocks have already beaten the Crimson Tide. On Jan. 20, with 24 points from Larry Davis and 17 points from BJ McKie, USC soundly defeated Alabama 90-67. The Gamecocks were 59 percent from the floor and connected on 11 three-pointers.

The other positive note is the game is being played in the Frank McGuire Arena, where USC is an impressive 16-1 at home this season.

For the Gamecocks to advance to Final Four, they must continue to shoot the ball well. In the opening round against Davidson, USC had its third best shooting night in school history, with 69.4 percent. Monday night against Vanderbilt, South Carolina shot 54.2 percent from the floor.

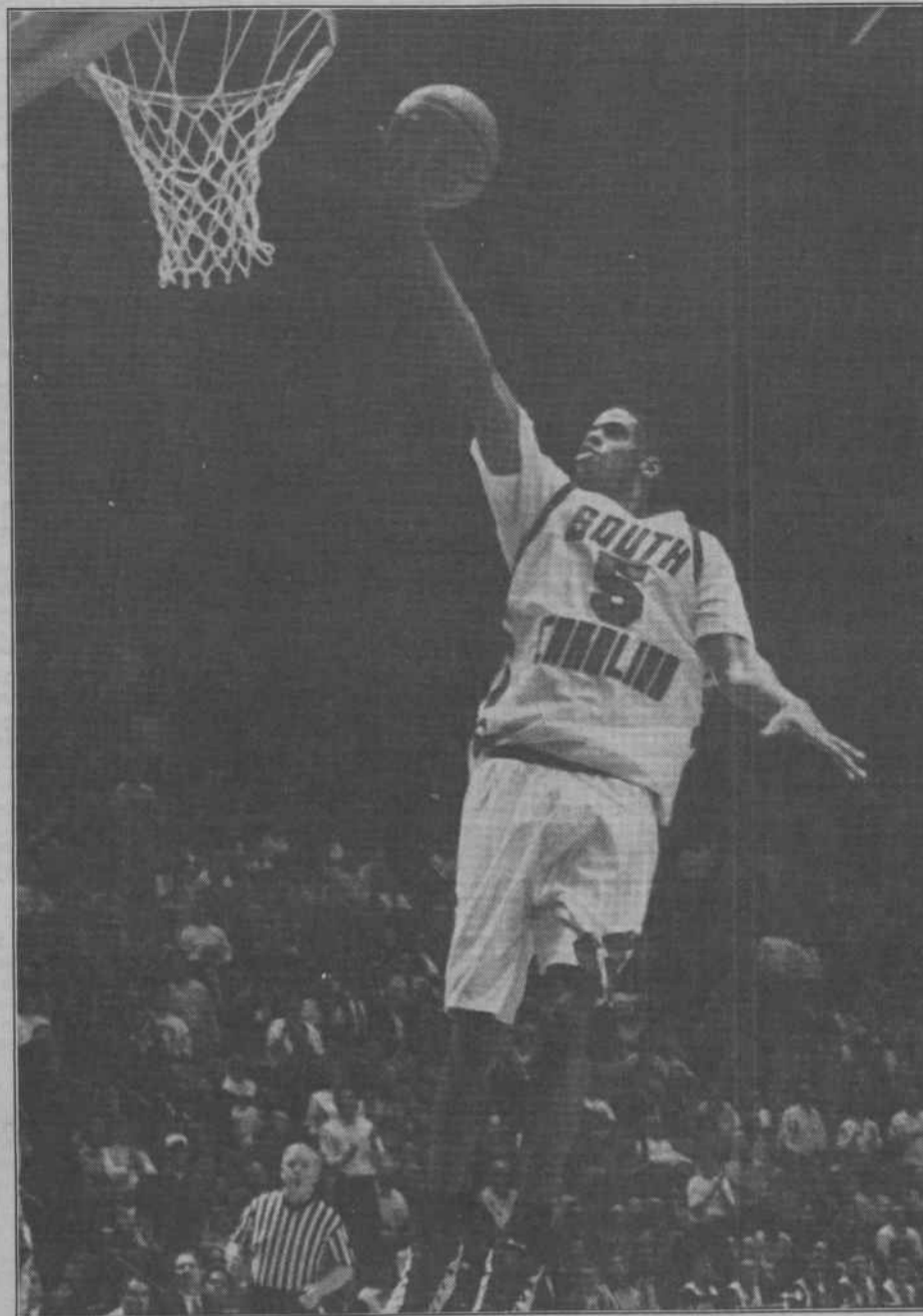
In the two NIT games thus far, USC is averaging 90 points per game and hitting 61.9 percent of their shots. The Gamecocks are a combined 10 for 20 from three-point range. Four players are averaging double figures, including Davis (19.5 ppg), McKie (19.0), Malik Russell (16.5) and Melvin Watson (11.0). The Gamecocks need production from these players and others if they want to make the trip to New York.

As for Alabama, they are coming off a 72-49 victory over the Missouri Tigers Monday night in Tuscaloosa. The Crimson Tide are led by guard Eric Washington and center Roy Rogers. Washington is averaging 17.6 points and 6.8 rebounds per game. As for the big man, he's averaging 13.5 points per game. But the bigger factor will be Roger's presence inside. He's averaging 9.2 rebounds and 5.1 blocks per game.

The success of the Gamecocks has led to a fan interest unlike any other this year. As of 5 p.m. Tuesday, there were only 500 tickets remaining for the game. The arena will be packed and rocking when USC and Alabama tip it off.

The frenzy and excitement has sparked the crowd. Over the last three games, the Frank McGuire arena has been at its loudest. Besides the cheerleaders and pep band leading the way, a new act has arisen. In the second row of Section U, the Painters. People have lit a spark and are hoping to start the tradition of the Carolina Crazies. Look for something new and crazy from this group tonight.

The game has even sparked an interest



DAN CHESNEY/The Gamecock

Malik Russell has been on fire as of late, averaging 33 points and 11 rebounds in the two NIT games. Russell hopes to lead the Gamecocks to the Big Apple.

in the media. Tonight's match-up will be televised nationally on ESPN. This is the first nationally televised game of the season for USC. Because of the coverage, tip-off has been moved up to 7 p.m.

If the Gamecocks win tonight, one player will get to play in front of his hometown. Senior Malik Russell, who is definitely playing

in his last home game, will play in a building close to his home. The Brooklyn native hopes to lead the Gamecocks into Madison Square Garden next Tuesday night at 9 p.m.

The cards are set and a trip to New York is up for grabs tonight. The Gamecocks are looking for their twentieth win of the season.

Gamecocks maturing, building for future

It's mid-March, the Gamecocks are still playing, the Carolina faithful are packed in the Carolina Coliseum and a New Yorker is leading the way.

ROBBIE MEEK OVERTIME

No, it's not the Gamecocks of the 70s, Frank McGuire isn't calling the shots and it's not John Roche, Mike Dunleavy or Tom Riker leading the way.

It's the 1995-96 Gamecocks coached by Eddie Fogler with New Yorker Malik Russell leading the way. And this year's Gamecock basketball team is growing and maturing as a team in post-season play, and this is the first step in getting back to the national prominence that the Gamecock teams of the '70s enjoyed.

The Gamecocks advanced to the third round of the NIT Monday night with a win over Vanderbilt 80-70. The Gamecocks' leading scorer didn't score: Larry Davis finished with only 6 points. The second man in that category, BJ McKie, didn't show up until halftime.

The Gamecocks, however, still won because other Gamecocks stepped up to carry the load. That's a sign that Carolina has come a long way. Russell and Melvin Watson both had excellent games, finishing with 17 and 16 points, respectively. McKie threw himself into the scoring mix in the second half and finished strong with 16 points.

The Gamecocks still have a tough road to follow if they want to reach the NIT Final Four in New York next week. On Wednesday, the Alabama Crimson Tide come to town. The Crimson Tide left Columbia on Jan. 20 after a 90-67 thrashing, compliments of the Gamecocks. You can be sure tonight's game won't be a blowout as the angry Crimson Tide return looking for revenge.

The Gamecocks are getting experience playing in the NIT that could be invaluable to the future of Gamecock basketball. With only one senior, Russell, a NIT championship or even Final Four appearance could be the start to great things for the Carolina basketball team.

This season, Coach Fogler's third at Carolina, holds some resemblance to Frank McGuire's third season at Carolina. The Gamecocks, now

19-11, were 16-7 in 1964-65 after going 6-17 and 11-13 in McGuire's first two seasons at Carolina. The Gamecocks were 9-18 and 10-17 in Fogler's first two seasons.

From there, McGuire led the Gamecocks to four consecutive NCAA tournament appearances and a preseason No. 1 ranking in 1969-70.

Could history repeat itself? Could Fogler follow McGuire's footsteps as the next great Gamecock basketball coach? The next week and a half could prove to be a big step in that direction.

Russell catches on fire! Malik has scored 33 points and pulled down 11 boards in the two NIT games. The underrated senior forward is the top rebounder, with 5.9 rpg; a great passer and definitely the best Gamecock defender. Fogler calls Malik "one of the better defensive players in the SEC, if not the country."

If the Gamecocks win tonight, the Brooklyn native will get to play the last two games of his collegiate career at home.

"If we win one more game," Russell said, "I get a free trip home." Good luck Malik. Thanks for your contributions to Gamecock basketball.

SEC dominates post-season play. The SEC placed four teams in the NCAA tournament. All four—Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky and Mississippi State—have made it to the Sweet Sixteen. The SEC also placed five teams in the NIT. Carolina and Alabama are still alive.

No other conference has done that well. Yes, the SEC does play something besides football!

Nolan for Coach of the Year. If I were Nolan Richardson of Arkansas. The man lost ten players off last season's National Runner-up team, then lost his top rebounder and top scorer for academic reasons at the end of the season.

Guess what? That hasn't stopped Richardson's Razorbacks, who are back in the Sweet Sixteen despite the loss of 12 players in the last year. Arkansas plays UMass Thursday. Look out, Minutemen.

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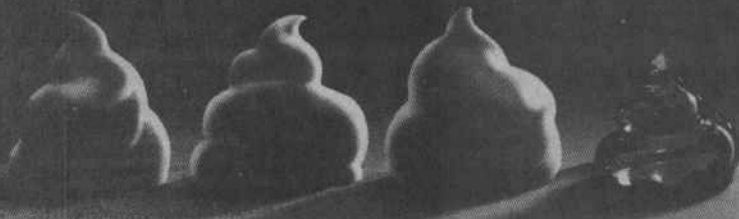
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