

Gamecocks deserve credit for great season

BRYAN JOHNSTON
3-point play

PITTSBURGH —Yes, they lost to a team they should have beat. Yes, the season is over.

And yes, all the talk of championships and glory have changed to failure and shattered dreams.

The Gamecocks' season ended abruptly Friday when they were beaten by Coppin State, 78-65.

The 15th-seeded champions of the MEAC defeated the No. 2-seeded Gamecocks in Pittsburgh in a game that was just plain ugly.

USC was out-rebounded, out-hustled and outscored. It just looked like the Eagles wanted it more than the Gamecocks.

And they weren't the only ones. Of the 17,100 fans in attendance, close to 16,750 were rooting for the under-dog.

And as an improbable upset loomed, the fans got louder and louder, to the point where the Gamecocks weren't playing on a neutral site.

But it could be a lot worse. Carolina might not have made the Big Dance. They could have been relegated to the Not Interested Tournament. They might not have beaten Kentucky twice or have won the school's first-ever SEC title in any sport.

As the old cliché goes: It is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all.

It's a shame that such an incredible season will be remembered for one game.

USC will be forever linked to the record books as only the third No. 2 seed to lose to a No. 15 seed in the NCAA tournament since it expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

Ten years from now, talk of the 1996-97 season will revolve around "The Debacle in The 'Burgh."

Hey, let's forget that the Gamecocks beat the Wildcats twice, went into Cincinnati and won, went 15-1 in the SEC, won the regular-season title, were ranked as high as No. 4 in the nation and had three count 'em, three players on the first team All-SEC team.

So now that the Gamecocks' season is over, how are the Gamecocks supposed to be next year?

Granted they are losing All-SEC performer Larry Davis and reserve Nate Wilbourne, but mark my words this day: The Gamecocks will be better next year than they were this year.

Coach Eddie Fogler is bringing in two highly-regarded guards, plus Antonio Grant will be available after being redshirted this year.

Lee Davis has his freshman year out of the way and should be a scoring threat next year.

Arthur Carlisle came on late in the season and is another solid guard.

Oh yeah, All-SEC members BJ McKie and Melvin Watson will be back.

Ryan Stack and William Gallman were pleasant surprises this year and should be even better next season.

George Formanek and transfer LeRon Williams will be eligible next year as well.

Williams, a transfer from Florida, is a talented big-man who is dangerous from the outside.

I know I'll see all of you fairweather fans next year when USC is climbing in the polls once again.

So instead of bashing the team, why don't you congratulate them on a great season. They feel bad enough for the way they played. They don't need to keep hearing about it.

In my mind, Carolina was a winner just by making the tournament.

Only 64 teams out of 311 Division I teams make the field so they can't be that bad.

The true winners are those that go out give it their all in the name of competition. It matters not what the outcome is, only the fact that they competed.

So the dream season is over. Or was it a dream season?

A dream is a fantasy or something that usually doesn't come true. I don't think that's quite right because the Gamecocks were projected to do well, just not that well.

I like to think of it as more of a prologue season. It's just a sign of the great things to come.

Lethargic play dooms Gamecocks from start

SHAWN SINGLETON
penalty box

This was not the way I had envisioned my spring break.

I was a single guy in Myrtle Beach during couples' week, I had spent a ton of money on alcohol (not like that was a bad thing), and the Gamecocks lost to Coppin State in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

The Gamecocks lost in the first round? No, not the same team that beat Kentucky twice, including beating them on Senior Day for the first time in 33 years. Not the same team that went 15-1 in the Southeastern Conference and won it by two full games. Yes, those guys.

Who did they lose to again? Who the hell is Coppin State, anyway? Weren't they a lowly 15-seed from a cheesy conference?

The sad truth about that first round debacle is that we lost to a team out of the mighty MEAC located in Baltimore, Maryland, with a coach named Fang and a band that they borrowed.

All the fairweather Carolina fans now have something to bitch about. Yes, all those fans who only went to the games in which they had a slight chance to get on television;

the same people who wanted Eddie Fogler's head in December probably want his head now in March. We are a fickle lot, aren't we?

Back to the game itself, what happened to the triumvirate of guards that were being compared to the great Georgia Tech teams of the early 1990's. I'll tell you what happened, they disappeared under the zone defense of Coppin State.

BJ McKie scored 16 points, a shade under his 17.5 point average. Melvin Watson, however, only had five assists while committing six turnovers. Larry Davis went one for eight from the field in 33 minutes.

However, what really left me pissed off about this game was the lethargic style in which the Gamecocks played it. Their passes were lazy and high, putting the shooters out of position for shots.

We were out-hustled, out-played, and simply out-classed by a smaller, faster opponent with more heart than we had.

We were expecting to go to the Sweet 16, maybe the Elite Eight. Instead we are home, with the dubious distinction of being just the third number two seed to lose to a 15-seed since the field was expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

It remains to be seen whether

or not this was a fluke, or the start of something huge.

If I were really heartless, I could give this week's idiot award to our basketball team, but alas, I will give them a much-needed break. After all, they have until next November to relax.

Instead, I will give this week's winners of the Forrest Gump "Stupid Is As Stupid Does" Award to a group of people who really deserve it—the Selection Committee for the NCAA tournament. And as always, I come to bury stupidity, not to praise it, as the movie suggests.

First of all, explain to me how the Selection Committee could place the College of Charleston as a 12th seed when they finished the season ranked No. 16, yet place teams such as Clemson and Georgia in as fourth and third seeds, respectively.

After this weekend's upsets and debacles, it's rather obvious that these guys are missing the point when it comes to inviting teams in and seeding them.

There were a great deal of weak sisters in this field, but this could be rectified with a little bit of common sense, but that would be too simple. I think the prerequisite for being on a committee like this is not to have common sense.

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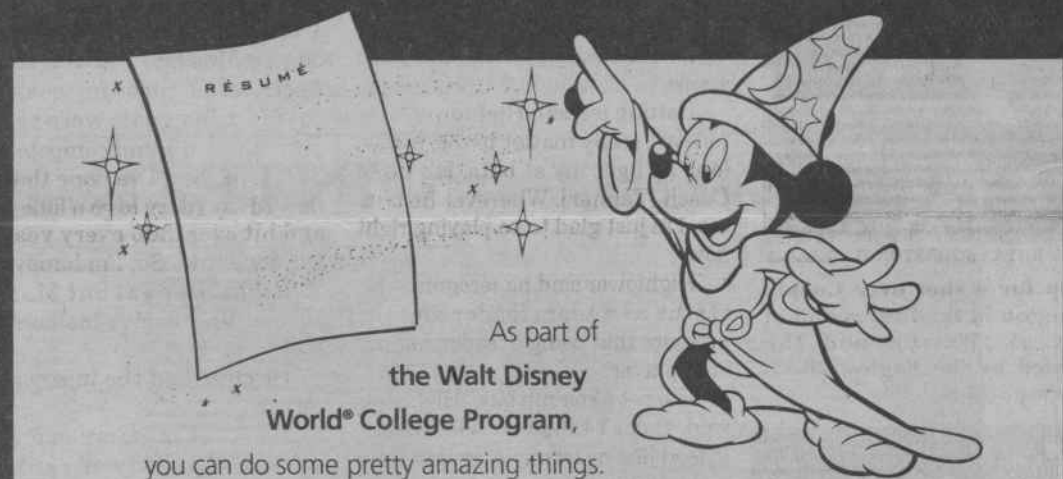
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