

# TWO Left Feet

*Gamecocks stumble to upset-minded Coppin St. in Big Dance's 1st round*

by Larry Williams

The Chicken Curse. A phrase that's all too familiar to Gamecocks fans was painfully rekindled after USC's shocking loss to Coppin State in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

While it's unlikely No. 2 seeded USC suffered any supernatural torment in the "Upset of the Year," one phrase might be more appropriate when considering the flops of seasons past in Gamecocks sports history: The Chicken Choke.

Consider:

— In 1984, the football team sprinted to a 9-0 record and a No. 2 ranking in the polls, needing only to beat Navy to wrap up a spot in the national championship against Oklahoma. The Gamecocks were ambushed by the Midshipmen in a loss that still hurts for USC fans to think about.

— In 1987, the No. 8 USC football team traveled to Jacksonville, Fla. to put an end to what had been an impressive season. Sterling Sharpe, the Gamecocks' senior wingback, boldly predicted his team would crush the LSU Tigers. Sorry, Sterling. The Gamecocks fell victim to themselves, looking miserable in a 30-13 debacle.

— In 1988, the USC men's basketball team held a 14-point lead over mighty Louisville with a minute remaining, but managed to lose the game after a bench-clearing brawl and about 15 free throws.

— In perhaps the darkest moment in USC sports history, the Gamecocks lost to

The Citadel in 1990. Bulldogs quarterback Jack Douglas ran option left into the end-zone with time running out to turn Williams-Brice Stadium into a morgue.

— USC bolted to a 5-1 start in 1994, and many believed first-year coach Brad Scott's team had reached the next level. Not so fast. East Carolina came into Williams-Brice and jolted USC for a 28-0 lead, then held on to beat the hapless Gamecocks, 56-42.

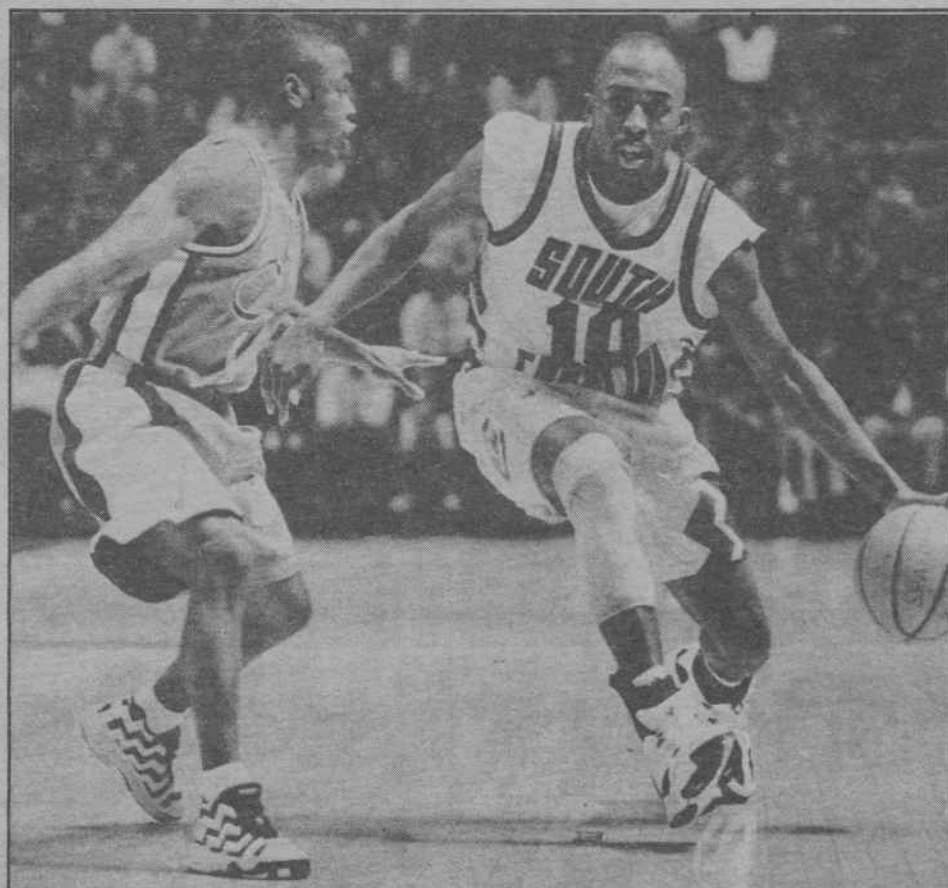
— And in the latest episode, the Gamecocks became only the third No. 2 seed to go down to a No. 15 seed — ever. Guess those experts from around the country who picked USC to advance to the Final Four learned a lesson, one that Gamecocks fans know all too well.

## The Conspiracy Theory

There's always a few qualified teams that are left out when the NCAA tournament pairings are announced, and this year was no exception.

Steve Alford left his mark on March Madness 10 years ago, and many felt he should have been back this season as coach of Southwest Missouri State, which posted a 24-8 record and fell just short of an at-large bid. Alford was last seen as a player draining a record seven 3-pointers in the Hoosiers' 1978 win over Syracuse for the national title.

Alford can blame Terry Holland, chairman of the



The Gamecocks became only the third No. 2 seed to be eliminated in the first round of NCAA Tournament play in a 78-65 loss to Coppin St. The Gamecocks won the SEC Regular Season Championship and finished the season with a record of 25-7.

NCAA Selection Committee. Holland just so happens to be the athletics director at Virginia, a team that "squeezed" into the tournament as a No. 9 seed. Remember, College of Charleston, which had the nation's longest winning streak (22 games), and had beaten two Top 25 teams, was relegated to a No. 12 seed. The Cavaliers posted a ho-hum 18-12 overall record and a forgettable 7-10 conference mark.

After the first round concluded, Holland's error was obvious. Virginia got whipped by Iowa, and C of C dominated Maryland, an ACC Team that was favored by seven points. Poetic justice? You could say that.

## There's another tournament?

Of course, for the unfortunate teams, there's always the NIT, otherwise known as the Nobody's Interested Tournament. Despite its lack of appeal, the 59-year-old tourney hasn't always been known as "that other tournament."

Believe it or not, the NIT used to be as glamorous a

tournament as the NCAAs, as finishing a season in the NIT Championship at Madison Square Garden was just as prestigious as doing so in the NCAAs. But then, in the 1970s, the NCAA began to expand its postseason field, first from 25 to 32 teams in 1975, then to 40, 48, 53 and ultimately to 64 teams, which is where it stands today.

What was the end result?

The NCAA's bargaining power skyrocketed, while the NIT — which offered the services of only 16 teams — marinated in mediocrity.

In 1977, Pete Carlesimo, executive director of

the NIT (and the father of Portland Trailblazers coach P.J. Carlesimo) tried to plug the holes by expanding it from 16 to 32 teams, and allowed the first two rounds to be played on the college campuses, while the semifinal and final remained in New York. And, in a most obvious capitalist move, the NIT began "reseeded" after each round; that is, the committee could create the matchups it wanted after each round and determine where it would be played.

The NIT sealed its death wish by putting money before competition.

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