

CINDERELLA AGAIN! LITTLE HAMPTON LIVING UP TO BIG DREAMS

By Kieran Darcy – ESPN.com/ESPN the Magazine

RICHMOND, Va. -- Making magic, Making miracles happen. Hampton University knows all about that. The Pirates did it last year. And they just might do it again. This was supposed to be a rebuilding season -- yet Hampton has done nothing but build upon last year's success. This year's team is much different than last year's -- yet this program has done nothing but move forward, on and off the court. Outside expectations were not as high -- yet the team and administration have done nothing but raise their expectations, and accept the challenge therein.

The world changed for Hampton University on March 15, 2001. Hampton 58, Iowa State 57. 'Nuff said. They became only the fourth 15th seed in NCAA Tournament history to knock off a No. 2 -- and in the process became the underdog darlings of the Big Dance. One shining moment, for sure.

But Hampton shines on. After going 25-7 a year ago and winning their first conference championship, what have they accomplished this season? A 26-6 mark to date, including 17-1 within their conference. And they'll be dancing again this week, after winning their second straight Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference tournament.

All this for a program that only joined Division I in 1995. But the university had been discussing this move since the mid-'80s. The athletic aspirations of the school stem from the university's president himself, Dr. William L. Harvey. And they are carefully considered. "When we went Division I, we planned 10 years, an entire decade, to try to insure that once we went, we wouldn't be a doormat," Harvey says. "And the fact is, we're not"

Under the direction of Harvey and athletic director Dr. Dennis E. Thomas, a solid foundation was put into place. Consultants were brought in, to help with the transition. State-of-the-art athletic facilities were constructed, including the crown jewel -- the Hampton University Convocation Center, a campus arena seating 7,200 for basketball, which opened in 1993.

The next task was to find the right man to lead their basketball program -- a tough job to fill at a school as serious about academics as Hampton (The school is ranked by U.S. News and World Report as one of the southern region's top universities). "It takes a special person to do the things that we want to do," Thomas says. "Graduate student-athletes, develop young men and women, teach character and integrity, respect for self, respect for others, and win! Everybody can't do that. But it's been done before, and it's being done today. The Dukes and the likes are doing it the right way, and we also feel we can do it the right way."

And they found the right man in Steve Merfeld, a longtime assistant at fellow mid-major Bowling Green. Merfeld immediately guided Hampton to its first winning season in DI after taking over the reins in 1997. And during his five year tenure, the program has made great strides.

But despite those strides, the moment that put Hampton on the map, athletically and otherwise, without question came last March 15. Hampton, a historically black university in southeastern Virginia, has now become a flagship program for similar institutions to emulate. The impact that one win had is immeasurable. It was just what the university had hoped for -- and planned for. "It's kind of scary, really," Thomas says. What we had envisioned is coming to fruition."

Hampton would lose two days later in the second round to Georgetown. But, the Pirates next win, in their first game of the season, was almost as shocking -- and almost as important. Hampton went to Chapel Hill, and beat North Carolina in a game the Pirates led for 39 of 40 minutes. The Tar Heels struggled this season, but it was still a huge win. "At the time, no one knew the type of year (North) Carolina was going to have," Merfeld says. And what it really did was it gave this team its own identity....We really stressed in the off-season that no one can ever take away last year's experience from you -- but it's over. We've got to continue to be sure that the program continues to be successful,"

That they have done -- despite losing their top three scorers from last season (they also kicked a fourth returning starter off the team following the win over UNC). After getting out of the blocks fast with an 8-1 start (their best start since joining Division I), the team hit a rough patch on a four-game western swing dropping all four games (two in OT). But from there, the team has won 19 of their last 20, their only loss coming on the road to division rival Howard at the buzzer.

The team is led by senior guard and MEAC player of the year Tommy Adams, the only returning Pirates starter from a year ago. He's averaged 19.7 points a game and is seventh in the country in 3-pointers made with 101. But their second-leading scorer, Devin Green is Hampton's future star. A starter from day one, the 6-foot-6 swing-man from Columbus, Ohio has averaged over 13 points and was named the MEAC rookie of the year. Merfeld used his Midwest ties to snag Green during the fall before his senior season. Afterwards, major conference powers such as Pitt, Miami, Fla., Notre Dame and Iowa came knocking on his door. But Green felt good all along about his decision -- especially last March 15.

Now after winning its conference automatic bid for a second straight year (it wasn't easy -- the Pirates got quite a scare in their semifinal matchup with South Carolina State), the question is: Where does Hampton go from here? In this year's tournament, the answer is: As far as they can. They know they will not sneak up on anybody. But their aspirations are high -- especially those of their senior leader. "I'm quite sure that everyone on this team expects to win that first game," Adams says, "My personal expectation is that if we can't get to the Sweet 16, then my senior year won't be fully satisfied. I'll be happy, but it won't be complete. I expect to play three more games before the end of my college career."

Is he dreaming? Perhaps. But Hampton has been dreaming about how far this basketball program can go for a long time. In fact, the university's recent \$250 million fundraising campaign is called "Dreaming No Small Dreams." The first step to making a dream come true is believing, believing you can do it," Thomas says. "We believe we can do it."

"The sky's the limit. Dr. Harvey's vision is to go to the Final Four. But in order to do that, you have to go to the Final 32. We've done that. Our next goal now is to make the Sweet 16. We've got to do that."

Hampton's future star has even broader goals in mind. "I just want to make the team a respectable program, that everybody fears and everybody respects -- just like any other big school," Green says. "We want everybody in the world to respect Hampton when they come in to play, and not always call us the underdogs." Gonzaga is a program that has made it to that level -- from perennial NCAA Tournament underdogs to legitimate Final Four contenders. "Gonzaga's been an inspiration for a lot of mid-major programs," says assistant coach Ed Huckaby. They've shown it can be done."

Merfeld thinks it can be done at Hampton too. "The resources are that that are going to allow us to be successful," Merfeld says. "When I took the job, I made a statement that if we're not successful, it will be our own fault. Are we capable? Absolutely." Last season's success has had a strong impact on Hampton's recruiting. Their win over Iowa State happened too late in the spring signing period to make a big impact on this year's squad. But this past fall, the Pirates signed six players -- a recruiting class rated among the top 30 in the country by Clark Francis' HoopScoop.

They also have the facilities to continue to attract recruits and be successful. But despite all of last year's accolades, there's still much work to be done. The Pirates went 10-0 at home this season, but their average attendance increased by only 200 people. And, with an average home crowd of 3,178, that still leaves more than half of their arena empty. "There's been more interest, but it hasn't reached the level that you observe at other successful programs," says Merfeld. "Why? I don't know. I always thought if you win, they will come. And we've won 50 games in the last two years. And the support is not what we would hope -- it's not what these kids deserve."

"We've got to do a better job of letting the public and community know that we have an extremely attractive product." Added Thomas. "You've got to market a product. ... Now we're on a consistent level of winning, and it should be a lot better." The administration has also explored moving to a bigger, more competitive Division I conference, in an effort to move the program forward. Among the other conferences the school has investigated are the Atlantic 10 and the Colonial Athletic Association. "We've made applications to several conferences," Thomas says. "It just hasn't happened yet. We'll continue to explore our options and if a situation presents itself as a good match for Hampton, then we'll take advantage of it."

One of the biggest reasons for Hampton's success has clearly been Merfeld. With mid-major programs, there's always the possibility that success will bring coaching offers from bigger programs in bigger conferences (see Dan Monson leaving Gonzaga for Minnesota; Gary Waters leaving Kent State for Rutgers). Merfeld didn't get such an offer after March 15, 2001. He will undoubtedly be approached by other programs after March 2002. But his happiness at Hampton is obvious. "I don't think that bigger is always better, for me," Merfeld stresses. I'm not motivated by money. I'm not motivated by being in the Atlantic 10 or the Big East. I'm motivated by being at a place where I know the support is there for us to be successful. That's the main reason that I'm extremely happy at Hampton University."

Nevertheless, Hampton's administrators know the realities of the situation. "That's the nature of the business," Thomas says. "When you're successful, then you move on, to bigger and better things. We do not want to lose Coach Merfeld. ...We hope we don't." But the administration also feels the foundation for success has been laid, and the building process will continue, no matter who is at the helm. "We're going to continue no matter what," says Harvey. "Because we've got a model, and if one plug moves out for whatever reason, graduation or so forth, we've got that model."

And it all comes back to that model, the plan that Hampton University has put into place over the last several years. It turns out this has been no magic trick, no miracle.

Accept the challenge. That's been the team's motto all season. That's just what they've done. And dreamed no small dreams