

ONE SHINING MOMENT – HAMPTON EXPECTS ANOTHER MAGICAL TOURNAMENT RUN

Kieran Darcy -- ESPN.com/ESPN The Magazine

Hampton, Va. – They call it the Merfeld Moment. The magical Merfeld Moment. And no March Madness fan will ever forget it. West Regional, 2001 NCAA Tournament, First Round: Tarvis Williams' 4-foot jumper with 6.9 seconds on the clock puts the 15th seeded Hampton Pirates ahead of No. 2 Iowa State for good, 58-57. Final buzzer sounds -- Hampton's players, fans, cheerleaders and band bum-rush the court. The cameras, however, focus on diminutive head coach Steve Merfeld. And, as the coach races around the court like a madman possessed, forward David Johnson corrals him and lifts him up in the air, Merfeld's arms and legs extended and pumping.

A single win put Hampton University on the map. A single moment put Hampton University in our hearts. A year later, the Pirates gathered together with family, friends and supporters in a meeting room inside the school's football stadium complex, to celebrate seeing their school's name appear in the brackets for a second straight Selection Sunday. The 50 or so people present cheered as the players were introduced one by one. But before the school's name even appeared in lights once more, there it was. The shot. The celebration. The Merfeld Moment. One more time.

They've all seen it hundreds of times. But as the players' hooting and hollering demonstrated, it never gets old. It never fails to give you that warm, fuzzy feeling. And it never loses its impact. "The exposure that something like that brings to the program is unlimited, and not only to the program but to the university and the community," Merfeld says. "They can show it as many times as they want!"

Last year's NCAA win focused the public's attention on Hampton, a historically black university located in southeastern Virginia on the mid-Atlantic coast. The city was previously known for producing NBA All-Star Allen Iverson. The university was previously known for producing NBA bad boy Rick Mahorn.

But this team is focused on making its own magical moments. It's already made history, becoming the first No. 15 seed to win a game in the NCAA Tournament and return to the dance the following season. Now they want to shock the world – by winning not one tournament game, but two!

"If we just step up to the challenge, and prepare like we prepared before, there's no reason why we can't win," says senior guard Tommy Adams. "I don't think there's any reason why we can't get to the Sweet 16." No one is more excited about this opportunity than Adams, the lone remaining starter from last year's team. Adams has had a wonderful season – he was the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference player of the year, and has been invited to the Portsmouth Invitational Tournament as one of the top 64 senior NBA prospects in the nation. But his season is far from complete. Last year, Adams was the fourth-leading scorer on the Pirates, averaging just over 10 points a game (he's almost doubled his scoring output this season). But in the Tournament, despite the team's success, Adams struggled. The normally prolific 3-point shooter scored eight points total in the two games against Iowa State and Georgetown, shooting 3-of-18 from the field and 0-for-8 from downtown.

He's on a mission to redeem himself and show the country what he can do. "I was happy we were winning (in last year's Tournament)," Adams says. "But deep down I felt that Tommy Adams could do better. I felt like I had to prove that to myself and my coaches this year."

The Pirates face a major challenge if they are going to improve on last year's success. Despite a 26-6 record and losing only one conference game all season (at the buzzer), Hampton was again awarded another 15 seed, and will do battle on Friday against the Big East champion Connecticut Huskies. The team cheered wildly when they saw their name on the big screen TV – but they were still a little disappointed with the seed. "I think that with everything that this team has accomplished this year, this team deserved a 14 or a 13 seed," Adams said. "But that was out of our control, and we're just gonna take what we can get and try to take care of business."

One thing that will help is a home crowd – Hampton will be playing in Washington D.C., much closer to home than last year's games in Boise, Idaho. The team is thrilled to be staying nearby. "We're extremely excited that we're going to D.C., to give all of our supporters an opportunity to experience what we experienced last year," Merfeld says. "This is March Madness. It's a very special time of year."

But it will be difficult to make the experience more special than last year's. Not only was it the team's first appearance in the Tournament – and not only did they notch one of the biggest upsets in Tournament history – but they also became the adopted sons of Boise. A city whose population is 98 percent white fell in love with an all-black underdog team. But it went far beyond the team. Hampton's entourage became the toast of the town – specifically the cheerleaders and pep band, who are almost as entertaining as the team itself. The band is a big deal at Hampton – in fact, it's probably one of the few places where being in the band is considered cool. Because this isn't your ordinary school band -- this is The Force.

The Force, standing for Full Optimal Rejuvenation Concerning Enthusiasm is equal parts marching band, jazz ensemble and rock group. "We play a lot of urban contemporary things a lot of hot tunes that are out there," says pep band director Rasan Holmes. And they don't just play their instruments – they dance too, right along with the cheerleaders, who do a lot more dancing than cheerleading. Boise loved this group so much that they invited them to perform at an Idaho Steelheads minor league hockey game last year. And D.C. better watch out, because The Force is coming to the nation's capital – dancing all the way back to the Big Dance.

And so are the Hampton Pirates. Can they beat UConn? It will be tough. The Pirates have very good guards, but they are undersized. Last year they featured the nation's leading shot-blocker. This year they play no one taller than 6-foot-7, and their leading rebounder, Isaac Jefferson, is generously listed at 6-5. Still Hampton returns to the Tournament with great expectations. "Last year, we were just happy to be there," says Adams. "This year we're looking at who we are playing, what are the advantages we have over them, where we can break them down. That's to be expected when we're trying to build a tradition here of winning in the NCAA Tournament year after year,"

With Hampton, expect the unexpected. This isn't your ordinary Cinderella. This is a team that still cherishes the opportunity to play in the Tournament. But this is also a team that expects to compete, and is playing to win.

They just might. And, there just might be another Moment.