

THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB -- MERFELD HAS HAMPTON READY FOR ANOTHER MARCH

Marty O'Brien -- Hampton Daily Press

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Three days after Hampton University's first conference defeat and two days before a game at rival Norfolk State, Pirates coach Steve Merfeld is fuming. The object of Merfeld's relentless scolding is freshman Devin Green. No fewer than a dozen times, Merfeld whistles practice to a halt to point out a Green mistake. Once, Green turns the ball over during a fast break. Merfeld whistles, then motions -- as if he were rewinding a tape -- for everyone to back up to where they were standing when Green threw the pass. "Show me where Barry was," Merfeld says, referring to guard Barry Hairston. Green points to a wide-open Hairston on the left wing, prompting Merfeld to shout, "Then why didn't you throw him the ball?" On and on it goes as Merfeld highlights Green's every failure: weak screens, sloppy passes, poor hands. "Catching and passing is a part of the game people take for granted," Merfeld says. But we're always concerned about fundamentals, even in March."

Too harsh and critical? Or just the right touch? These days, Merfeld seems to push all the right buttons. Entering today's Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Tournament quarterfinal against Morgan State, Hampton is 23-6, 17-1 against conference opponents. Not bad for a program that lost the top three scorers from a team that finished 25-7 and upset second-seeded Iowa State in the NCAA Tournament's West Regional.

"A lot of people are talking about him," says George Mason coach Jim Larranaga, who hired Merfeld as an assistant coach at Bowling Green in 1989. "I think he definitely made an impression on the national level last year with the win over Iowa State. Then, to be able to repeat the regular-season title after losing three of his top players is just incredible. Nobody in the country has done a better job than Steve. To win your first 16 conference games means you have to win on the road, and they've gotten good wins against North Carolina, William and Mary and Old Dominion on the road."

But even after clinching the top seed for the MEAC Tournament, Merfeld drove his team hard prior to the regular-season finale at Norfolk State. None harder than Green, the conference's Rookie of the Year. "I know what that's like," senior guard Tommy Adams says. "Coach Merfeld rode me my whole freshman year. When he's doing that, he seems like the bad guy. But all coach wants is the best for you. He's a perfectionist, and by the time you're a senior you appreciate it because it makes everything easier."

Two days after that rough practice, before 7,200 raucous fans at Norfolk State, Green plays as if his senior season has arrived three years early. He scores 22 points, on 9-of-11 shooting, nabs a team-high seven rebounds, dishes out a career-high five assists and doesn't have any turnovers. His diving save of the ball on the baseline leads to a critical Hampton basket late in regulation. His block of Darryl Towe's shot in the lane with 13 seconds to play in overtime preserves the victory.

"I thought Devin was tremendous," Merfeld says. I push him hard because I know he's the kind of kid who can take it. He's not your typical 18- or 19-year-old. He's the kind of kid who will come in after a practice like Thursday's and thank you. But you can't do that with every kid. You've got to know your personnel."

Merfeld had adapted well to his personnel. Last season he leaned on 6-foot-9 center Tarvis Williams, who led the conference in scoring at 21.9 points per game and the nation in blocked shots at 4.6 per game. This season the Pirates are a perimeter-oriented team with an emphasis on the kind of passing Merfeld stressed with Green. The Pirates' 413 assists are 38 more than any other team in the MEAC, and Isaac Jefferson, a power forward, leads the conference with 121.

Each new success begs the question of whether Merfeld will remain at Hampton, or whether some other school will come calling. "If they get back to the NCAA Tournament, more people will take notice," Larranaga says. "If they win a game for the second year in a row, things will snowball for him." Virginia Tech coach Ricky Stokes, another Larranaga assistant at Bowling Green, says he thought Merfeld would be a "hot commodity" after the Pirates' NCAA success a year ago. "If he repeats that, he'll be hard to keep," Stokes adds.

Destination aside, Merfeld's journey has already been remarkable. He is a rarity -- a white coach in a conference of historically black colleges. He was labeled "an accidental coach" because he was promoted from assistant to head coach when Byron Samuels left HU abruptly in July 1997. But Merfeld's career path was anything but accidental. He grew up in the southwest Wisconsin dairy farming town of Bloomington, population 800. Jim, one of Merfeld's four brothers, says "The only thing to do in the town was play sports." The Merfeld's backyard, which featured a 10 x 25-foot basketball court with a 10 foot goal at one end and a 7 foot goal at the other, became a town playground of sorts. There, Merfeld honed the passion and competitiveness that led him to coaching. "There was plenty of fighting and pushing in those games, but Steve could handle himself," says Merfeld's younger brother John, now a physician.

Despite standing just 5-7, 160 pounds, Merfeld played baseball, basketball, and football at Bloomington High. His football coach remembers his toughness, his basketball coach his savvy. "He made up for lack of size by not backing down," Bloomington football coach Jerry Usgaard says. "We were mostly a running team, and the ends were required to do their share of blocking. He was a very good blocker for his size and blocked defensive tackles who were a lot bigger." Ron Benish, Merfeld's basketball coach, remembers him as "a real competitor and a team leader on the floor. He was strong-willed, determined and he really understood the game a lot."

What Merfeld understood most was passing. "That's one of the things I've been able to pass on to this year's group." He says. "I've always been analytical, able to break things down and figure things out. I'm 40 and out of shape, but I think I could go out on the floor and pick our guys apart passing the ball."

Merfeld's dream of coaching did not dim when he was cut from the basketball team at Wisconsin-LaCrosse as a freshman. He blinked once, considered a business career during his sophomore year. His late father, Robert, a lawyer in Bloomington, rarely interfered in his children's careers, and none followed him into law. One of Merfeld's brothers went into medicine, another is a banker, one retired in his early 30s after owning a beer distributorship, one is an engineer and his sister is a physical therapist. But when Merfeld considered leaving college, his father intervened. "He told me I didn't need a degree to go into business, but I would need an education degree to become a teacher," Merfeld says. "He told me if I didn't like teaching and coaching, I could always go into business. It was the best advice I ever received."

After graduating from LaCrosse, Merfeld spent two seasons as basketball coach at a military academy in Delafield, Wis. But he decided he wanted to coach somewhere with less student turnover, so, to buy time and increase his marketability, he applied for graduate assistantships at several universities. One of them was Bowling Green, where Larranaga had just arrived as head coach after a long stint on Terry Holland's staff at Virginia. Larranaga hired Merfeld sight unseen in March 1986 after viewing his application. With the full-time assistants traveling to recruit, Merfeld assumed some of their responsibilities and quickly proved himself capable. "Steve made a lot of sacrifices, because virtually no money went with his position." Larranaga says. "If he wasn't sleeping, he was working. He lived and breathed basketball. He was out there from 7 in the morning to 11 at night, helping out in study hall, shagging rebounds or watching game film on the VCR. He was also heavily involved with organizing and running our summer camp, which was a lot of responsibility at that age, with not a lot of help."

Merfeld spent 10 years at Bowling Green, seven as a full-time assistant, rising to recruiting coordinator. His biggest recruiting success was landing point guard Antonio Daniels, whom the Vancouver Grizzlies picked fourth in the 1997 NBA draft. In 1996 Merfeld joined Samuel's staff at Hampton, because he believed expanding his recruiting contacts beyond the Midwest would make him more attractive as a head coach. That opportunity came more quickly than expected, because Samuels bolted suddenly during the summer of 1997 to become an assistant at Tennessee. Because it was mid-summer, too late for a lengthy coaching search, Merfeld was named interim coach. That made him just the second white head coach in MEAC history, but Hampton athletic director Dennis Thomas says that race was not a consideration. "I had observed his leadership ability, work ethic and ability to motivate student athletes while he was an assistant," Thomas says. "He had the characteristics we were looking for in a coach, and whether he was black, white, blue, or brown was insignificant."

Some at Hampton felt differently. The Pirates went 14-12 in Merfeld's first season and the interim tag was dropped. But a drop-off in '98-99 raised some doubts. "When we were 8-19 my freshman season, some students would tell me that coach Merfeld was at the wrong place," says Adams, who, like his teammates, is African American. "We just learned to block that out. Funny thing is, nobody is questioning him anymore. It's been a total change, but he's earned it. In three or four years he's become totally accepted at a predominantly black college."

The Pirates turned the corner in 1999-00 with the arrival of three transfers: point guard Marseilles Brown (from Richmond), forward LaSean Howard (Syracuse) and center Mohamed Woni (Clemson). After a 0-5 start, the Pirates won 17 of their last 24 games. "We felt like we needed some immediate success to get the program to another level," Merfeld says of getting the transfers. "We've also been good at developing young players. Tarvis Williams was MEAC Player of the Year last season, Tommy Adams is the top player in the conference this year and Isaac Jefferson could get it next year." And Green could get Player of the Year after that if he continues to respond as dramatically to Merfeld's coaching as he did at Norfolk State. Then one of six recruits in a class rated in the top 30 nationally by some scouting services could reap the honor.

The question is, will Merfeld be around to see any of it? He says he's not even thinking about his coaching future, that all of his concentration is on the MEAC tournament. With a 3-year-old daughter, Lauren Marie, and a 7-month-old son, Andrew Robert, he says fatherhood has softened his outlook. "When you come home to a 3-year-old who doesn't care whether you won or lost, it changes your perspective," he says.

Nevertheless, Merfeld still gets so wound up on game night that "he doesn't sleep a wink," according to his wife Mary Jo. That's not all bad, she adds, because she doesn't have to get out of bed to feed Andrew on those nights. But, if Merfeld's passion for basketball still burns bright, that doesn't make it a cinch that he will bolt to another university. "I've learned that happiness isn't always more money or the bigger, better opportunity," he said. "Sometimes bigger is not better. I feel we're in a position to compete for a championship year-in and year-out. "Some jobs never provide those resources."

THE MERFELD FILE

AGE: 40

COLLEGE: Wisconsin-LaCrosse (B.A. 1984)

COACHING CAREER: Hampton University, head coach 1997-present; Hampton University, assistant coach 1996-97; Bowling Green, assistant coach 1986-96; St. John's Military in Delafield, Wis., head coach 1984-86.

RECORD AT HU: 87-56, two MEAC regular season titles, one MEAC Tournament title

FAMILY: Wife, Mary Jo. Children, Lauren Marie, 3 and Andrew Robert, 7 months

MERFELD'S MILESTONES

*Hampton defeats Sundance AAU, Nov. 1997: Merfeld realizes his life-long dream, debuting as a college head coach in an exhibition on Nov. 3, the birthday of his late father Robert.

*Hampton 76, Howard 57, March 1998: The victory gives Merfeld a winning record 14-12, in his first season as a college head coach

*Hampton 78, Central Florida 74, Jan. 2001: Merfeld makes center Tarvis Williams the focus of the Pirates offense. Williams responds with 37 points -- on 13 field goals and 11 – of – 12 free throws -- in the overtime win.

*Hampton 70, South Carolina State 58, March 2001: Pirates clinch first NCAA Tournament berth with a victory in MEAC Tournament championship game.

*Hampton 58, Iowa State 57, March 2001: Williams' four-foot jumper with 6.9 seconds left in West Region first round game makes Hampton the fourth No. 15 seed in NCAA Tournament history to defeat a No. 2 seed.

*Hampton 77, North Carolina 69, Nov. 2001: With an unexpected but relatively easy win in Chapel Hill, the Pirates provide the first evidence the 20th ranked Tar Heels are in for a long season.