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### **Howard's rise leads to NJCAA Tournament**

Forget about wearing green this Saint Patrick's Day. Red and black are going to be the most popular colors with many locals, celebrating the ascension of the Howard College women's basketball team. The Hawks begin their bid for a national title at the NJCAA National Tournament in Salina, Kan., Tuesday, facing 11th-seeded Kaskaskia College in the opening round at noon.

It's been more than 10 years since Howard last made an appearance at the national tournament. The Hawks came the closest it ever did to winning a title in 1998, placing third.

Advancing to the national stage was commonplace for Howard in the 1990s. The Hawks made their first appearance in 1993 under the tutelage of Royce Chadwick, who is now the head coach at NCAA Division I Marshall. They won the consolation side of the bracket, meaning a seventh-place finish.

Chadwick took the Hawks back in 1994. This time they finished sixth.

A third consecutive trip was made in 1995 under coach Terry Gray, but Howard experienced its least amount of success at the tourney that year.

Coach Matt Corkery was responsible for leading the Hawks to the tournament in 1998 and their top national finish.

Eleven years later, the program is under the direction of Earl Diddle and has been on the upswing since he took over four and a half seasons ago.

When Diddle came to Howard, the coaches before him had just quit on the program in the middle of the season and several of the players followed suit. He had just four players left. He recruited a softball player to complete the starting five and had his manager come off the bench so he could have a sub.

Needless to say, the Hawks didn't win a game in the competitive Western Junior College Athletic Conference in Diddle's first year.

Even with a full squad, Diddle couldn't pick up a victory in the league in his first full season with Howard in 2005-2006.



The Hawks finally started to turn the corner the following year, winning a few conference games, but losing several by seven points or less.

Finally in the 2007-2008 season, Howard had a breakthrough, finishing fourth in the WJCAC and qualifying for the Region V Tournament. The Hawks were eliminated by South Plains College in the tourney, but the appearance at the regional was only a sign of what was to come.



In the opening round of the 2009 Region V Tournament, the Hawks put together one of the most impressive performances of the season in Diddle's opinion, routing Weatherford, 77-44.

Howard got a bigger challenge from a scrappy Collin County Community College team in the semifinals. After playing to a draw in the first half at 30-30, the Hawks exploded in the second, eventually winning 76-52.

The same scenario played out in the finals against Odessa College. The Hawks trailed 25-24 at the break, but methodically broke the will of the Lady Wranglers in the second half, claiming a 78-53 victory and a bid into the NJCAA National Tournament.

"Getting this bid to the national tournament means a lot to this team and it gives us a chance to represent Howard College and this community," said Diddle. "I'm excited to take our image of Howard to Kansas. Howard had a great tradition in the '90s and now we're back on the national stage. Obviously, we're excited about that. The next step is to keep it there."

Howard (26-7) has been ranked sixth in the tournament field of 16. The bracket is played in a false double-elimination format, meaning a team has to lose twice to be eliminated, but once a loss is suffered a national championship cannot be claimed.

The Hawks draw the Kaskaskia College Blue Angels (25-6) at noon Tuesday in the first round. It is the first time in program history Kaskaskia, which is in Centralia, Ill., has qualified for the NJCAA Tournament.

The Blue Angels defeated Rend Land, Ill., 74-69, to capture the Region 24 and District P title. They started the season with a 6-5 record, but won 19 of their final 20 games, including a 16-0 mark in conference play.

Kaskaskia is led by Whitney Williams, who averages 13.5 points and 8.2 rebounds a game. Sad'a Ray is good for 12.1 points and 8.7 rebounds, while Kelly Albers contributes 9.2 points and 7.4 boards per contest.

Diddle says Kaskaskia and Howard actually mirror each other quite a bit.

"Kaskaskia is an interesting team. They're a lot like us," said Diddle. "They're a half court team. They don't have a lot of size. Their primary source of scoring is off the dribble-drive and then crashing the boards on second shots. We've got to do a good job of limiting their paint points.

"The challenge is we've got to do what we usually do," he continued. "Any time you get into a tournament in March, you've got to be able to defend, rebound and take care of the ball."

The Hawks are led by Miesha Blackshear, who averages 13.8 points and 7.3 rebounds a game. Patricia Malouff throws in another 9.6 points per contest.

Howard also leads the nation in defensive scoring average, allowing less than 45 points a game.

In the Region V Tournament, it seemed a different name stepped forward and had a big performance every game.

Against Weatherford, the Hawks got 36 points off the bench from Clarrisa Krum (18 points), Danielle Cota (10) and NaTalia Smith (8).

In the semifinals against Collin County, Malouff caught fire, knocking down four 3-pointers in a 20-point performance. Blackshear scored 13 and led Howard with eight rebounds, eight assists and six steals.

Against Odessa, Rachael Dryver and DeAndra Thomas took over. Dryver led all scorers with a career-high 22 points, while Thomas added 15. Malouff also had 15 with all of her points coming in the second half.

The way Howard shot the ball in the regional was key, according to Diddle, and he's hopeful the effort can continue in Salina.

A win and Howard will play the winner of third-seeded Connors College (Okla.) or 14th-seeded Vincennes (Ind.) at 6 p.m. Wednesday. A loss and the Hawks meet the loser of the same game at 4 p.m. Wednesday.