



It's Hoop Time Again In The Queen City!!

The CIAA Tournament is set to 'Rock The Rim'

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CHARLOTTE -- It's time once again for the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) to put on their 64th and 34th men and women tournaments, respectively in Charlotte and the excitement will be in abundance both on and off the court.

Jazz concerts, high school day, fitness classes and a career day expo are some of the many interactive events taking place for the general public to participate in and a way for the historic conference to give back to the local community and the people who support them.

Of course the CIAA Tournament wouldn't be "The Tournament" without the array of celebrities, politicians, former great players of the past and of course "Mr. CIAA" who is always on display with various colorful suits that make you think of a rainbow after a brief rain shower in the midst of summer.

On the court, the action promises to be fast, furious and exciting in both the women's and men bracket with the top four teams all having a legitimate shot at taking the Championship

WOMEN'S

On the women's side, Bowie State, Fayetteville State, Johnson C. Smith and Virginia State lead the "fab four" of the tournament. The Lady Broncos are the top seed but the Lady Bulldogs are talented and the Lady Golden Bulls will have home court advantage since the university is located just minutes from the site of the tournament.

Bowie State: The Lady Bulldogs come in as the winners of the CIAA Eastern Division with a 6-2 record in the Eastern Division (14-4 in the Conference, 17-10 overall) look to prove they are the best team in the conference. The Lady Bulldogs have a wealth of talent led by Bianca Lee, Teanusha Robinson, Juliette Turner and CIAA defensive player of the year, Denisha Kenion. The Lady Bulldogs are athletic, talented and are out to prove they are the best but the road to the finals will be tough.

Fayetteville State: The Lady Broncos are the top see with the best overall record as a division winner (Western division) at 7-1 but come into the tournament as the second seed because Bowie State had the better overall conference record. The Lady Broncos are led by L'Oreal Price, Chelsea Jeter and rookie sensation DeJa Middleton. The Lady Broncos have been solid all season and have played with discipline and poise. If they continue to do the fundamental things they've done all season, a slot in the CIAA women's championship is likely and expected.

J.C. Smith: If the Lady Golden Bulls want to make it to the finals in their backyard, they will need Wendy Stywalt and Demetria Bell to play like they have all season in leading the Lady Golden Bulls to a 5-3 record in the Western Division (12-6 in the conference, 17-10 overall) if the host team once to play in the final game. The Lady Golden Bulls are a good basketball team, but they will need more than the home crowd and home court advantage to beat Fayetteville State or Bowie State.

Virginia State: The Lady Trojans have been impressive all season overall but struggled a bit in CIAA Eastern Division play. Although the Lady Trojans won 20 games overall and 11 games in the conference they only managed to finish .500 in division play. If the Lady Trojans want to get to the championship game, they will have to play much better than they did against their divisional foes and they must get maximum efforts from Katania Walker and Angela Brown.

Team to watch: Saint Paul's: It's been a pretty decent season for the Lady Tigers of Saint Paul's. The Lady Tigers finished second in the CIAA Eastern Division with a 5-3 record (10-8 in the conference, 14-13) overall which is quite an accomplishment considering there are so many other established teams in the CIAA that are used to the weekly grind and competition in the historic conference. If the Lady Tigers want to continue to be a surprise and upstart team, they must continue to get stellar play out of CIAA women's player of the year Tatiana Ellis. Ellis is the first female basketball player to be named Player of the Year at Saint Paul's College.

MEN'S

The men's side of the world is just as athletic, competitive and exciting. The "fab four" on the men's side of the world are Virginia Union, Elizabeth City State, Johnson C. Smith and Saint Augustine College. The Panthers and Vikings look strong but the Golden Bulls and Falcons have shown strong throughout the season so it's anyone's tournament to take and win.

Virginia Union: The Panthers haven't missed a beat with hall of fame coach Dave Robbins retiring with new head coach Willard Coker. The Panthers come into the tournament as the top seed with 14 overall wins in the conference and a 7-1 CIAA Eastern division record. Former legendary coach Dave Robbins didn't leave the cupboard bare with talented players like the Byerson brothers (Brandon and Braxton) and Gregg Thondique. The Panthers are talented and experienced and clearly are the favorites to win the CIAA Championship.

Elizabeth City State: The Vikings come into the tournament as the second seed and come in with the Player of the Year for the second year in a row. Anthony Hilliard comes into the big tournament averaging 23.6ppg and 11.6rpg and also acts as a decoy for other players on the team to make big shots to help the Vikings win basketball games. If Hilliard doesn't play up to potential along with the role players who were getting it throughout the season, it will be a short time at the tournament for the Vikings this season.

Saint Augustine's College: Of all of the teams on both the men and women brackets, the Falcons of St Augustine's College may be the most intriguing. They played well against the top teams in the conference like Virginia Union, Johnson C. Smith and Elizabeth City State which should prove they have the ability to go all the way and win a title. Coach Lonnie Blow, in his first season, has done an exceptional job considering he took the job right before the start of the season. Coach Blow will need All-CIAA players Will Gill and Haywood Fain to step up and play big if the Falcons want to continue to surprise the rest of the conference.

Team to watch: Bowie State: Many say Bowie State is the most talented team in the CIAA but it hasn't resonated on the court all the time for Coach Luke D'Alessio and his Bulldogs. All-CIAA player Duke Crews averaged nearly 16 points and 11 rebounds and Andrew Engel averaged 10 points and led the team in three pointers made. Bowie State finished the season strong, winning four of their last five games and look to take that momentum and turn it into a deep tournament run.

My predictions:

Women's semis: 1) Bowie State vs. 6) Saint Paul's and 2) Fayetteville State vs. 3) Johnson C. Smith.

Women's final: 1) Bowie State vs. 3) Johnson C. Smith

Men's semis: 1) Virginia Union vs. 5) Saint Augustine College and 2) Elizabeth City State vs. 3) Johnson C. Smith.

Men's final: 2) Elizabeth City State vs. 5) Saint Augustine College.

Players to watch:

Women: Teaushia Robinson of Bowie State and Demetria Bell of Johnson C. Smith.

Men: Anthony Hilliard of Elizabeth City State and Haywood Fain of Saint Augustine's College.

Enjoy the games and the excitement of the CIAA Tournament and experience and I'll see you there!

Celebrity notables:

Singer Calvin Richardson, jazz artist Kim Walters, gospel singer Tonex, gospel singer Smokie Norful, gospel singer Yolanda Adams, DJ Funkmaster Flex, comedian/radio host MO'NIQUE, former NBA player Muggsy Bogues, Chef G. Garvin from the "Cooking Show" on TV One, Lakisha Jones, former "American Idol" contestant, Anthony Hamilton, choreographer Laurie Ann Gibson
singer Robin Thicke, and of course, "Mr. CIAA"