

**Friday, January 8, 2010**

## Reviewing the Road

After a gruelling five game road trip, I am able to share some thoughts and observations from the past three games; losses at Ball State, Nebraska, and Oklahoma.

We all know that this year's version of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore men's basketball team is overall a young, athletic, and so-far, short-handed squad. Injuries have already taken their toll. The loss of senior Neal Pitt, last year's top scorer and rebounder, has slowed the Hawks in the post, while junior Josh Bright's absence has forced the healthy guards to play extended minutes. Head coach Frankie Allen was already facing the task of having to get his team, all new-comers with the exception of Pitt, Bright, and freshman Tyler Hines, to play as a unit, and now has had to mix-and-match different line-ups from an eight-man rotation. There certainly have been a number of challenges this team has had to face, and we are just now arriving at the start of conference play on the schedule.

The nine point loss at **Ball State** was closer than the final score indicates. UMES held several leads throughout the ballgame, including in the second half. The Hawks were able to stick to that night's game plan - slow the game down offensively, and play a packed-in, man-to-man on the defensive end. As a result, the Cardinals main man, Jarrod Jones (in front of at least one NBA scout) was held in check, as the 6'9 big man scored just 12 points, five below his average. In the end though, the Cards were able to make a few more plays down the stretch, and increased their lead with free throws in the final minute. Despite the loss, it was good to see an under-manned team fight for 40 minutes after two consecutive double-digit losses.

The **Nebraska** loss was perhaps a little more frustrating to take. I felt that the Hawks, who were heavy underdogs going into Lincoln, surprised everyone but themselves with their aggressive play over the first 20 minutes. The Cornhuskers led by just four at the break. UMES was able to force some turnovers on the defensive end by jumping the passing lanes, resulting in some nice transition hoops. I thought sophomore Hilary Haley, the Hawks' leading scorer, played well and was more in-sync with the offense. The front court controlled the boards by out rebounding NU, 40-32. UMES was physical, and looked flat-out confident out there against a Big-12 opponent. It was the opening five minutes of the second half that did in the Hawks. Nebraska went on a 13-0 run, forcing UMES to play catch-up over the final 15 minutes. The Hawks played well enough to win for 35 minutes, but not for the 40 required.

**Oklahoma**, led by sophomore Willie Warren, one of the country's most dynamic and recognizable players, was as good as advertised. The Hawks were forced to battle this juggernaut with junior Tim Burns waging his own battle - against suspected food poisoning. The 5'10 guard received an IV before the game, but was gutsy enough to suit up anyway. I think it had something to do with our visit to an Oklahoma City restaurant the day before; perhaps our waiter didn't like us.

Either way, this one was quickly out of reach. The Sooners provided non-stop pressure throughout the course of the entire game, forcing too many Hawk turnovers. Freshman Sean

Berry was a bright spot, grabbing a career-high 12 rebounds to go along with 16 points. He looked fearless at times in the post and on the window, going chin-to-chin with the 6'10, 296 pound OU freshman Tiny Gallon. Berry's hustle is contagious, and should only improve as the season moves forward.

Now that MEAC play has arrived, fans should begin to feel optimistic again. After all, conference wins are the only ones that really matter, and UMES is already 1-0, thanks to a December victory over Delaware State. The Hawks match-up Saturday against South Carolina State will serve as an accurate barometer, in terms of showing us where this team is a week into 2010. I like their chances; they are 3-1 at home, and just seem to simply play better at the Hytche. Besides, now that 14 hour travel days, food poisoning, and Willie Warren are in the rear view mirror, the task seems no where near as daunting.