



Bucs at the Big Dance

The CBU Buccaneer basketball team makes history by advancing to the Elite Eight and posting its first All-American player.

BY CORY DUGAN
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Nick Kohs ('09) is the first CBU basketball player to earn All-America honors. He was also named Gulf South Conference Player of the Year and South Region Player of the Year.

A year after winning their first-ever Gulf South Conference (GSC) championship in 2007-08, the CBU Buccaneers were ranked No. 19 in the preseason Division II Bulletin national rankings last November. In January, the team made its first appearance of the year in the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) Division II Poll at No. 17. The next week they rose five spots to No. 12. After splitting a pair of games the following week, the Bucs dropped back down to No. 17 in the NABC Poll. By February 3, the roller coaster poll took them to their highest point in six years as they moved up to No. 10 in the national rankings. On February 10 they claimed the No. 8 spot. But a six-game winning streak was snapped by Delta State within the week, and the Bucs slipped back to No. 10. By the last week of February, the team regained the No. 8 spot and earned the No. 2 spot in the NCAA Division II South Regional ranking—the highest ever for the Bucs. This time Southern Arkansas played the spoiler, dropping the Bucs 52-46 and sending them tumbling in the polls to No. 12. But the same week they clinched their second straight Gulf South Conference West Division Championship with a 65-63 victory over Arkansas Tech, ending the regular season with a record of 22-5, and 11-3 in the GSC West.

For the first time since joining the Gulf South Conference in 1996-97, the Bucs swept the three major GSC West Division individual awards, claiming the Player of the Year, Coach of the Year, and Freshman of the Year. Senior center Nick Kohs led the GSC with 21.1 points and 10.3 rebounds per game as he earned the GSC West Division Player of the Year award, becoming the first Buc to earn that honor. Kohs had already been named Player of the Week six times for the season. Freshman guard Scott Dennis, who averaged 6.2 ppg and 7.6 rpg for the season, was named GSC West Division Freshman of the Year, continuing CBU's unprecedented run of success in the category as he became the fourth CBU player in five years to win the award, the first 4-in-5 years streak for any GSC team in the history of the award. He is the Bucs' sixth Freshman of the Year winner overall.

Head coach Mike Nienaber was rewarded for another banner year with the GSC West Division Coach of the Year award for the second time in three seasons. Nienaber won his first Coach of the Year award in 2006-07 as the Bucs went 21-7. Senior guard Reggie Peyton joined Kohs on the All-GSC West First Team as he averaged 14.7 ppg.

Ranked third in the South and seeded No. 1 in the

West Division, the Bucs took the court at the Gulf South Tournament aiming to win their second straight conference championship. But the Harding Bisons had a different plan in mind and took out the defending champions with a strong second half and a 60-53 upset. Wounded but somehow still snagging a bit of triumph from defeat, the Buccaneers still earned the No. 2 seed in the NCAA Division II South Regional at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, FL. The Bucs also collected two more significant postseason awards this week as Kohs was named Daktronics South Region Player of the Year, and Nienaber was voted the NABC South Region Coach of the Year.

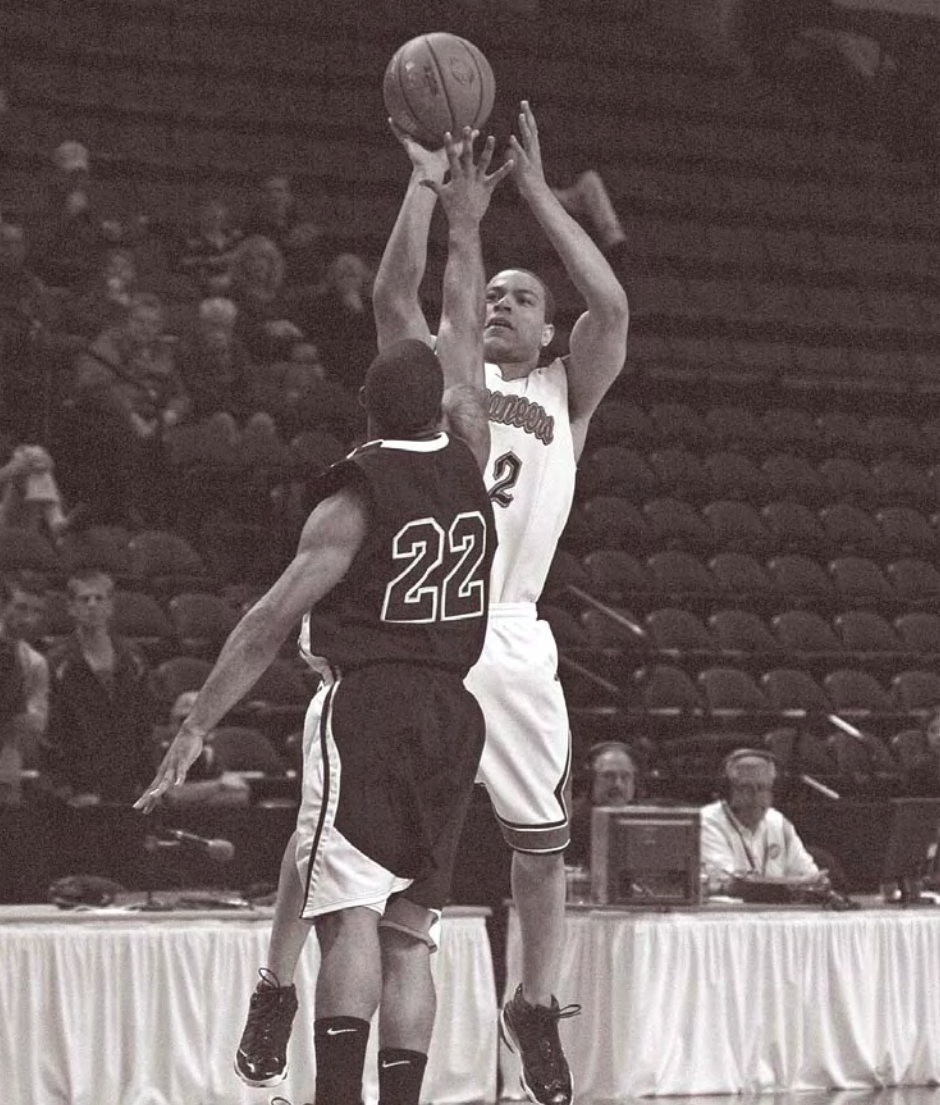
Two days after the tournament line-up was announced, the final NABC Poll of the season ranked CBU at No. 15—a seven-point drop from the season high, but still the highest final ranking ever achieved by the Bucs; CBU has been ranked in the final NABC poll one other time, when they finished No. 19 in 2003-04. The Bucs were also the only GSC team finishing in the Top 25, but—big but—their first opponent in the Big Dance was perennial rival and spoiler Delta State, with whom they'd split decisions during their two meetings in the regular season.

"I'd rather play almost anyone else but Delta State," Coach Mike Nienaber said at the time. "They know us too well. We'd have an element of surprise going for us against any other team in the regional."

The Bucs jumped out to a 10-0 lead in the first three minutes with seven points from senior center Nick Kohs and a three-pointer from junior guard Kyle Couvion, but the Statesmen answered with a 12-1 run to take the lead with 12:10 remaining in the first half. After four ties and four lead changes, the Bucs took the lead for good as they closed the first half on an 11-2 run, going into the locker room with a 27-20 lead after a jumper from senior guard Reggie Peyton with 40 seconds remaining in the half.

The Statesmen closed to within three points in the second half with 17:28 remaining, but the Bucs went on a 9-1 run and took a 39-28 lead on a Kohs layup with 13:28 remaining. After DSU scored the next four points, the Bucs went on another 9-2 run to take their biggest lead of the game, 48-34, with 6:02 remaining. The Statesmen never came closer than six points again, and the Bucs won their quarterfinal round 63-54. Kohs led the Bucs with a game-high 22 points and three blocks, while Peyton scored 18 with a game-high four steals.

In the semifinal round, the Bucs jumped out to a 15-4 lead before the first media timeout and cruised to



Reggie Peyton ('09) earned All-GSC honors and was named to the South Region All-Tournament Team.

a 72-53 win over third-seeded Claffin University. With the win, the Bucs advanced to the South Regional final for the first time in school history. The win also gave the Bucs 67 wins in the last three years, the best three-year win tally in school history, and their season-high 24 wins clinched their best total since joining the NCAA. The overall school record for wins was set in 1984-85 as the Bucs went 25-10.

"This game was about trying to get to the Elite Eight," Nienaber said. "Breaking records wasn't really on our radar. It's not something we ever even talked about. I came to the regional thinking, 'Please, God, just don't let us lose the first game. I just want to get an NCAA win,'" he added.

At that point, Nienaber's team had two NCAA wins and was only one victory away from capturing the NCAA Division 2 South Region title. The title round pitted the Bucs against the No. 1 seed, Florida Southern University. "There's a reason why they are hosting the tournament," Nienaber said. "There's a reason they're the No. 1 seed. They're going to be a hard team to beat."

By this time, those who watch DII basketball had noticed that the Bucs led the country in scoring defense, allowing only 55.7 points a game. The team also boasted the No. 4-ranked field goal percentage

defense, with opposing teams shooting just 38.8 percent. Nienaber explained that his defensive style came from his Princeton-style offense, which he adopted five years ago. "We are about ball control, and slowing the game down," he said. "We try to take up to 25 seconds off the shot clock on each possession and then get to the rim. If not, then we take the next best available shot from the field or the foul line."

The Florida Southern Moccasins averaged 84.1 points per game during the season, and had posted 94 and 95-point performances in their first two games of the tournament. Nienaber knew that the key to playing FSU was to control the pace of the game. "If the score gets up in the 70s and 80s, we're going to be in trouble," he said prior to the game. "That's not the kind of game we need to play."

Obviously the Bucs played the kind of game they needed to play. They scored the game's first four points and never trailed as they dominated the game against the host Mocs. The Bucs began to pull away with a 10-2 run sparked by back-to-back three-pointers from sophomore forward Connor Wetzel and Peyton. Back-to-back layups by Nick Kohs capped the run, giving the Bucs a 19-10 lead with 11:06 remaining in the first half. The Mocs then pulled within three points with an 8-2 run, closing within 23-20 with 7:50 remaining in the half. They would get no closer as a Kohs dunk started a 15-5 run that gave the Bucs a 38-25 lead with 1:40 remaining in the first half.

The Mocs cut the lead back to four points twice early in the second half, but Peyton and Kohs put the game away for good, scoring all 15 points in a 15-3 run that left the Bucs with a 59-44 lead with 7:13 remaining, and the Mocs never came closer than seven points again. The Bucs took home the South Regional Championship with a final score of 82-72.

"I found myself thinking throughout the game, 'God, please, I just don't want to lose this thing by blowing a 10-point lead,'" Nienaber said. "And we managed to win with exactly that 10-point lead."

"I felt like I carried us a little bit inside during the first half," Kohs said. "And Reggie just took over the second half. We split it up pretty well and made sure somebody was going each half."

Kohs was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player, scoring 27 points in the championship to finish the regional with 75 points, 19 rebounds, nine assists, and seven blocks in three games. Peyton joined Kohs on the all-tournament team as he scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half, slicing through the Mocs' defense for six layups

in the second half alone. Freshman Dennis turned in another strong performance, finishing with 13 points, eight rebounds, and six assists with no turnovers. For the tournament, Dennis had 24 points, 25 rebounds, 16 assists, five steals, and just one turnover.

“He’s an All-American,” FSU head coach Linc Darner told the Lakeland Ledger after the game, speaking of Kohs. “He’s the best big guy we’ve played all year and we’ve played some pretty good big guys.”

Sure enough, the day before the South Regional Champion Buccaneers were scheduled to play their Elite Eight match-up against the Southeast Champions, the No. 4 Augusta State University Jaguars, Kohs was named to both the NABC and Daktronics Division II All-America Teams, becoming the first CBU basketball player to earn All-America honors.

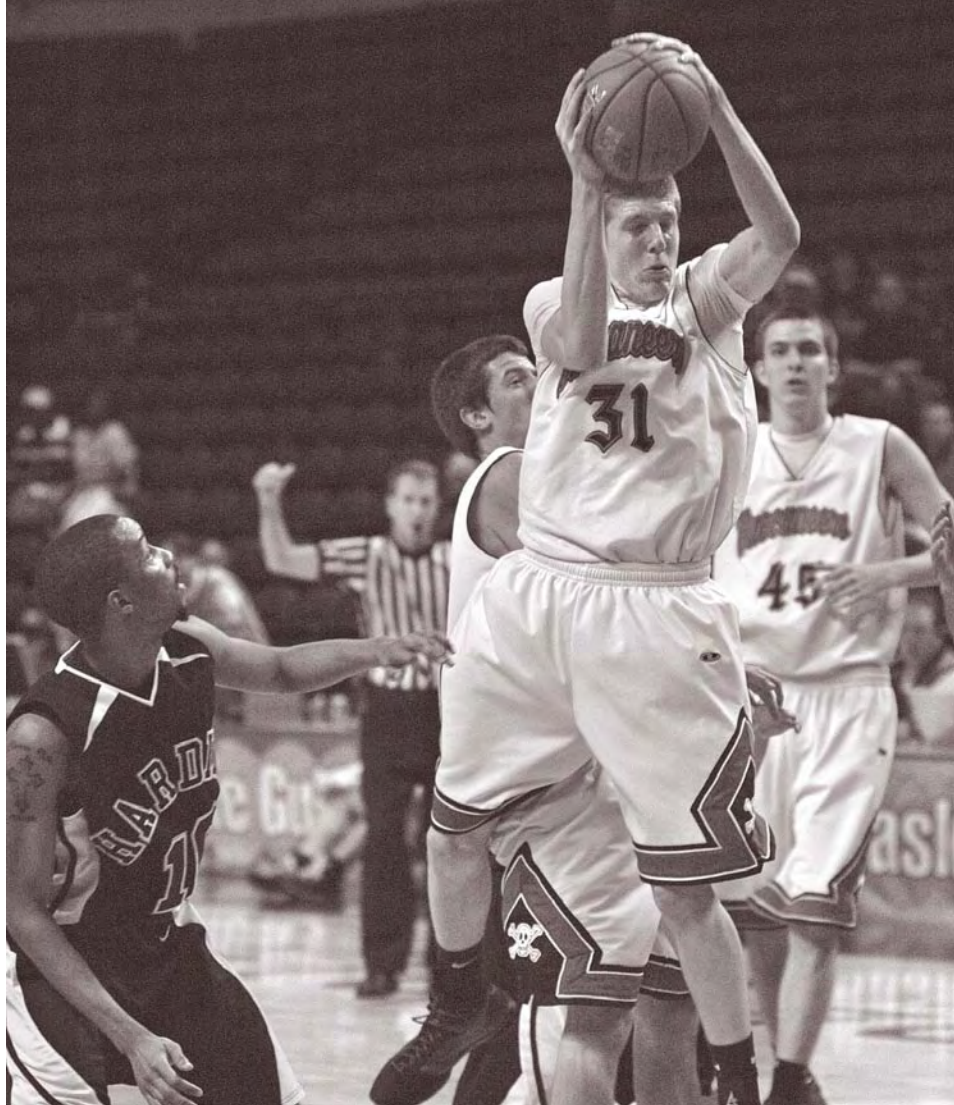
Arriving in Springfield, MA for the Elite Eight, the Buccaneers represented the smallest school in the field, with the smallest athletic budget, probably the highest academic standards, and definitely the thinnest bench—a mere 15 players, four of whom played an average of 30 minutes per game and another who averaged 24.9. Kohs, as a drastic example, had played 1,185 of a possible 1,240 minutes at this point in the season, an average of 38.2 per game.

But Nienaber wasn’t worried about that. “I think depth is the most overrated thing in college basketball,” he said. “You’ve got kids who are 18 years old, and they only play four minutes and sit for a two-minute break? You’ve got to be kidding me.” But Nienaber refused to feel confident or to let his players feel too satisfied with their performance. “At this point, we’re playing with house money,” he laughed. “It’s taken me 26 years of coaching to get here, so I’m just going to enjoy every minute of it.”

There was plenty to enjoy in the first half, as the Bucs dominated the Jaguars early and built a 21-9 lead in the first 14 minutes. CBU took a 32-18 lead into the locker room at halftime.

That double-digit lead held until a three-point play cut the margin to nine with 15:40 remaining. The Jags followed with a three-pointer, and a game-changing 25-10 run was underway. Once they took the lead, the Jaguars steadily added to it, extending the lead to 10 points twice in the final minute. The Jaguars ended up torching the Bucs for 52 points, shooting 62.5 percent for the half as they rallied for the 70-62 victory, eerily similar to Harding’s win over the Bucs in the GSC Quarterfinals three weeks earlier.

Peyton scored a game-high 20 points for the Bucs, but All-American Kohs was held to only 15 on 6-of-17



shooting. Dennis added nine points, four assists, three steals, and three rebounds before fouling out in 37 minutes. “We had trouble getting open for shots and getting into the lane in the second half,” said Kohs. “They did a great job defensively of preventing us from doing what we wanted to do offensively. A lot of my moves are to the baseline, and they just completely shut me off.”

“We played about as good as we could have played in the first half, but I’ll be second-guessing myself all the summer about the second half,” said Nienaber. “The first half we made shots that fell, and they didn’t. That flipped in the second half, and unfortunately so did the score.”

The Bucs ended the magical and historic season going further than any basketball team in school history, tying the CBU record for wins in a season with 25, and with the highest three-year win total (68) in school history. The season also ends the CBU career of five seniors: Kohs, Peyton, Brandon Shane, Colin Flynn, and Zach Welter—who played the final 29 seconds of the final game together.

They may not have managed a repeat GSC championship, but the 2008-09 Buccaneers went even further and took CBU where no other team has been. Job well done, South Regional Champions. ■

Scott Dennis ('12) was named GSC West Division Freshman of the Year, the fourth CBU player in five years to win the award.