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**THE JOURNAL REPORT: NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT**

# Winning by Losing

## *Small universities have found a way to raise their profiles: become Division I independents*

By **DAVID ARMSTRONG**

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
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This college basketball season, the Longwood University Lancers from Farmville, Va., traveled thousands of miles by air in playing 20 of their 31 games on the road.

Their schedule took them to San Francisco, New York and many a stop in between. Their opponents included formidable foes such as Illinois, the top-ranked team in the country for most of the season, and national power Cincinnati.



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See the complete **NCAA Basketball Tournament**<sup>2</sup> report.

The result? Little Longwood failed to win a road game. In fact, the Lancers won only one game all year, finishing with a record of 1-30.

But the school did win something it craves even more than basketball success: name recognition. Because they were playing teams with national followings, the Lancers were mentioned on the ESPN cable sports

network, wire-service reports of their games were picked up in newspapers across the country, and feature stories about Longwood appeared on high-traffic Web sites.

"It raises the profile of the university," Longwood coach Mike Gillian says of the games against national powers like Illinois. "The amount of publicity generated from those games -- you can't put a dollar figure on that."

Across the country, a handful of mostly small universities are hoping to cash in on the popularity of college basketball by joining the elite Division I circuit. Most, like Longwood, formerly played in the decidedly less talented and low-profile Division II ranks. Until a few years ago, Longwood didn't even charge admission to its games. But schools like Longwood, enchanted by the attention and the money that comes from playing at the same level as storied programs like Duke and UCLA, move up to the top rung of the college basketball ladder to try to boost interest from prospective students, encourage more support from alumni and bolster their finances.

### Tough Road

Many of these schools are indeed winning attention, if mostly for things that go wrong on the court.

In its first year of Division I play last season, the University of Northern Colorado basketball team was so shorthanded that the school suited up two student managers in order to have enough players to practice. The team finished 6-22 while playing only nine home games. Newcomers to Division I routinely play most of their games on the road, because they lack the clout to get more-established teams to visit their campuses.

This year, Savannah State University in Georgia became the first Division I team since Prairie View in 1991-92 to go through a season without winning a game. The school, which like many of the other newcomers to Division I isn't affiliated with an athletic conference and so plays as an independent, was 0-28 for the season. Coach Ed Daniels, who took over the team in 2002 as it made the leap to Division I, was fired last month shortly after the school's season ended.

### ON THEIR OWN

**Got Game?** Division I independents spend a lot of time away from home. During one stretch right after Christmas, the Longwood men's basketball team traveled 7,850 miles in 17 days to play seven games.

**DEC. 26** - Drive from Farmville, Va., to

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne fired its coach in January shortly after losing to Wyoming, 100-59. The Mastodons, another independent, were 3-13 when coach Doug Noll was let go after five-plus years at the university. The school began playing in Division I in 2002.

### DOW JONES REPRINTS



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Early in Longwood's odyssey, **Michael Jefferson** scored 30 points against No. 1 Illinois

Raleigh, N.C., airport; fly via Chicago to Champaign, Ill.

**DEC. 27** - Lose to No. 1 Illinois, 105-79.

**DEC. 28** - Fly from Champaign via Chicago to Las Vegas.

**DEC. 30** - Lose to Cincinnati in Las Vegas, 95-69.

**DEC. 31** - Lose to Valparaiso in Las Vegas, 75-68.

**DEC. 31** - Fly from Las Vegas to Hartford, Conn.; drive to Springfield, Mass., hotel.

**JAN. 2** - Lose to Quinnipiac, 102-93, in double overtime, in Hamden, Conn.

**JAN. 4** - Lose to Hartford, 63-58, in Hartford.

**JAN. 5** - Fly from Hartford to Washington, D.C. (Snow delays travel to Utah.)

**JAN. 6** - Fly from Washington to Salt Lake City via Denver.

**JAN. 7** - Lose to Utah Valley State, 75-57, in Orem, Utah.

**JAN. 8** - Fly from Salt Lake City to Denver.

**JAN. 10** - Lose to Northern Colorado, 99-91, in Greeley, Colo.

**JAN. 11** - Fly from Denver to Richmond (after flight to Raleigh is canceled), drive to Farmville.

"It's not fair," Northern Colorado coach Craig Rasmuson says of the firings, before rattling off the disadvantages faced by the small independent schools. "How do you get a kid to come play for you when you have no postseason, limited facilities and budgets, you are going to play most games on the road, you don't have any rivalries, you have lousy crowds at home? A lot of factors work against you."

### Making a Buck

The independent newcomers are an easy mark for established programs looking to pack their schedule with home games. Yet the relationship between the basketball elite and the road-weary newcomers is surprisingly symbiotic.

While the big schools get to play at home and usually end up with an easy victory, the smaller, fledgling programs reap the exposure that comes from playing at a higher level. They also get something else they desperately need: money.

Many of the mismatches between top-ranked schools and the independents are known as "guarantee games." Normally, visiting teams aren't given a cut of ticket sales or any other payment. But in guarantee games, the host pays the visitor to make the trip. Independents are ensured a payday of \$25,000 to \$60,000 for traveling to play teams from the Atlantic Coast

Conference or Big East, for instance.

"The big boys will give [the money] to you so they don't have to go on the road," says Ronnie Arrow, the coach at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi.

Like many coaches of Division I independents, Mr. Arrow is required by his school to generate a minimum amount of revenue from guarantee games. Mr. Arrow says most independents are expected to bring in \$100,000 to \$300,000 by playing these games. The money from guarantee games is critical, since the independents don't get to share in any of the revenue that leagues generate from conference championship tournaments and playing in the NCAA tournament.

### A Rare Winner

Corpus Christi, which didn't even have an athletics program six years ago, is one of the few bright spots in the Division I independent ranks. The school plays in a new, 8,600-seat arena built by the city, which is a major selling point in recruiting players, along with the campus's location on an island in the Gulf of Mexico.

The basketball team posted an impressive 20-8 record this season. Instead of serving as an early-season appetizer for big schools fattening up on easy competition before beginning league play, Corpus Christi has made the guarantee games anything but a sure win for the host schools. Among the teams it beat on the road this year are Florida State of the ACC and Big 12 member Baylor.

Corpus Christi also did something this year that few independents have managed to do: It got one of the big schools to come play on its court. In January, a sellout crowd watched the Islanders take on Oklahoma State, a team that made it to the Final Four in last year's NCAA tournament. Although Corpus Christi lost the game, 86-61, it was a defining moment for the program.

In many cases, says Mr. Arrow, the independents will sign "two and one" contracts with big schools like Oklahoma State, in which a team like Corpus Christi agrees to travel to the bigger school twice in exchange for one home game at its arena. But the established programs rarely honor those contracts, Mr. Arrow says. Instead, those schools often buy out the obligation to travel to the smaller school, paying a penalty of up to \$50,000 to renege on the contract. "They can afford to do that because if

### WHO'S WHO

The roster of Division I independents in men's basketball

#### TEXAS A&M CORPUS CHRISTI

NICKNAME: Islanders  
LOCATION: Corpus Christi, Texas  
ENROLLMENT: 8,227  
RECORD: 20-8

#### UTAH VALLEY STATE COLLEGE

NICKNAME: Wolverines  
LOCATION: Orem, Utah  
ENROLLMENT: 25,000  
RECORD: 15-12

#### UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PAN-AMERICAN

NICKNAME: Broncs  
LOCATION: Edinburg, Texas  
ENROLLMENT: 16,000  
RECORD: 12-16

#### UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-DAVIS

NICKNAME: Aggies  
LOCATION: Davis, Calif.

they stay at home they can make \$100,000," Mr. Arrow says.

### A Step Up, A Step Back

For most independents, the only home games are against other independents, and there are precious few of those. Longwood's schedule, with just about a third of its games at home this year, mostly against other independents, is a stark contrast to the team's experience in Division II.

The school was a nationally ranked Division II program for many years, capturing its conference championship in 2001. Its alumni include Jerome Kersey, who went on to become a standout for the National Basketball Association's Portland Trail Blazers.

In 1999, Longwood's board of visitors (which serves the same function as a board of trustees) voted to jump to Division I beginning in 2003, as part of an effort to increase the school's visibility. Located in the rural center of Virginia, the school of 4,300 students is little known outside the state.

"We want people to have heard of Longwood and then figure out where it is and what it is about," says Athletic Director Rick Mazzuto. "We hope we can help accomplish that with athletics."

Even with all the losses, the move to Division I is paying off, he says. "That 26-point loss to Illinois generated more interest than you can imagine."

Longwood was competitive with No. 1 Illinois for much of the game, trailing by just eight points in the second half in front of a crowd of nearly 17,000 Illinois partisans. Longwood guard Michael Jefferson scored 30 points in the game, one of the best performances by any Illinois opponent all year.

Mr. Jefferson says playing at Illinois was one of many "amazing" experiences made possible by the road-tripping ways of Longwood. Before this year, he had been on an airplane only once.

As the season progressed, though, the travel became more difficult, the star guard concedes. "At the beginning, it was a breeze," he says. "But the longer it went, the harder it was waiting in airports and carrying all those bags. We had days where we just did laundry in the hotels. It starts taking a toll on you mentally and physically."

Mr. Jefferson believes Longwood could have won more of its home games if the team wasn't worn down from travel -- a belief echoed by Mr. Mazzuto, who says he wants the team on the road less next year.

Like the other independents, Longwood aims to join a conference. Without a conference affiliation, taking part in the much-watched NCAA tournament is nearly impossible. An independent would have to win one of the few at-large slots to participate in March Madness, which is unlikely given the difficulty of winning games with such a brutal schedule.

Longwood has applied for membership in the Big South Conference. Such an affiliation would create rivalries and guarantee a stable slate of home games, says the team's coach, Mr. Gillian. And the conference champion automatically qualifies for the NCAA tournament.

"League affiliation is more important than anything," says Mr. Gillian. As for Longwood's chances of joining the Big South, the coach says league representatives "didn't say yes to us" following a visit to the campus last year, "but they said 'We are emphatically not saying no.'"

Big South Commissioner Kyle Kallander declines to comment on Longwood's prospects for joining the conference, though he does say the league is considering expansion.

"We had discussions with them," Mr. Kallander says of Longwood, "and they are a good institution."

--Mr. Armstrong is a staff reporter in The Wall Street Journal's Boston bureau.

Write to David Armstrong at [david.armstrong@wsj.com](mailto:david.armstrong@wsj.com)<sup>3</sup>

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ENROLLMENT: 30,170  
RECORD: 10-17

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**  
NICKNAME: Bears  
LOCATION: Greeley, Colo.  
ENROLLMENT: 11,855  
RECORD: 8-20

**INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY FORT WAYNE**  
NICKNAME: Mastodons  
LOCATION: Fort Wayne, Ind.  
ENROLLMENT: 11,767  
RECORD: 7-21

**LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY**  
NICKNAME: Lancers  
LOCATION: Farmville, Va.  
ENROLLMENT: 4,300  
RECORD: 1-30

**SAVANNAH STATE UNIVERSITY**  
NICKNAME: Tigers  
LOCATION: Savannah, Ga.  
ENROLLMENT: 2,700  
RECORD: 0-28

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