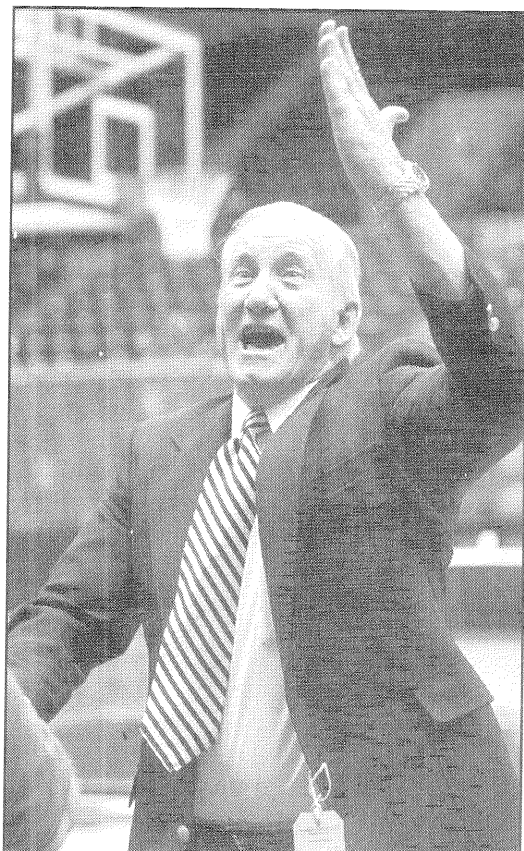
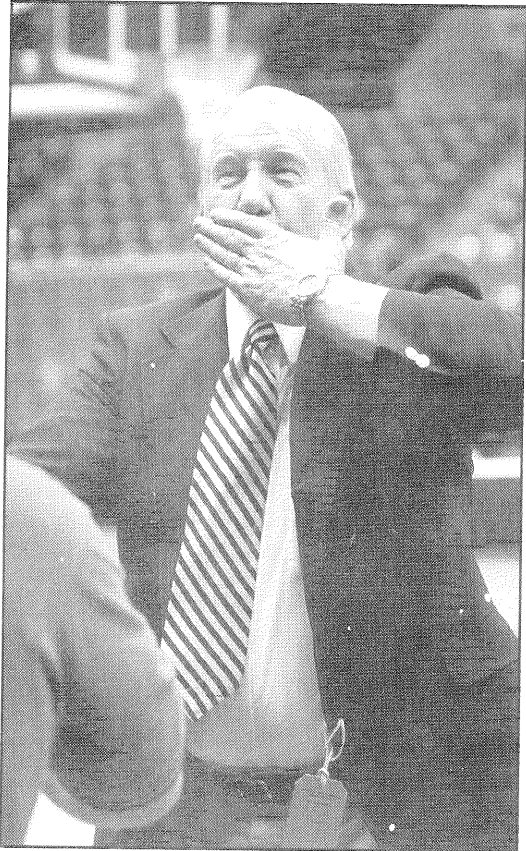


Final Four Preview

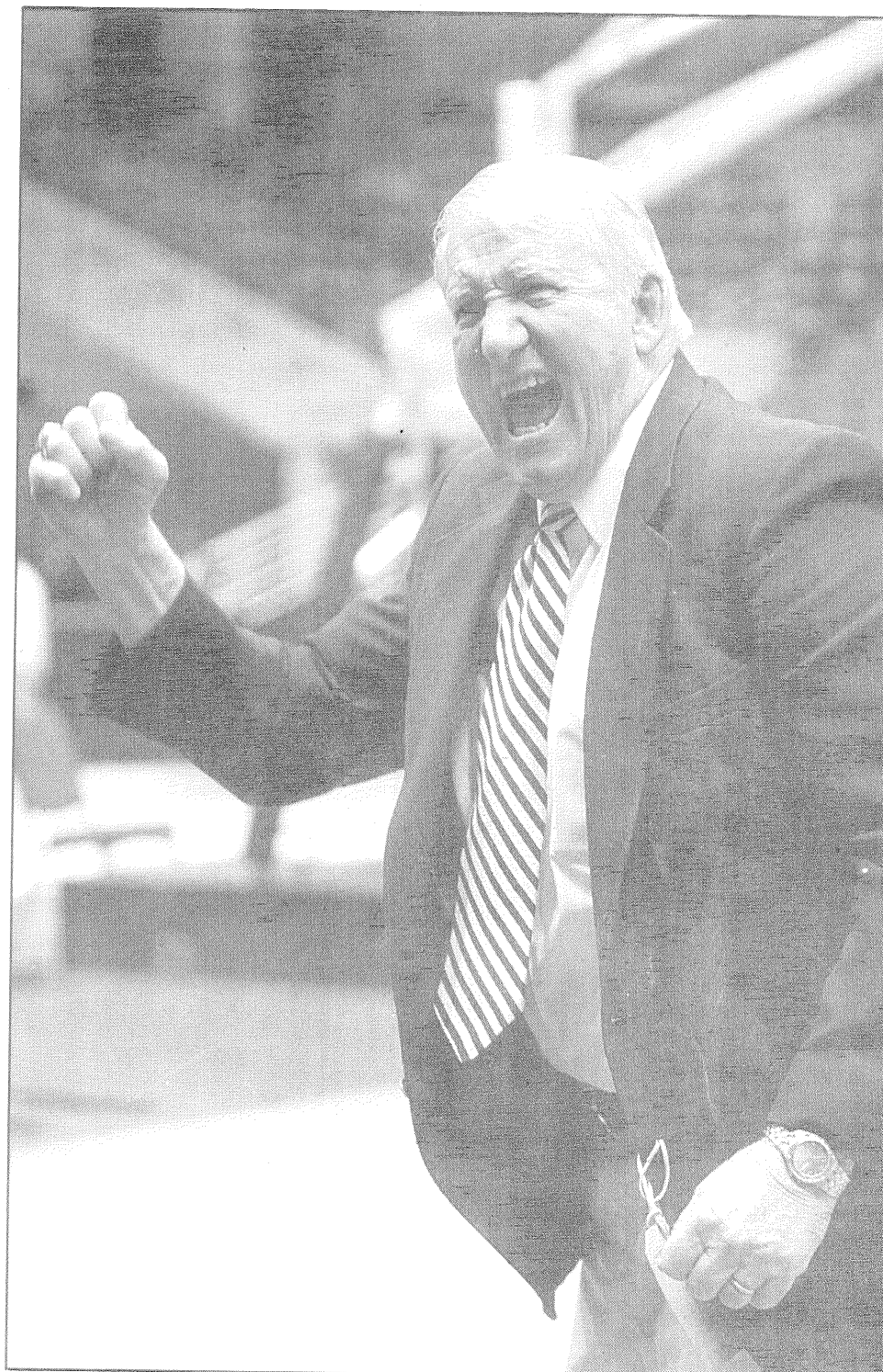


Mandi Singer/The Covington News

On the money: Newton head coach Ron Bradley blows a kiss to the crowd of supporters that gathered at the Macon Coliseum and saw his team defeat Douglass in the state quarterfinals.

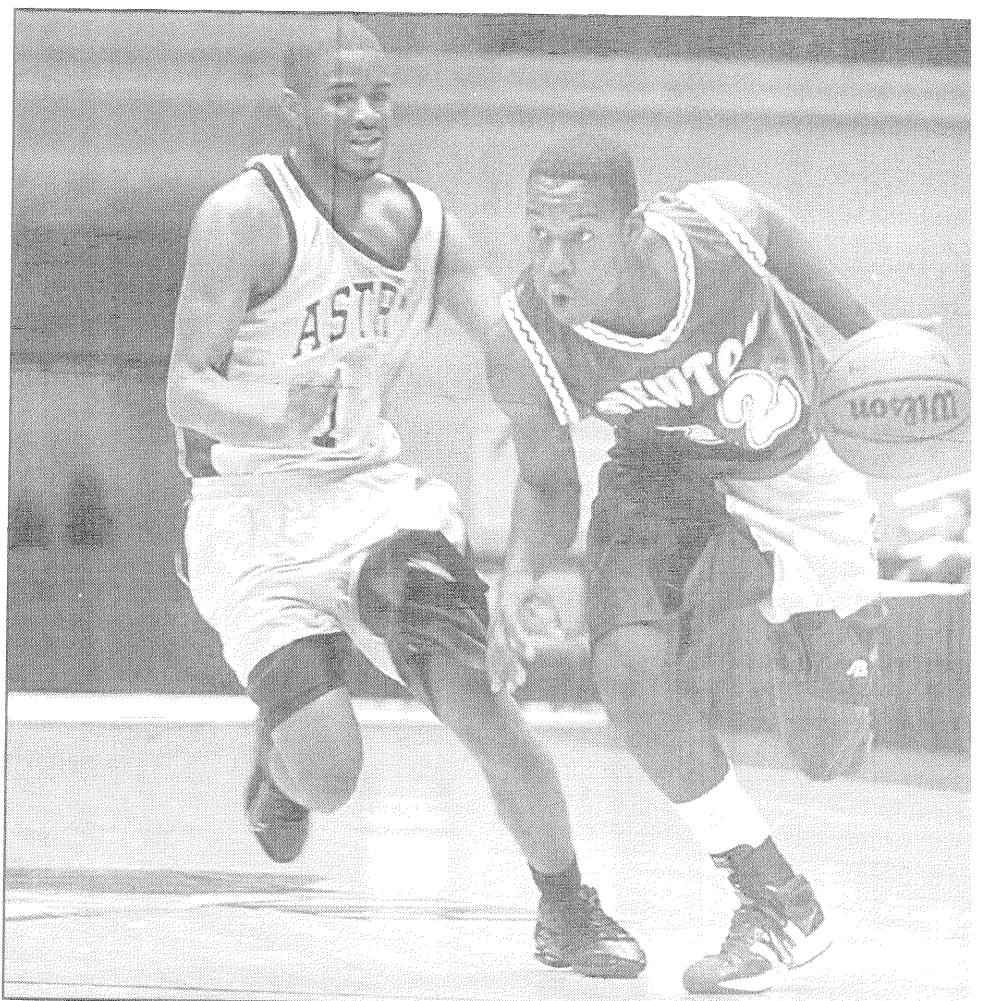
NEWTON'S ROAD TO THE ...

FINAL FOUR



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

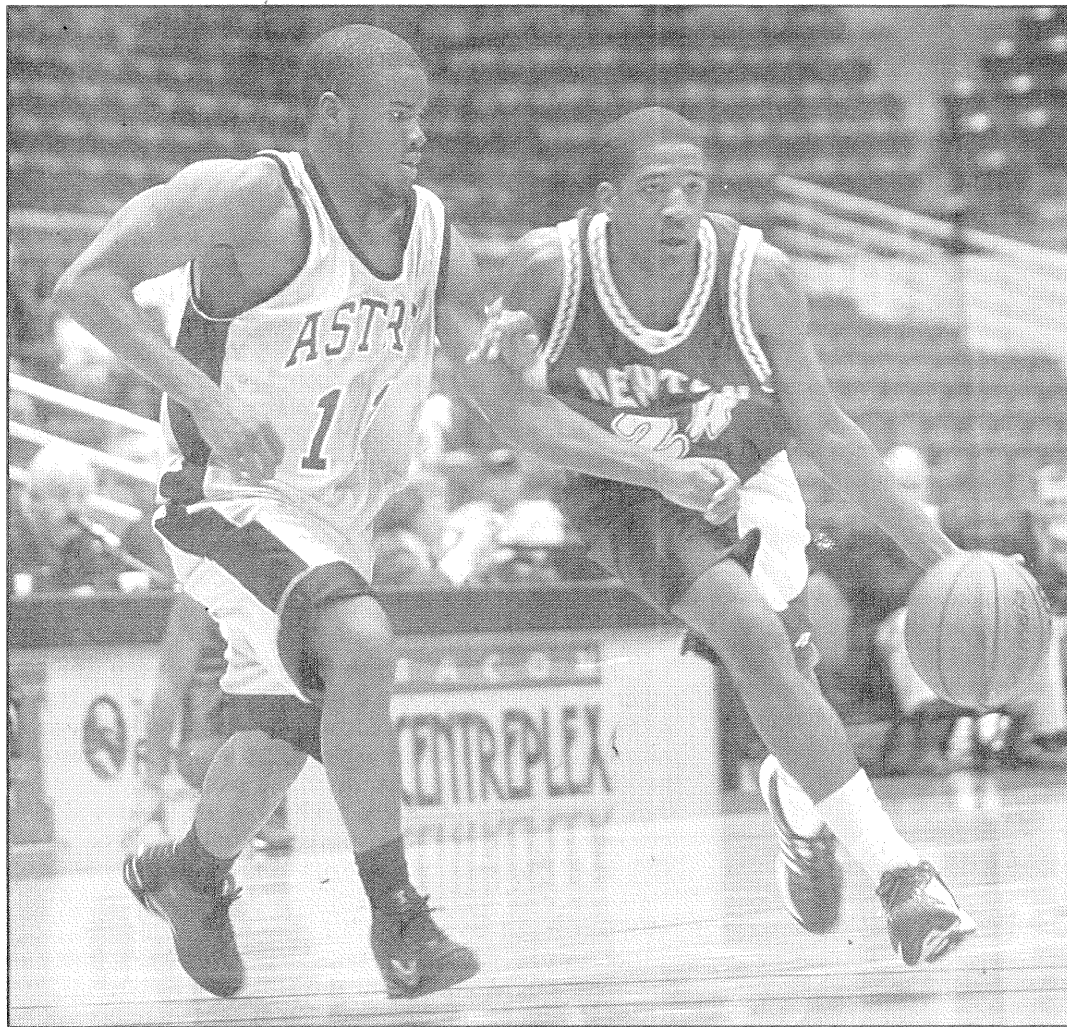
Ageless wonder: Newton head coach Ron Bradley pumps his fist in the air following his 1,301st victory of his 45-year career, a 7-point win over Douglass in the Elite Eight.



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

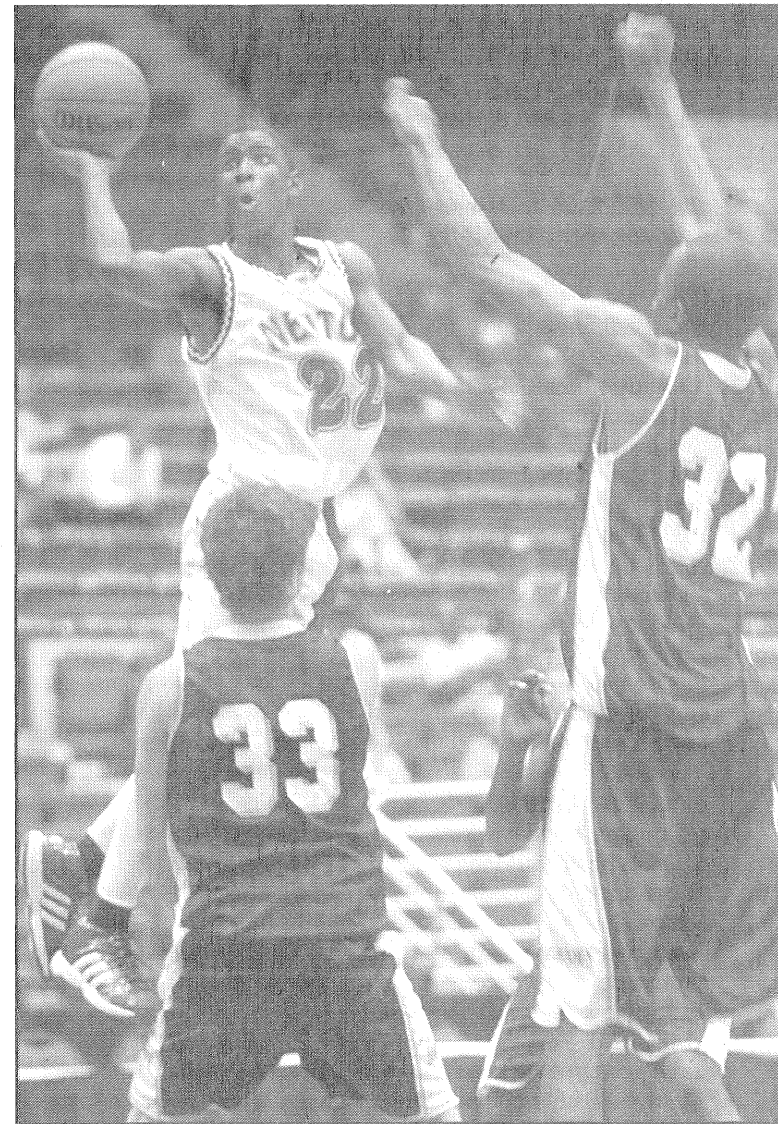
Not since 1981 has the Newton High School boys' basketball team been to the state semifinals. Now this special team with a special coach finds itself on the brink of its first state championship in 41 years. After wins over ninth-ranked East Coweta, 1-AAAA champ Lowndes and Douglass, the Rams (21-9) have reached a plateau few thought possible.

reached a plateau few thought possible.



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Deadly dribble: Newton's Todd Hoskins (24) slips past Douglass' Marcus Anthony (11) in his team's 51-44 win over the Astros Saturday at the Macon Coliseum. Hoskins has scored a team-high 51 points in three state tournament games for the Rams.



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Versatile threat: Above, Newton's Rudy Nolley (32) drives past Douglass' Marcus Anthony as the Rams triumphed over the Astros in the Class AAAAA State Tournament quarterfinals at the Macon Coliseum in Macon.

Flying high: Left, Newton's Jerrell Boswell (22) soars over Lowndes' Brent Brock (33) and 6-foot-9 Erving Sharpe (32) as the Rams cruised to a 21-point victory over the Region 1-A AAAA champion Vikings in the second round of the state playoffs.

Final Four Preview

INSIDE SCOOP

- **Who:** Newton (22-9) vs. Wheeler (29-1)
- **What:** Class AAAAA State Tournament Final Four
- **When:** Thursday, 5:30 p.m.
- **Where:** The Arena at Gwinnett Center, Duluth
- **Tickets:** Admission to the game is \$10.
- **How they got here:** Newton, the No. 2 seed out of Region 2-AAAAA, is unranked and defeated East Coweta (45-37), Lowndes (62-41) and Douglass (51-44) to reach the Final Four. Wheeler, the Region 6-AAAAA champion, is ranked No. 3 in the state and beat Meadowcreek (118-80), North Gwinnett (82-41) and defending state champion South Gwinnett (84-41) to reach the Final Four.
- **What's Next:** The Newton-Wheeler winner meets the North Gwinnett winner for the Class AAAAA state championship on Friday at 8:15 p.m. at the Gwinnett Center Arena.

Probable Lineups

NEWTON RAMS

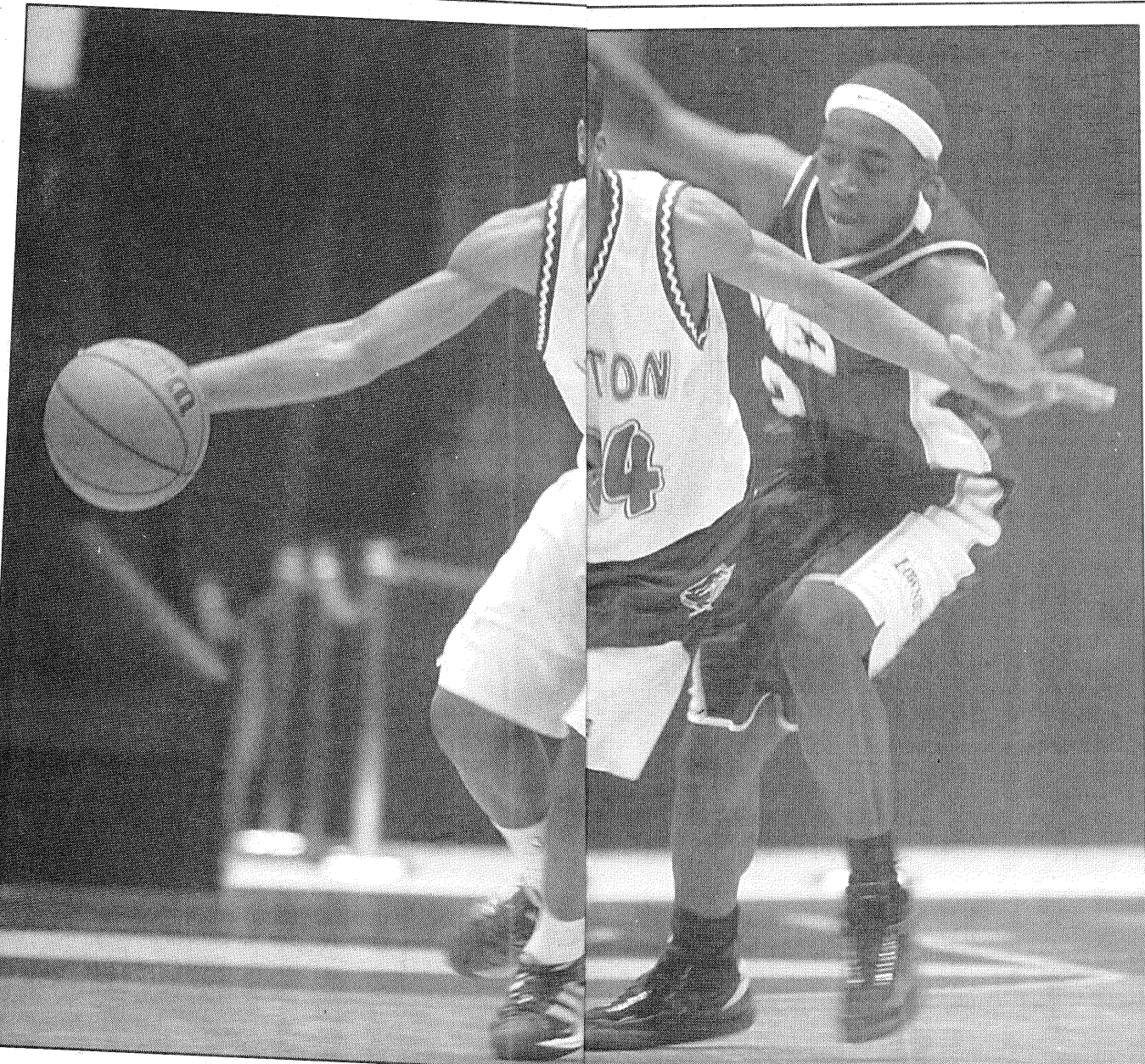
NO.	POS.	PLAYER	HT.
14	G	Brandon Finch	5-11
22	G	Jerrell Boswell	6-0
24	F	Todd Hoskins	6-1
32	F	Rudy Nolley	6-4
44	C	John Monk	6-2

Reserves: Jamahl Maddox (5-4, G), Trent Brown (5-8, F), Thomas (5-11, G), Walt Fortson (6-5, F), Armani Marie (6-6, F), Sean Monk (5-11, F), Larry Sheppard (6-4, F)

WHEELER WILDCATS

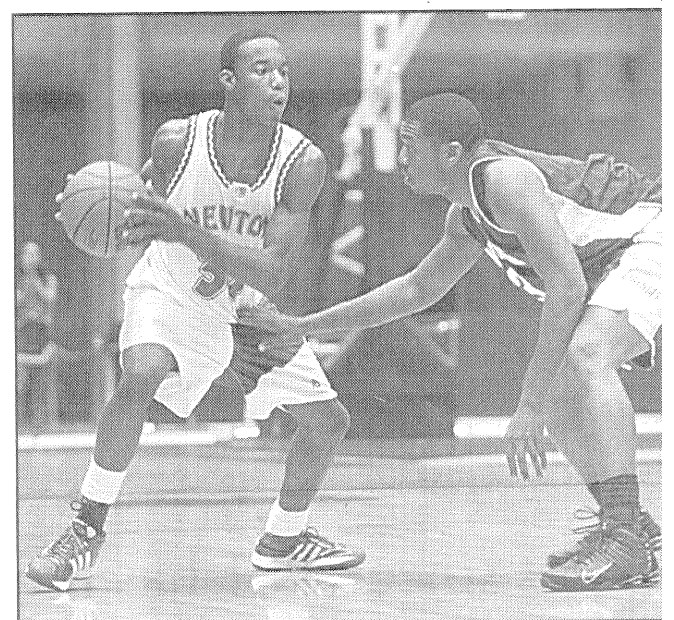
NO.	POS.	PLAYER	HT.
2	G	Sharaud Curry	5-10
10	G	James Florence	6-2
21	F	Chris Hanna	6-4
12	F	David Gonzalves	6-4
22	C	BeJay Corley	6-6

Reserves: Darrell Hubbard (6-3, F), Corey Towers (5-8, G), Armani Titus (5-10, G), Steven Wolcott (6-3, F), David Frost (5-9, G), Tiller (6-3, F), Dominique Nixon (6-3, F), Mark Fortes (6-4, F)



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Protecting the ball: Newton's Todd Hoskins (24) shields the ball from a defender in a second-round win over Lowndes.



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Planning his next move: Newton's Rudy Nolley, left, takes a defender off the dribble in a victory over Lowndes.

Dream: Cinderella reaches Final Four

From page 1B

"He had a great second half [against Douglass]," Bradley said. "Everybody's defense is geared towards him. He only shot twice in the first half."

In January, Boswell became the third Newton player — joining Legale Floyd and Darius White — in as many years to record his 1,000th career point. He made the leap in just two seasons and will likely surpass the 1,500-point plateau at some point in 2005-06.

A 'blessed' transfer

One year ago, Todd Hoskins was about as far away from the Newton High School boys' basketball team as a player could get, philosophically speaking.

Playing for arch rival Rockdale County, he had done little to endear himself to the Rams; he gave them fits with his ability to get to the basket and his proficient mid-range jump shot.

Last summer, everything changed. Hoskins switched sides, donned the blue and white and provided Newton with another proven scoring threat. Boswell had a running mate.

Hoskins scored 18 points in his debut — against Rockdale County no less — and has been one of the guys ever since.

"We've been blessed with Todd," Bradley said. "You look at Todd, and he's not that big, but he's a threat to score any time he touches the ball."

Hoskins has been Newton's most consistent player in the state tournament, striking for 51 points in three games, including 25 in a second-round rout of Lowndes. What's more, he has converted 21 of his 26 attempts (81 percent) from the foul line.

"He brings a lot to the table," Bradley said. "He's savvy, and he makes a lot of things happen out there. He's just a smart player."

Grizzled veteran

No player has been with the Newton program longer than Rudy Nolley has. After weathering two years of painfully inconsistent performance, the 6-foot-4 forward has blossomed into a legitimate star.

An even-tempered, soft-spoken senior who works quietly on the court, Nolley is averaging 13 points and a team-leading eight rebounds per game for the Rams, leading them to their first Final Four appearance since 1981.

"He's the old veteran here," Bradley said. "He makes great



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Scanning the floor: Newton's Trent Brown (5) keeps his dribble alive and surveys the court in a quarterfinal win over Douglass.

plays. He's just been outstanding for us."

Gifted with a deceptively soft touch, wicked quickness and the kind of leaping ability that defies gravity, Nolley has given the Rams a presence in the paint, helping provide balance to the floor.

Without him, Newton would be a far different team, in and out of the gym.

"Rudy's been the catalyst that's kept this team going," Bradley said. "When it's not going the way we want it to out there, when we're not getting it done, he's who we go to. I really respect the type of young man he's become."

Nolley has maintained his productivity deep into postseason, scoring 28 points and ripping down 25 rebounds in three state tournament games.

Thief of thieves

Brandon Finch was supposed to be the question mark, an unproven commodity at the unforgiving proving ground position of point guard.

Instead, he has become an invaluable asset, averaging better than 7.0 assists and 3.0 steals per game. Seems no player was better equipped to handle the jump to Region 2-A.

"We weren't sure what to expect [out of that position]," Bradley said, "but he has so much talent. He's real quick, and he understands the game."

Though not the offensive threat some projected him to be, Finch gets into the teeth of the defense with regularity, drawing defenders as he goes. He has attempted only six shots in his last 10 quarters of play, knocking down three of them.

"He's one of those guys who has always had a lot of talent," Bradley said. "Had I recognized it earlier, he probably would have been out there sooner. We tried to make him into something he wasn't."

What Finch has become is the essence of pure point guard play. He defends like a madman and distributes like a magician, a player with that sixth sense who knows where the ball is headed before it ever gets there.

"He always tries to make our team better," Bradley said. "He makes things happen on defense."

Big man, big heart

John Monk has conquered a great deal of adversity during his senior year with these Rams, not the least of which

was a mid-season benching.

He is the muscle for an undersized Newton team that lacks the ability to bang beneath the basket. A player who can battle the big bodies on the blocks, Monk's importance cannot be underscored enough.

"He's the heart of our team," Bradley said. "He went through some problems earlier this year and lost his starting job, but he's matured as a man."

Monk's contributions rarely make it into newsprint, since they're measure more by what he keeps the opposing team from doing. But on occasion, as he did against Douglass, he'll sneak into the lane, pull down an offensive rebound and knock down a shot that turns the tide.

Able to handle himself around the rim, he can score when asked to, as evidenced by the 15 points he scored in Newton's regular-season finale.

"He's just given us tremendous effort," Bradley said. "He's a level-headed player who doesn't hurt us out there."

Out of the blue

Much like his team, Trent Brown seemed to appear out of thin air.

Once a cast off, he has become Newton's sixth man, the first off the bench, the player in charge of restoring life where there is none. At 5-foot-8, he regularly defends men a foot taller than he is, proving just how far tenacity can go.

"Of any player I've ever coached," Bradley said, "he might be the most pleasant surprise."

A year ago, Brown sat in the stands, hidden behind dread locks and baggy clothes, a distant admirer who simply wasn't ready to play. When he showed up for summer workouts, something had changed. Bradley threw him a bone and gave him an opportunity.

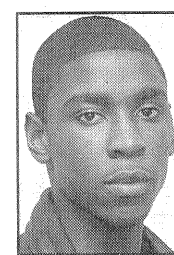
"We didn't want to keep him," Bradley said. "Two years ago, we had to take his uniform from him because he wouldn't do what we asked him to do, but he kept working."

His career rekindled by the fire that burns within him, Brown is instant energy off the bench. He personifies everything Bradley's program is about, a self-made player who has maxed out his physical tools.

"I can't say enough about him," Bradley said. "Being able to deal with people like Trent Brown is why you get into coaching."

Star Watch

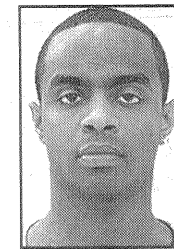
■ **Newton (Jerrell Boswell, G):** A prolific 3-point s has developed into a more of a threat off the drib



BOSWELL

Boswell has been Newton's most offensive threat throughout his junior. The 6-foot guard can be frigid opponents if he gets hot, as was when he lit up Lithonia for a care points in January. Skilled at run screens, he has a lightning-quick that makes him almost impossible guards his size or smaller to defend. Boswell burst on the scene generating nearly 17 points per game sophomore. He scored in double figures in all but five team's games, scoring 20 or more 10 different times.

■ **Wheeler (Sharaud Curry, G):** Perhaps the best in the state outside of South Gwinnett's Mike Mer



CURRY

has dominated opponents in the tournament, averaging a team-high per game. He scored 31 points in round victory over North Gwinnett 10, he is not a physically imposing but his talents are what make Wheeler one of the top collegiate prospect state, he is currently being courted by Tennessee, Clemson, Mississippi, Arkansas, Miami, among others. A relentless who maximizes his quickness, Curry spear of Wheeler's full-court pressure defense, which treated more than one worthy opponent this season.

History Lesson

Wheeler High School

Wheeler has a rich and storied tradition, having region championships and three state titles (1992-2003) since 1994. The Wildcats have finished the ranked in the top 5 seven times in 11 years and won the state championship in two of the past three seasons. Their program has produced such marquee player as Abdur-Rahim, who has enjoyed an all-star career in NBA, and D.A. Layne, who played at the University of North Carolina.

Newton High School

The Newton High School boys' basketball team has a rich history of its own, winning a state championship in 1964. The Rams have been to the state semifinals in school history and have advanced to the championship game three times (1964, 1966 and 1970). They appeared in the Final Four 24 years ago under the coach Richard Porter, losing 78-49 to Baldwin.

— Compiled by