

CLASS AAAAA STATE TOURNAMENT SWEET 16

Fighting to stay alive

COMMENTARY

Win or lose, special team deserves to be remembered

Amazed? You bet I am. When this high school basketball season tipped off three months ago, I had about as much hope for the Newton boys' basketball team as I did for peace succeeding in the Middle East. Not because I doubted the coach or the players, but because of the cut-throat reality that they were about to enter.

There aren't too many teams in the state any classification, that you top to bottom like Class AAAAA. Consider well the team from the region performed in state playoffs this week. All four advanced, and Tri-Cities, the No. 2 seed, won its showdown with Class AAAAA champion Newnan by points.

That the list of Sweet 16 teams includes Newton blows my mind. I figured I'd be gearing up for basketball and those 35-degree March nights by now. Instead, I'm just along for the ride.

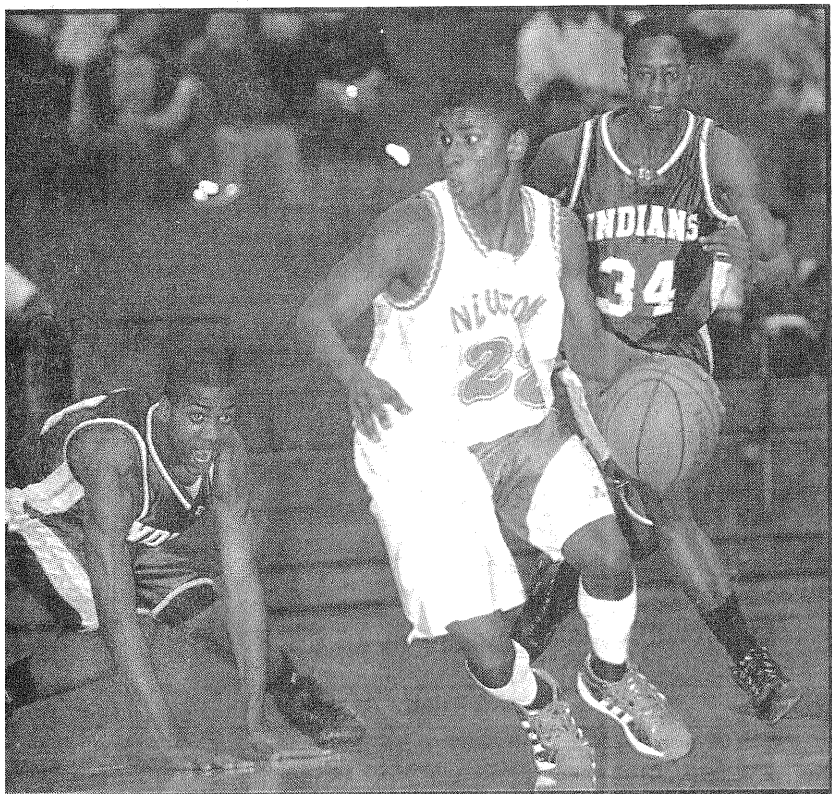
And it might not end for a while. With Coffee's upset of eighth-ranked Savannah in the bottom of Newton's bracket, the Rams have a real chance to reach the Final Four. Should they beat Lowndes Thursday that would stand in their way of Coffee or Douglass, a team that has already beaten twice, once by 31 points.

Few outside our box realize how special, how unlikely, this season has been. At the start, I quietly wondered if the Rams would be able to break .500 and might have taken a bet with someone who thought they could.

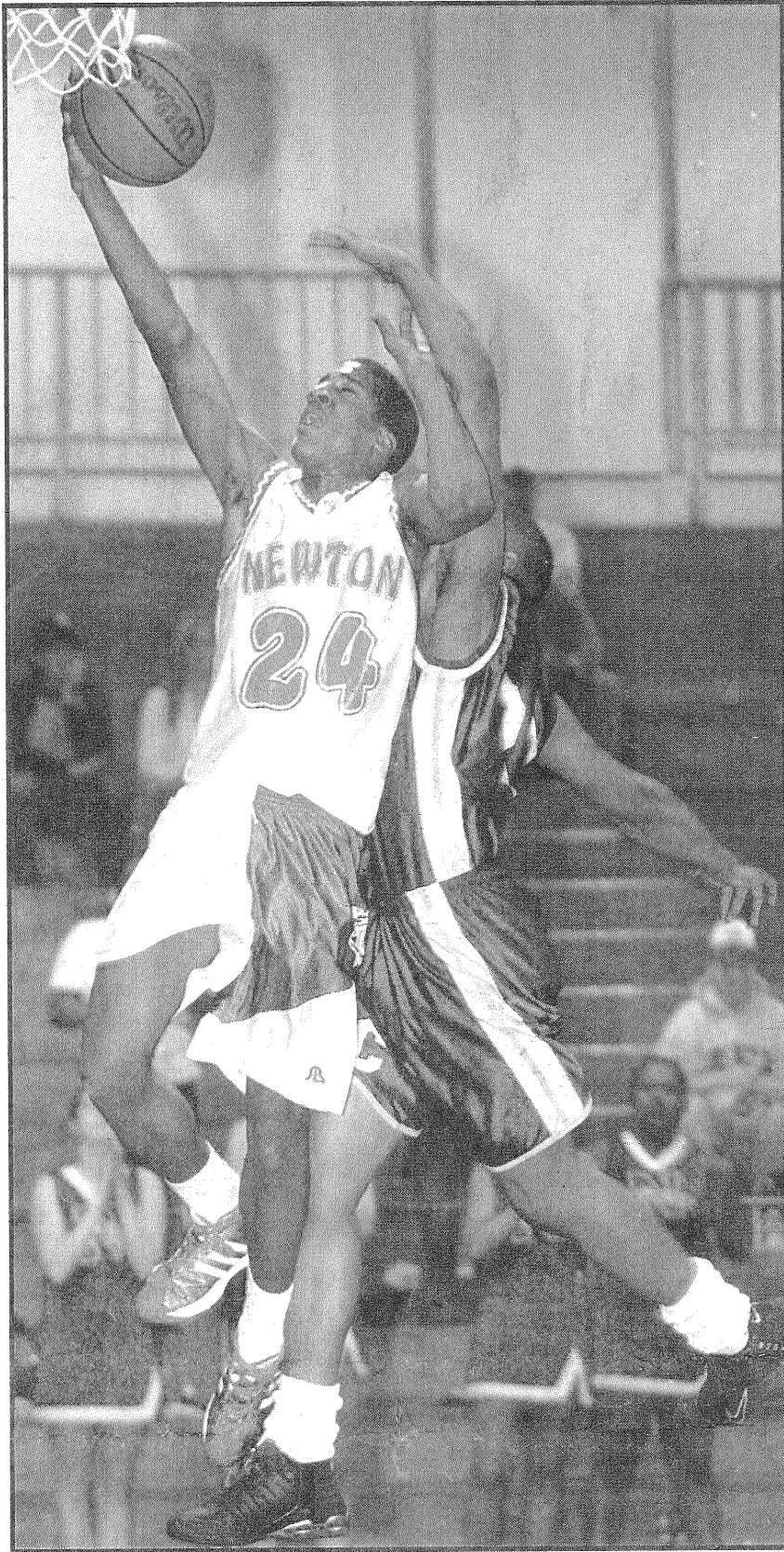
That all changed when Newton played its very first region game this year. Riverdale walked in with all the hype, with a sophomore that might someday play at Duke with a coach who had state championship rings on each hand and had beaten.

It was then that we were awakened to the possibilities, to the fact that something beyond our grasp might happen.

See Knapp p. 7B



Mandi Singer/The Covington News



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Up, up and away: Newton's Todd Hoskins (24) rises to the rim in Saturday's 45-37 win over East Coweta in the opening round of the state tournament.

Creating space: Newton's Jerrell Boswell (22) leaves two East Coweta defenders in his wake in the first round of the state playoffs.

Region 1-AAAAA champion Lowndes next up for Newton

Brian Knapp
knapp@covnews.com

The Newton High School boys' basketball team has gone where few of its predecessors have gone before. Now, the Rams want to go a little bit further.

In the Sweet 16 for just the second time since 1984, Newton challenges Region 1-AAAAA champion Lowndes in the second round of the Class AAAAA State Tournament at 5:30 p.m. Thursday at the Macon Coliseum in Macon.

Newton (19-9) has won two of its last three games and is one of four Class AAAAA teams alive in the draw. With Coffee's upset of eighth-ranked Savannah, the Rams will not have to face a ranked opponent until the state semifinals at the earliest.

A door has been opened. "We're in a very competitive bracket," Newton head coach Ron Bradley said.

Lowndes (21-8), though unranked, is perhaps the most highly regarded team left in the Rams' side of the bracket. The Vikings bring with them one of the state's premier players in power forward Terrance Vinson.

Vinson, a 6-foot-8, 215-pound power forward, has already committed to play for Virginia Tech. He is averaging 13.2 points, 9.6 rebounds and 3.8 blocks per game and was chosen as the Region 1-AAAAA Player of the Year. He has had as many as 21 rebounds in a game this season.

THE GAME

■ **Who:** Newton (19-9, No. 2 seed out of 2-AAAAA) vs. Lowndes (21-8, No. 1 seed out of 1-AAAAA).

■ **What:** Class AAAAA State Tournament Sweet 16.

■ **When:** Thursday, 5:30 p.m.

■ **Where:** Macon Coliseum, Macon.

■ **Admission:** \$7.

■ **Key Players** Newton - Jerrell Boswell, G, Rudy Nolley, F, Todd Hoskins, F; Lowndes - Terrance Vinson, F, Brent Brock, G, Erving Sharpe, C.

■ **MORE COVERAGE:** With one more win Newton's Ron Bradley will be the fourth to reach 1,300. See 2B

Size is arguably Lowndes' main strength. In addition to Vinson, the Vikings also get production from 6-foot-9 Erving Sharpe, who played a significant role in their 53-31 first-round victory over Brunswick.

"They're big," Bradley said. "They've got a lot of size. If our guys don't play well, we won't be playing much longer."

Lowndes, which has made two consecutive Sweet 16 appearances, has tremendous depth and routinely goes 10 players deep.

"They play a lot of people," Bradley said. "They've got some good athletes."

The Vikings play at a controlled pace, maximizing each possession.

Bradley thinks that could work to his team's advantage, negating some of the Lowndes height.

"They like to play slow, which is an advantage for us," Bradley said. "If the ball doesn't go in the air, you can't go get it. We've got to get good shots."

Newton outlasted East Coweta 45-37 in the first round of the state playoffs Saturday, recording its first state tournament win since it beat Murray County in the first round six years ago.

"That was a big one," Bradley said. "The last two years, we'd wound up playing the favorite [in the first round]. We got a more favorable draw this time and a chance to

stay around."

Todd Hoskins delivered 12 points (10 in the fourth quarter) to drive the Rams past East Coweta, breaking a 5-game losing streak in state tournament play. Rudy Nolley, the only other Newton player in double figures, pumped in 10 points and ripped down seven rebounds.

Newton, which won its only state championship 41 years ago, committed only eight turnovers in the game. It forced twice that many from East Coweta in the second half alone.

The survivor of the Newton-Lowndes showdown will play the Coffee-Douglass winner in the state quarterfinals at 5:30 p.m. Saturday at the Macon Coliseum in Macon.