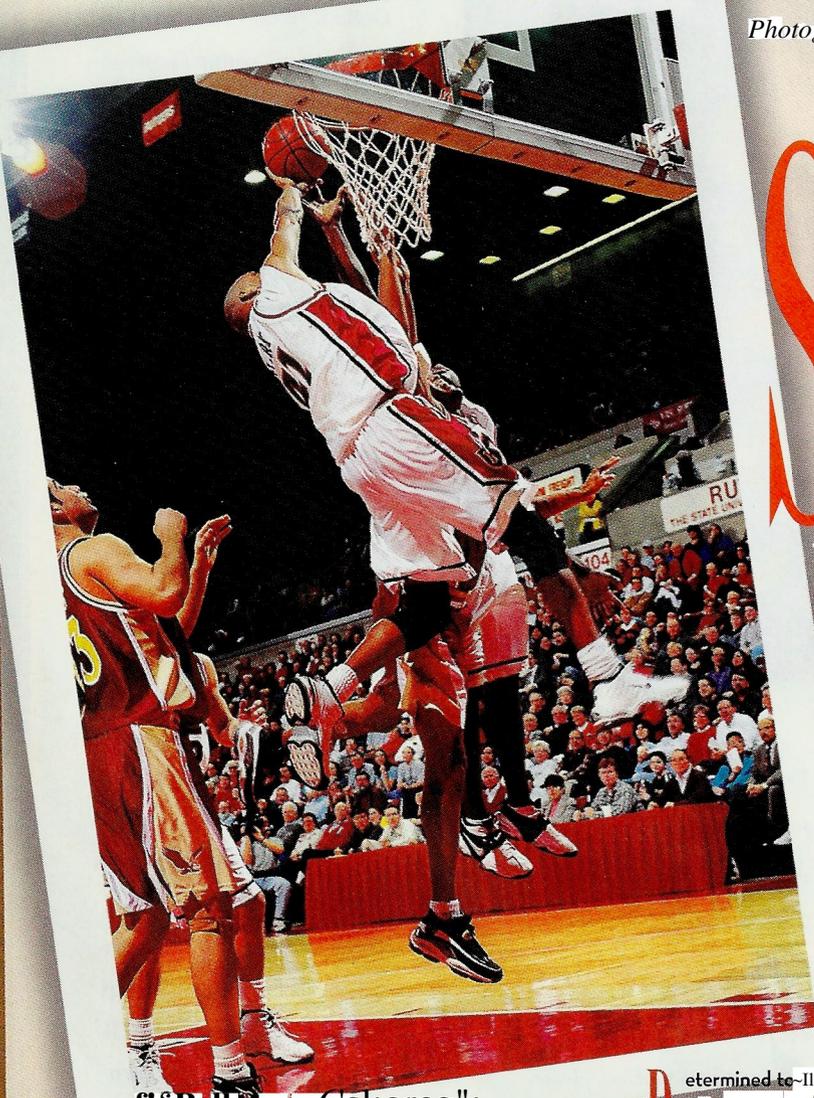


the BASKETBALL DIARY

In his courtside chronicle, Scarlet Knights senior Eric Clark reveals what it's like to shoot for his dreams one last time.

Edited by Bill Glovin

Photographs by Nick Romanenko



Since 1994, when Rutgers' basketball program won the recruiting battle for Eric Clark (LC'98), his life on the court has been about making adjustments: going from a powerhouse program at Lutheran High School in Rockford, Illinois, to a struggling college team; beginning his career under Coach Bob Wenzel in the Atlantic 10 Conference and ending it under Kevin Bannon in the Big East Conference; and, at 6' 8" and 205 pounds, often playing in the pivot instead of what seemed like his more natural position, power forward. In his first three seasons under Wenzel, Clark proved to be a dominant shot blocker and rebounder—when he could keep out of foul trouble and on the court. Entering his senior year, Clark was determined to help the team achieve its goals—finish the season above .500 and get a postseason berth. He also had some personal goals to meet—improve his offense, stay off the bench, serve as a role model for the younger players, and graduate on time with a double major. Maintaining a journal throughout the season helped Clark keep track of his progress—and lets fans snatch a glimpse into the life of a college athlete.

Determined to improve his skills in the state of Illinois, Clark visited schools from Boston to Texas A&M. "I chose Rutgers based on the acceptance I felt from my future teammates, the University's academic reputation, and the promise that I would start as a freshman," says Clark.

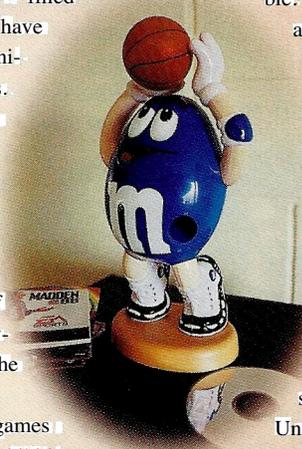
Practice Make Perfect

Like most players on Division I teams, I came from a high school program that was used to winning. In four years, the games we lost were mostly to Antoine Walker's team, and now he's a star with the Boston Celtics. That's why my first three seasons at Rutgers were hard to accept, but this one—my last at Rutgers—is filled with promise. Several things have changed—the coach, the uniforms, and the athletic logos. The first few weeks of practice have gone well, although I doubt our new coach, Kevin Bannon, would agree. The sessions are somewhat slow and methodical because we're learning his system. Some of the guys, including me, are having a little trouble grasping the new concepts.

I'll be glad when the games start, even if the first two are exhibitions. I dread practice—it's the same thing over and over again. My high school coach was the first to get on my case about not practicing hard enough, telling me that if I wanted to be a successful player, I couldn't turn my game on and off like a light. Coach Wenzel relayed the same message, and I'm sure Coach Bannon will, too.

My feeling is, the difference between someone who loves basketball and someone who likes it comes out in practice. Someone who truly loves the game can't wait to get to the gym every day and shoot 100-plus jump shots to improve. Me, I would take those 100 shots and divide them into 25 jumpers, 25 from half-court, 25 with my eyes closed, and 25 left-handed hooks from beyond the three-point line. That's what I find fun. And as long as I'm having fun, I'll put up with all the other stuff and continue to play basketball.

It's the games I live for: the intensity, the emotion, the competition. Our first game is an exhibition against an opponent we play every year, Marathon Oil. The game should give us an idea of what kind of team we have. We'll also get a sense of what needs work. Coach has been giving us more offensive options, and our scrimmages have felt pretty good. We need to concentrate on cutting down on turnovers, taking our time on offense, and making things happen. It's going to be interesting to see how my new team-



mates compete against other players. I think they're ready for the challenge; they might even surprise themselves.

Team Work

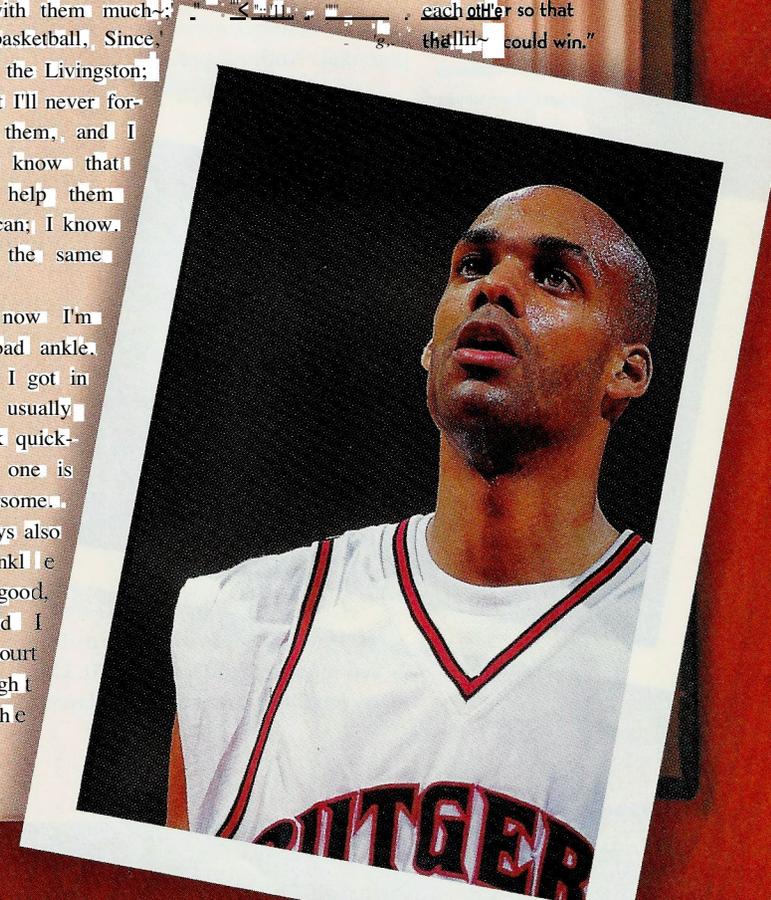
We lost to Marathon Oil in triple overtime, but it was a good test. Coach didn't like our execution, especially on offense. He called it "horrible." I'd have to agree. When most coaches are upset or mad, they let you know it. Coach Bannon is the same way. He expresses his disappointment loudly.

After the game, I found out that two teammates had been suspended for academics, which are now being stressed more than they were in the past. Since I've been at Rutgers, five teammates—all African-Americans—have been kicked out or left school. No matter what they've allegedly done, I haven't forgotten any of them. It hurts to see them pass up the opportunities that the University offers. I just hope that the younger guys will learn from these suspensions and not make the same mistakes.

As teammates, we compete, travel, study, and eat together practically every day for nine months a year. I feel a special connection to the people I've gone into battle with. Yes, though I don't hang out with them much outside of basketball. Since I'm over on the Livingston campus. But I'll never forget any of them, and I hope they know that I'll always help them any way I can; I know they'll do the same for me.

Right now I'm fighting a bad ankle sprain that I got in practice. I usually bounce back quickly, but this one is really bothersome. Alvydas Tenys also has an ankle sprain—not good, since V and I are sharing court time. He might not make the

A quiet person accustomed to leading by example, Clark wasn't comfortable when new coach Kevin Bannon urged team members to put more pressure on each other to succeed. "But as the season progressed," says Clark, "the focus shifted to finding ways to help each other so that they could win."



season opener with Princeton, and he missed our second exhibition against the Around the World All-Stars, an easy win. For the most part, Coach seems satisfied with the way we ran the offense. Now we have to focus on Princeton, a team that we've lost to throughout my college career. I'd love to pay them back them and a lot of other teams we'll play this year. Plus, since I've been at Rutgers, we've never won a season opener—it would be great to get one.

November 22-December 7:

Consistently Inconsistent

One problem Clark has faced is not being able to earn income during the academic year due to NCAA regulations. "I'm fortunate that my girlfriend, Tanesha Ogletree, works full time for ADP as a computer trainer and pays my way when we go out," says Clark. He feels that the NCAA should find a way to let student-athletes

What a horrible start! We lost at home to Princeton, beat Columbia, and lost to Iona. We then opened the Big East schedule by losing to Miami and Connecticut. Heads were hanging low in the locker room, but I've learned that you can't afford to hang your head for long. A day or two later, if you're not mentally ready to go, things can turn ugly fast.

Coach is really upset because we had five days to focus on stopping Princeton, which, as usual, ran their offense to a T. They made us play defense for the entire shot clock, then would go back door for a lay-up. If you go by statistics, it was probably one of the better games of my college career, but that doesn't matter much when you lose.

It was good to get our first win of the season against Columbia, even though we didn't play to our potential. Nothing personal against Columbia, but we should have handled them with ease. Instead we struggled to run our stuff, especially in the first half.

A very talented Iona team put a beating on us. It was one of those games you just want to forget—when nothing seems to go right. We turned the

ball over, failed to rebound, broke down defensively, and lacked intensity, pride, and heart. Coach didn't have to say anything—we know we played like garbage.

After the Iona game, I found out that I'd lost my starting position to V. I hope I'm not a victim of what I call "the senior screw-over." At Rutgers, it hasn't been uncommon for a senior to lose his starting position or see his role reduced. The spark is usually a bad game or a misunderstanding with the coach. It then evolves into getting yelled at during practice and drastically reduced playing time.

I've seen seniors in this position go one of two ways: They butt heads with the coach or keep working hard to contribute to the team. No matter how bad things get, I won't stop working and competing in practice. And I won't take it out on V, a fresh egg from Lithuania. Now that he's starting, I'm going to try to remember how I was treated when I was

in his shoes. In my freshman year, I started over a four-year senior in our second game. At the time, I didn't think I brought as much to the table as he did. The remarkable part was that he was incredibly supportive, never put me down, and always encouraged me to find my niche on the team. So now I'll try to do the same for V.

You know the really sad thing about the senior that I replaced? He didn't even play in his last college game.

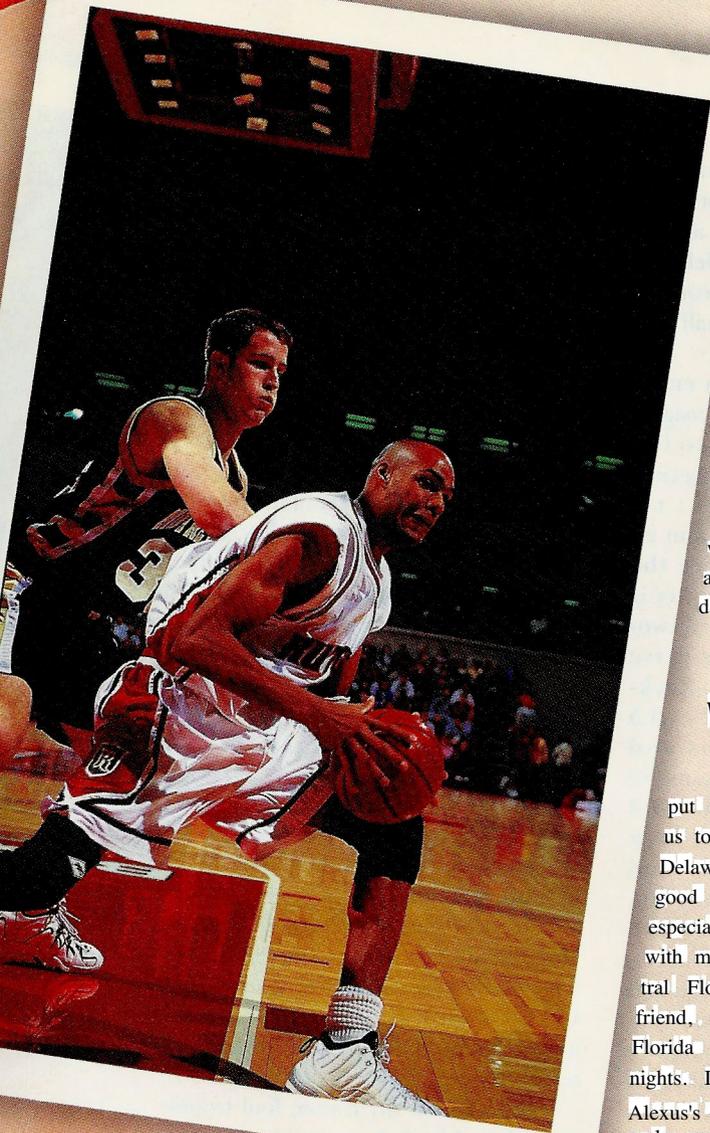
December 8-January 4:

The Cheale from Hell

So far, this semester has been the hardest of my college career. I'm taking six classes—18 credits—and can't wait for it to end in two weeks. I'm in the middle of finals, plus I'm finishing two 20-page papers, one 25-page paper, and a portfolio. My tendency to procrastinate means that I'll be pulling several all-nighters in the next two weeks, including a couple before games. Lately, I've been lucky to get two or three hours of sleep a night. I wish I spent as much time sleeping as practicing. The night before the Wagner game, I was in the computer lab on Busch all night, packed up around 7:00 in the morning, and headed straight to a final on College Avenue.

Basketball and schoolwork seem to take up every minute of the day. I wish I could see more of Tanesha, my girlfriend, and had more time and a little more spending money to socialize. Since NCAA regulations don't allow athletes to work during the school year, I've been a little strapped for cash—the money I saved over the summer is gone. Until my parents were able to help me get a car, I rode my bicycle 11 miles roundtrip down Route 130





to my job as a forklift driver on the overnight shift at a food-storage warehouse in Dayton. For me, the inability to work and earn a few dollars during the school year is part of the price you pay as a student-athlete.

If it sounds like I'm complaining, or that basketball is too consuming and my schedule too hectic, I have only myself to blame. I like staying busy and was never forced into basketball by one of those famers that continually puts pressure on their kid. The only thing my parents pushed me into was going to church on Sundays, but I'm glad they did.

I started playing basketball for fun as a kid on five-foot baskets at the Boys and Girls Club in Rockford. By the sixth grade, I was 6' 6" and could jam. The next thing I knew it was the summer after seventh grade, and I was receiving my first letters from recruiters. I still have them, if Mom hasn't thrown them out. Serious recruiting started in ninth and 10th grades. Tom Abatamarco at the University of Colorado was sending me two or three handwritten

letters a day, and eventually I followed him to Rutgers, which guaranteed that I would start my freshman year.

College has flown by. Now winter break is coming, and I desperately need the four days off, which is the most free time I've had in four years. The rest of the students get three or four weeks off, but the basketball program doesn't go on vacation. I haven't been to Rockford since June, so I'm going back to spend my four free days with family and friends. The first two days I plan to do nothing but sleep; my body will need to recuperate from the all-nighters and rigors of basketball. I'm sure the four days will fly.

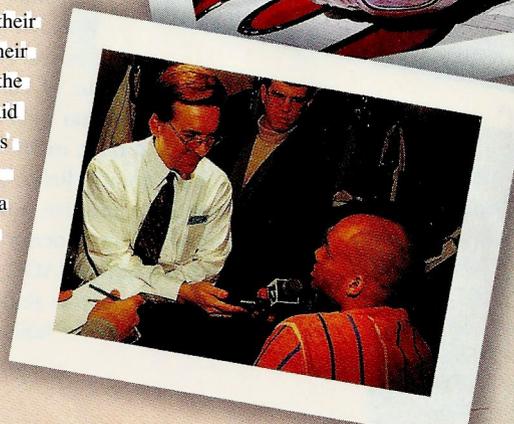
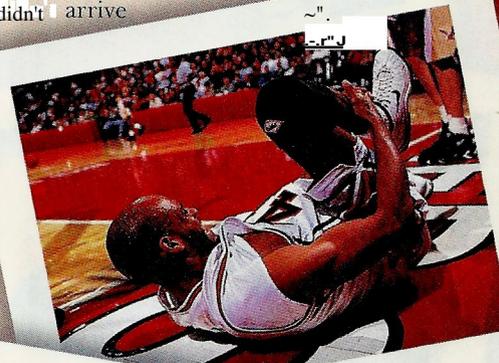
January 5-January 27:

When Opportunity Knocks

Things finally started to turn for us as we put together a five-game winning streak to bring us to 6-4. The streak started last month against Delaware State at home and continued against a good South Florida team on the road, which was especially fun for me because I got to hang out with my younger sister~Alexus, who plays for Central Florida Community College. My father, his friend, and my high school basketball coach flew to Florida to see me and Alexus play on back-to-back nights. I had hoped to get to Florida in time to see Alexus's game, but our flight didn't arrive early enough. She's very talented, and I miss watching her play. We talked and giggled all night after my game.

The most notable win in our streak came against 16th-ranked Temple in Philadelphia. Everything clicked for us. We were the first to beat Temple in their new gym and on their new floor. After the game someone said that Rutgers' men's basketball team hadn't beat a ranked team on the road in 20-plus years. Coach has been driving us hard in prac-

Clark, who sprained his ankle against Boston College, was able to play through the injury and answer a reporter's questions afterwards. "It's nice when they write positive things, but I've also seen them take what you say out of context and write some pretty nasty stuff," he says. "The first thing most of my teammates would do at breakfast was read the stories about us. I never did."



Given the option of watching a basketball game or a movie on television, Clark says he'd choose the movie everytime. "The only game I watched during the NCAA tournament was the final, and I fell asleep on it," he says. "Maybe that will change, but for now, there's a hundred other things I'd rather do than watch a game that I'm not playing in."

tice, but I have to admit that it's paying dividends.

Our winning streak ended abruptly against Syracuse. At one point we were down by more than 20 points, but we battled back to lose by just three. A loss is a loss though. We got back on track against our in-state rival, Seton Hall—our shots fell and our defense was tenacious. We held them scoreless for the first nine minutes of the second half and wound up beating them by 32 points.

It's remarkable how games and even entire seasons can change in a hurry. After that magical game against Seton Hall, we lost our next game against

Notre Dame. Since the campus is only a two-hour drive from Rockford,

friends and family came to the game and helped me forget the aches and pains or the flu.

We then lost two more games—Dne to Boston College and an on-the-road nail-biter to Pittsburgh in overtime-making it three conference losses in a row. I was so sick against Boston College that I seriously considered sitting out a game for the first time in my career.

I played anyway and scored more points than usual. A few reporters and friends are wondering if the flu is actually helping me. Our record is now 7-5 and 1-7 in the conference, putting

us dead last out of 13 teams. Spirits are low, but I'm confident that we'll bounce back.

Coach put me back in the starting lineup in Pittsburgh. It's a great relief to know that I'm ending my career on a positive note. My offense continues to improve; I even tied my career high of 20 points against Pitt at the RAC. I think it's based on more confidence and some selfishness on my part. In the past, whenever the ball came to the post, I

would automatically pass it out. Now, I try to take the ball to the basket. It feels great to hear Coach say that the Leat11 needs to get the ball inside to me more. In the past, plays were never run for me.

The spring semester—my last—starts Tuesday. Six classes for a total of 19 credits. It's Lough packing a double major-administration of justice and communications-int.o for four years, but I'm determined to graduate on time. The three internships I've taken during college have helped to give me an idea of what I may want to do with my life if basketball isn't an option after this year. This past summer, I worked with juveniles at Rutgers' Project CORE in Newark, something I really enjoyed. The other two internships—designing Web pages for athletics and assisting in the video department of Johnson & Johnson—took a lot of time and energy, but were very beneficial.

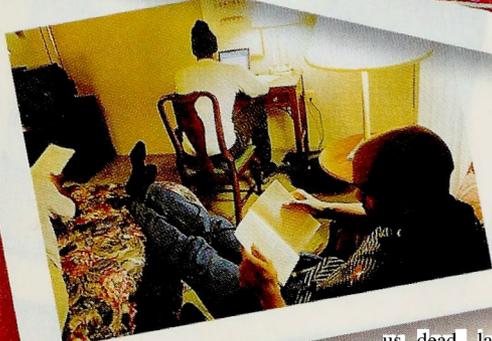
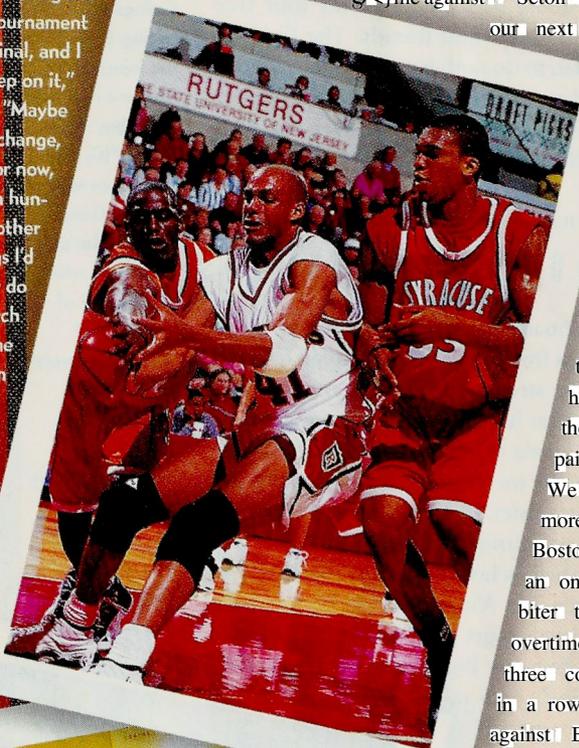
January 29-February 14

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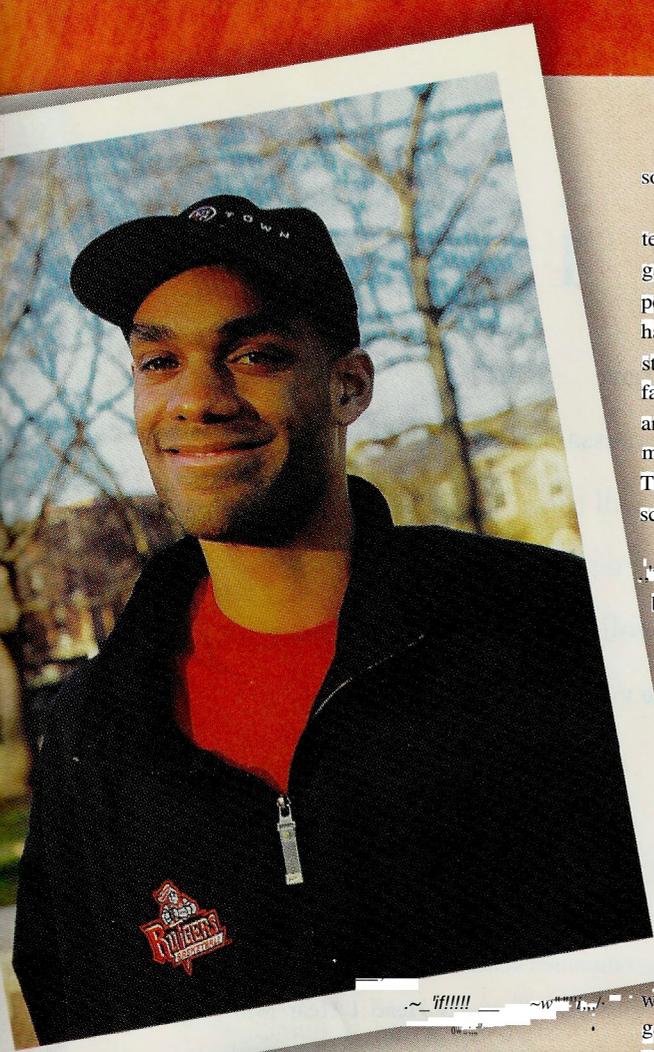
After being manhandled by St. Jolm's and Connecticut on the road, our win against Notre Dame at home was one of our biggest victories of the year. Now the pressure is on to win the rest of our games. I let my teammates down against SL John's and UConn when I got into early foul trouble in both games. It's incredibly painful to sit and watch the team struggle with me on the bench.

Throughout my career, foul trouble has been my Achilles' heel. It seems like I've got four fouls by the end of every game. I used to think the referees were conspiring to take me out of the game. The refs are sometimes as important as the players in determining the outcome. Of course they're not always wrong, but sometimes I wonder what game they're watching. In the first minute of the St. John's game, two questionable calls put me on the bench. When I finally got back in, I couldn't play my game because I was afraid of fouling.

Still, I'm in a little less foul trouble this year, and that's because I've learned to be less intense. By that I mean that during games, I constantly remind myself to not try to block every shot and to make sure there's a clear path to the basket. I had hoped to lead the conference in blocks, but I was taught that there is no "I" in the word "team." So if I can help the team by not blocking every shot, then I accept not meeting that goal. We hollowed our victory against Notre Dame at Lhe IDC with two more convincing home wins against Providence



Schoolwork doesn't end when the Knights go on the road. Says Clark, "I've studied in hotel rooms, taken finals on planes, and written lots of papers in airports."



son-to finish better than .500 is down the drain. A huge win over Syracuse, a nationally ranked team, helped make Senior Night-my last home game as a Scarlet Knight-truly special. The 9,000 people who gave me a standing ovation should have been applauding my parents, who were in the stands. They're the ones who truly deserve it. My father hasn't worked since an on-the-job accident, and my mother has spent her working life as a mixer in a Warner-Lambert bubble-gum factory. They always made sure I had what I needed for school and kept my head on straight.

My parents got to see a wild game. At one time we had Syracuse down 30-5. They roared back, but we held them off. At 12-13, we still had a chance to finish the regular season at .500 with a victory over Villanova. The media kept harping on the fact that, with another win, we'd be invited to the National Invitational Tournament. For me, it's always been first things first: Let's get our heads above water before we try to swim.

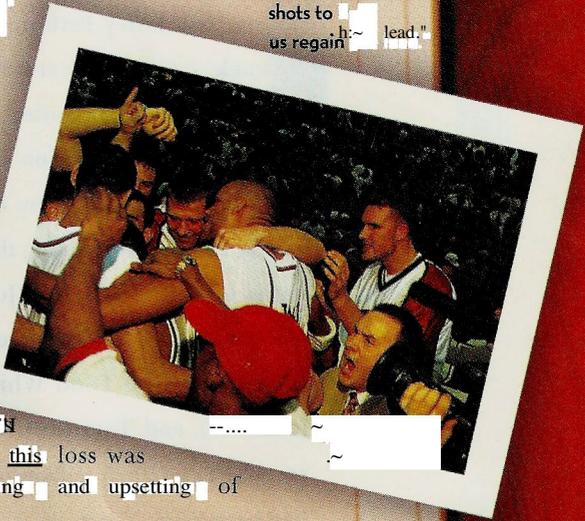
People always ask me if I'm nervous, or feel pressure before games. The answer is no, and that's because I've been playing basketball before large crowds all my life. But it d'ff

The most memorable games are won in the final seconds, says Clark. In the Georgetown tournament game, which was won at the buzzer, Clark went to the foul line with 30 seconds left on the clock and Rutgers down by one point. "I've been known to have problems shooting fouls, so I asked Coach Bannon who to foul if I missed. I think everyone knows when I hit the foul line, I'm usually in a foul shooting lead."

Wax my last regular-season game, my stomach did flips, my palms were sweaty, and my heart raced as I put on my uniform in the locker room. The nervousness disappeared when the whistle blew. My IS points and six rebounds weren't enough, though.

With so much riding on this last regular-season game, this loss was one of the most disappointing and upsetting of my career.

Now, with the regular season behind us, our only chance to have a winning season is to make it to the championship game in the upcoming Big East tournament. I'm not looking forward to putting on my uniform for the last time as a Scarlet Knight. It could happen as early as Wednesday in our first-round game against nationally ranked West



find Georgetown. I wish we were as mtlelse on the road, where we haven't won a conference game yet. Our next road game, against Boston College, is crucial. It's the difference between being 12-11 instead of 11-12 and moving up several notches in the conference standings.

I'm scared that if we lose these next few games, this season, which seemed to hold so much more promise than past years, will end up like all the others. If only I play better. If only we as a team play better.

February 15-March 3:

Season on the Brink

The two-point loss to Boston College is devastating. I place a lot of the blame squarely on my shoulders. I only made three of seven shot attempts, missed five free throws, and was in foul trouble the entire game. Now, another of our goals for the regular sea-

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Clark provides the spark

His career game keeps Rutgers alive

By Joe Calabrese

NEW YORK — It was late in the second half when Eric Clark stepped to the free-throw line. Clark, who projected the Rutgers bench during the season, now stepped a young line. Clark, who had pointed out in the lower stands behind the Rutgers chapter house at Madison Square Garden.

In 1996, "Eric, Please Stop One More Year" and when the senior stepped to the line, he said to himself, "I only I could. I only I could."

Clark leaves his college career in a matter of days, but if the 12th-ranked Scarlet Knights play another close to the level they performed yesterday when they defeated the second West Virginia, 72-61, in the opening round of the Big East Tournament, his closing moment in a Rutgers jersey may be the best he has ever had.

As Clark did yesterday, what

made in change. It didn't take to the head, and Clark was a freshman to the 40th floor. It was his last home game as a Scarlet Knight, and he was already a role player against the black shirts and white stripes of the Duke Blue Devils. Clark had a chance to make a name for himself because Clark had refused to have in any other way.

Rutgers coach Gerry Brunson has been impressed.

"When you're a senior, and particularly a senior who's playing for a new coach, you make a difference," Brunson said. "It's Eric. The biggest one is that he's not just a role player, it's about what his attitude is. He's just been great for us. I don't know where we'd be without him."

That the Scarlet Knights were a 12-14 record into today's conference quarterfinal against 13th-ranked

Georgetown, which spent four-second, when yesterday it was the point. Instead, it's about the attitude Clark provided to a new coach and a new program that is probably going to look to the future when Clark is long gone.

But Clark's impact has already been felt by the younger part of the team. Like James Cleveland and John Rodgers, and sophomore point guard Earl Johnson.

"It's such a big part of this team because he's a genuine warrior," said Rodgers, who has benefited from Clark's growing inside presence. "His every game we've played, but he's not motivated and outworked but never substituted. And he's truly unselfish. He always says, 'This guy, he's a great player.'"



West Virginia's Greg Jones took care of Eric Clark and dunked to get out of the hole.

(Continued on page 44)

Virginia. It's remarkable how fast four years have gone by.

March 4-March 14:

Final Days

It's been a week since the Big East tournament at Madison Square Garden. We beat West Virginia to give Rutgers its first Big East tournament win ever. In the next round, Janks to a last-second shot by Geoff [Billet], we beat Georgetown, advancing to the semifinals against UConn, the number-one seed in the tournament. I was confident we could win this third round, since they say that's a charm. Unfortunately, they beat us by double digits. As I left the game, I consoled myself with the knowledge that, as a team, we achieved something no other Rutgers team had accomplished. Maybe the loss was easier to live with since I tied my career high with a 20-point game.

After all the heat we've taken in the media and all the negative things I've heard on and off campus over the last four years, I'm flattered by all the praise and recognition we received for our performance in the tournament. But deep inside, I leave bothered by another losing season and no invitation to a national tournament.

Still, if I had the chance to do it all over again, I'd choose Rutgers. I know I've gotten a great education here and some invaluable life lessons from basketball. It takes a certain kind of person to keep trying his hardest, year after year, losing season after losing season. To be able to take losing and turn it into growing, you have to be strong in the mind.

I've often heard it said that your college years are supposed to be the best, and for me, they have been. Not because of the parties or the girls but because of the things I've learned and the friends I've made. I'd like to thank the fans who supported me all these years; as for the people who booed-you only made me better. God blessed me with a talent that gave me the opportunity to receive a great education, meet an incredible number of people, and travel to an amazing amount of places. I'm grateful to Him for that. ○