



26 of 250 DOCUMENTS

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UMBC'S CHIEF, KNOWN TO PREFER SCHOLARSHIP TO SPORTS, RELISHES THE FAME AN NCAA BID
HAS GIVEN HIS SCHOOL;
SUN PROFILE

BYLINE: Joe Burris, SUN REPORTER

BODY:

As cheers went up and confetti rained down after the biggest basketball victory ever at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Freeman A. Hrabowski III stood at midcourt smiling, his face glistening with tears.

The men's basketball team had just trounced the University of Hartford in the America East Conference tournament final on Saturday, clinching UMBC's first-ever bid to the NCAA men's basketball tournament. The team faces heavily favored Georgetown University tomorrow in Raleigh, N.C., in the opening round of what many consider the premier event in American amateur sports.

On this same court at the Retriever Activities Center on less frenzied days, Hrabowski had given numerous speeches describing himself as a "mega nerd" and emphasizing the school's academic achievements. One of the region's longest-tenured college presidents, he has gained wide recognition for helping minority students succeed in math and science at the Catonsville campus, where the chess team has long been its most celebrated.

Hrabowski, 57, has decried an emphasis on athletics over schooling, cautioned young black men to seek role models beyond sports and challenged young people of all backgrounds to get as excited about the classroom as the playing field.

But five days ago, surrounded by jubilant students who had just stormed the court as if someone had dropped a winning lottery ticket, Hrabowski could be forgiven if his beliefs about the balance of academics and athletics on a college campus had shifted just a smidgen.

"When they came to take me to the court at the end of the game, I felt like I was in a daze," said Hrabowski,

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Thursday

president of the school since 1992. "They call me the mega-nerd on campus, and proudly so. I like math problems. But I have become a believer in the power of athletics to build spirit and transform an environment."

Those who have known Hrabowski's academic exploits relished the accomplishment. Johns Hopkins retiring president, Dr. William Brody, joked that when he heard that UMBC's basketball team had advanced to the NCAA tournament, "I thought, 'My God, what's happened over there?'"

Then he added, "What they're doing is bringing in great students and great athletes together; when you get more competitive academically, the result is better athletics."

Before Saturday's win, one of the most-discussed competitions at the school has been the 2008 President's Cup, the equivalent of the Final Four of collegiate chess. UMBC will host it April 5 and 6, complete with cheerleaders, a pep rally and move-by-move commentary in the student center.

While its appearance in the Division I men's basketball tournament will be the school's first since it became eligible during the 1986-1987 season, in chess UMBC boasts four Final Four victories (2003-2006) and is seven-time champ of the prestigious Pan-American Intercollegiate competition (1996, 1998-2002 and 2005).

"Freeman's just as excited when the chess team beats Harvard," said Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland. "It shows that he's as comfortable in a basketball setting as he is with scientists and students, and it's exciting to see him get so wrapped up."

UMBC similarly lauds its National Society of Black Engineers, which won the National Academic Technical Bowl for the past two years, and its team of undergraduate debaters who won the inaugural Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl in 2006. Athletics has been widely supported but scarcely glorified. Supporters at lacrosse games have been known to cheer, "UMBC, We're an honors university."

That changed somewhat Saturday, when 4,000-seat RAC Arena was packed with fans in black and gold T-shirts, some with dyed hair and painted faces. Throughout the tension-filled conference final, the charismatic president shifted and squirmed in his seat. He clasped his hands together as if praying. At times, he couldn't bear to watch. When UMBC's victory was evident late, Hrabowski reared back in his seat and raised clenched fists.

"To see him having a good time at the game meant a lot," said former U.S. Sen. Joseph D. Tydings, who sat beside Hrabowski during the game. "Freeman has carried UMBC on his shoulders. What [the triumph] means is that it's going to be easier for him to raise private funds for the school, which is so vital in higher education today."

"The same way a parent wants a child to succeed, I want my students to do their best," Hrabowski explained. "And when I see them doing their best, and thriving, and I see the excitement of the crowds, parents and alumni, the energy just builds in me."

Growing up in segregated Birmingham, Ala., his family stressed education as a means to overcome hardship. His boyhood recollections of the Ku Klux Klan bombing that killed four children at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 were included in Spike Lee's documentary about the tragedy.

He's long been passionate about what he calls "the life of the mind." He graduated with honors from Hampton Institute in Virginia with a degree in mathematics at age 19.

"I was standing beside him on the court during the presentation and he kind of nudged me and said, 'Look at those fans and that spirit. Isn't it just wonderful?'" said Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith.

"He has legitimized scholastics and has promoted the idea that it's cool to study and to be smart. But he also has a tremendous appreciation for the complete student. And his excitement and enthusiasm for Saturday's victory is

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indicative of his overall commitment toward the complete student," Smith said.

Yesterday afternoon, Hrabowski addressed the basketball team during an informal send-off to Raleigh. Then he headed to Philadelphia, where he was to speak at Haverford College about preparing students for postgraduate education.

"Success in athletics is not fundamentally incompatible with an emphasis on serious academics, or vice versa," said R. Sanders Williams, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at Duke University School of Medicine. "Freeman, I believe, emphasizes to his students that they should not allow their interest or participation in sports to become their self-defining element."

Sure enough, when people congratulate him on the team, Hrabowski is often quick to point out the players' classroom accomplishments.

"One of the top players on the team, Brian Hodges, graduated with a 3.5 in three years of eligibility and is currently working on his master's in economics," Hrabowski said. "It's great for children to see him as an example that they can be great in basketball and in mathematics."

During Saturday's game, Hrabowski coughed from a cold and was hoarse from another UMBC sports thriller, a men's triple-overtime lacrosse victory Friday night over national power Maryland.

At times, the normally garrulous president sought to stay in the background and relish the moment quietly, yet that proved improbable. During a raucous pre-game ceremony, he was ushered to the podium to lead the crowd in chanting the school's rallying cry. And he did, cracked voice and all.

"U-M!" he yelled.

"B-C!" they responded.

"One, two, three!"

"Go big dogs!"

The ovation continued as he left the podium.

"Imagine me," he said softly. "A cheerleader."

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Freeman A. Hrabowski III

Born: Birmingham, Ala.

Age: 57

Family: wife, Jacqueline Coleman; son, Eric

Education: bachelor's degree in mathematics at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), 1970; master's in mathematics and doctorate in higher education administration/statistics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975

Career: president, University of Maryland, Baltimore County since May 1992; co-wrote *Beating the Odds* and *Overcoming the Odds*, books focused on parenting and on black achievers in science

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

1. UMBC President Freeman A. Hrabowski III cheers the Retrievers before they carried him to center court after their victory Saturday. 2. President Freeman A. Hrabowski III embraces UMBC players after the Retrievers' victory over the University of Hartford advanced the men's basketball team to the NCAA tournament.

1 & 2. Lloyd Fox : Sun photographer

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