

Arkansas Regains Southeastern Branch Linnaean Title

KNOXVILLE: March Madness in Knoxville usually involves the names Summit and Pearl, but this year's "pearl" was the unexpected tour-de-force shown by the Linnaean Games team from Arkansas at the Summit Ballroom. The tournament run made by the "Evil Boll Weevils" gave Arkansas its first Regional title since 2000, and their sixth overall. Most games in the tournament displayed hot and cold spells, and an exceptionally boisterous crowd. Arkansas's win in the final was marked by consistent team play and scoring by all players, with Arkansas outlasting Clemson 90 – 60. Both the Evil Boll Weevils and the Clemson Tigers move on to the Big Dance in San Diego, where they await the finalists from the other three regionals.

In the final game against Clemson, Arkansas – playing in its favored red jerseys – came out fast with two quick scores by power-forward Godshen Robert on physiology and toxicology questions, but then the Evil Boll Weevils went into a long scoring drought, as Clemson edged back into the game on two easy lay-ups on ecology questions, while Arkansas center Jackie McKern ran into foul trouble on an interrupt. The scoreless period for the Evil Boll Weevils was broken by a powerful slam dunk by transfer-student Becky Trout and a crowd-pleasing ecology answer by point guard Sandra Sleezer, from well beyond the arc, just as the shot-clock approached zero. Immediately after the score – and in an attempt to regain control of the game, head official Ron Kuhr threatened the Arkansas bench (assistants Tara Wood and Craig Shelton) with a technical for excessive celebration. The threat settled the bench, but Arkansas had its momentum. Once Arkansas regained their form, Clemson didn't have an answer for the inside-outside combo of Robert and McKern. Down in the closing minutes, Clemson was forced to foul, but both Trout and Robert drained their bonus shots.

The early round of the tournament found many teams hit by cold shooting on toss-ups and poor performance on the bonus shots. Clemson quickly overwhelmed Mississippi State, Tennessee got by LSU, and Arkansas dismantled Auburn. The round was not without its controversy as NC State won a squeaker over Georgia when a last-second answer by Georgia's Paul Smith was called off by the judges. The crowd, which clearly thought the shot was good, pelted the officials with their shouts of displeasure. The final match of the first round pitted the Florida Gators against their cross-state rivals, Florida A&M, with Florida's speed finally wearing down A&M's big backcourt duo of Rafael Abanja and Oulimanthe Paraiso.

In second-round action, Clemson got by Tennessee, as Tennessee's usually sharp players hit a cold streak at the wrong time, allowing Clemson to build a strong lead. NC State overpowered Florida, whose players were clearly showing fatigue from the pace of the first game. Arkansas had a bye, which allowed them to ice their buzzer-thumbs for the back-to-back bruising battles against top-seed NC State and Clemson.

This year's tournament was wide open with no clear favorite, after former-powerhouse Georgia lost All-American Floyd Shockley when he lost his eligibility. NC State had a late-season run powered by senior systematist Matt Bertone, but Arkansas surprised all tournament odds-makers by building a solid team with returning star McKern, transfers Trout (who left Kentucky because of a lack of playing time) and Robert, who arrived in August from Montana State, as well as highly touted freshman Sleezer, whose usually sharp shooting was hampered by the effects of an early-season dislocated thumb. Because Arkansas coach Allen Szalanski was unable to travel with the team due to a 4-game suspension, assistants Cesar Solorzano, Tara Wood and Craig Shelton helped draw up the offense that stymied the defenses of Clemson, NC State, and Auburn.

Named to the All-Tournament First-team were McKern and Robert from the winning Arkansas team, NC State's big man Matt Bertone, Georgia's Paul Smith and Tennessee's Greg Wiggins. Both Arkansas's Trout and Sleezer were named to the All-Tournament Second Team, as were Josh Herbert (Florida), Carla Dillings (Tennessee) and Aubree Roche (Georgia).