

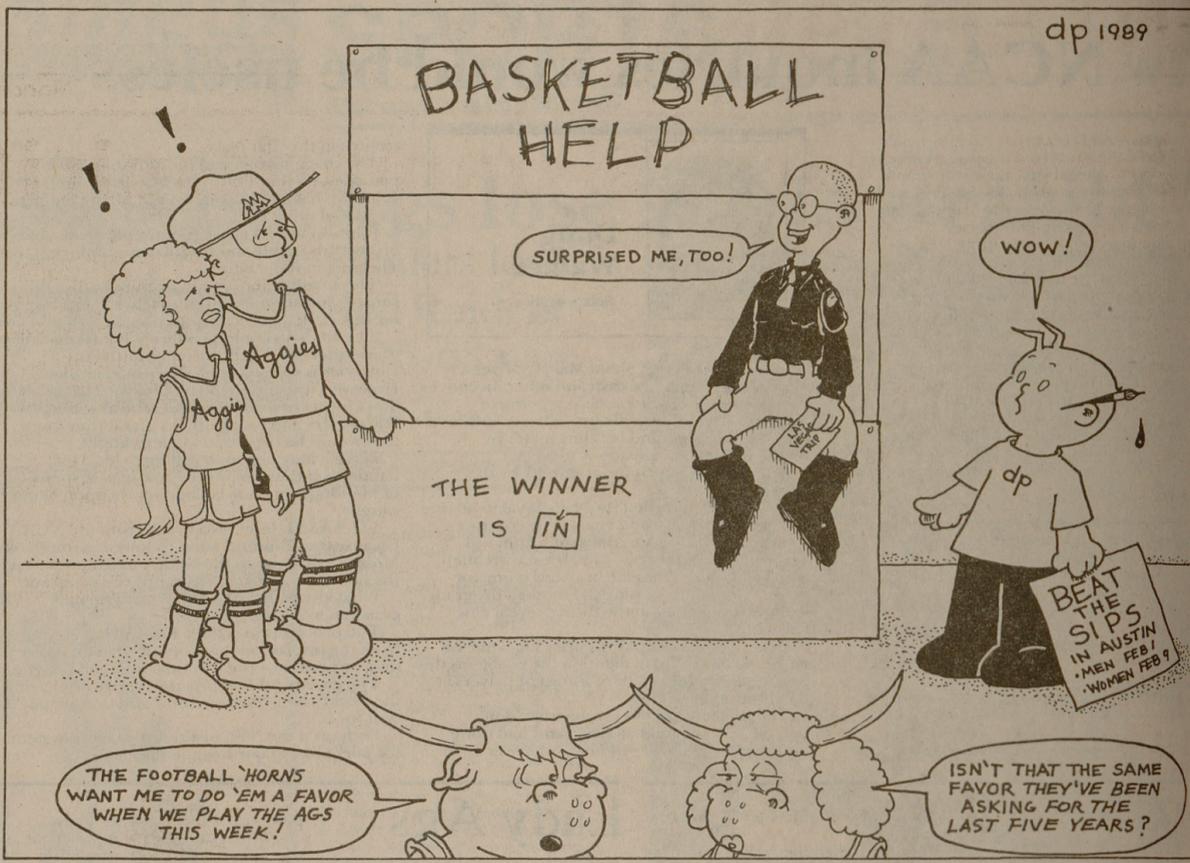
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Texas producing top basketball talent
 Former SMU recruit Johnson preparing for UNLV career
 WJCAC is recruiting hotbed

ODESSA (AP) — He was the only junior college player invited to the Olympic trials, picked as last year's top college freshman and leads the nation's No. 1 juco team with an average 32 points a game.
 So you'd think Odessa College coach Dennis Helms wouldn't have to bench his sophomore star, Larry Johnson, for passing off too often.
 But it's happened before.
 "He's sometime too unselfish," said Helms, "and we have to get after him to do something more in some situations."
 Seems like Johnson, 6-foot-7 and 235 pounds, could hardly do more than what he's done already: score more than 40 points in four games this season and lead the nation's juco players in scoring.
 "He may be the best player we've ever recruited," said Nevada-Las Vegas coach Jerry Tarkanian, who signed Johnson in November.
 With so much talent, is the phenomenal Johnson a Ferrari among Toyotas while in the junior college ranks? Not in his eyes.
 "I thought coming to a junior college meant the talent wouldn't be that great," he said. "But that wasn't the case. Every time you get on the floor you're against a guy that can play. That really surprised me."
 As a standout at Dallas Skyline High School, he hadn't intended to go the juco route at all.
 Johnson wanted to stay close to home and signed with Southern Methodist. But the school asked him to retake the Scholastic Aptitude Test, although his score qualified him for enrollment, because his score had improved so dramatically from an early administering of the test.
 Johnson declined rather than risk getting a lower score and becoming a Proposition 48 casualty.
 "I didn't want to sit out, so I started looking at junior colleges," said Johnson. "I think it turned out for the better because I've been working

on my academics."
 Johnson's dominance, says Helms, stems from superb physical traits and an attitude that allows him to capitalize on those traits.
 "He's probably got the greatest hands (of anyone) 5-foot-10 to 7-foot-6," he said. "He has more instinct than anyone on the floor. He knows what's going on in every situation out there."
 His only weakness may be that Johnson, the Wranglers' team captain, is too nice a guy, too willing to give credit to others and too reluctant to criticize his teammates.
 Odessa's coaching staff recently decided they would name a co-captain, in addition to Johnson, to provide stronger leadership for the Wranglers, 23-0 overall and 8-0 in the Western Junior College Athletic Conference.
 Johnson, who last season helped Odessa to a 30-5 record, wants his parting gift to Helms to be a national junior college championship.
 And until then, Johnson says he won't stop working.
 "If you're doing something that you love, you want to be the best at it and play hard night in and night out," he said.

ODESSA (AP) — Out on the windswept plains of West Texas and eastern New Mexico, there's not much to do but play basketball and hit the books.
 But that's just the idea behind the Western Junior College Athletic Conference, which has become a recruiting hotbed for Division I coaches who just recently discovered junior colleges.
 The nine schools which make up the WJCAC are located in isolated towns — Snyder, Levelland, Big Spring, Hobbs — where oil rigs dot the flat horizon and the wind blows incessantly.
 But that hasn't stopped some of the nation's top players from starting their college careers at WJCAC schools such as Midland College — whose most famous player was Spud Webb — Western Texas and New Mexico Junior College in hopes of landing at a top Division I program.
 The WJCAC has joined such tradition-rich junior colleges as San Jacinto College among the juco elite.
 "I feel that without a doubt this year the junior college basketball in Texas is by far the best in the country," said Oklahoma assistant coach Jim Kerwin, a former juco coach at Seminole Junior College.
 Through Kerwin's recruiting efforts, Oklahoma has taken so many players from Midland College the school's almost considered a branch by the folks in Norman.
 Former Chaparrals Ricky Grace

and Mookie Blaylock helped take the Sooners to the Final Four last year.
 Other Chaps are playing at Kansas State, Seton Hall, Wyoming and Idaho State.
 And Midland was only a third-place conference finisher last year.
 In the past two years, that school's dominance has been challenged by other league members.
 "I think Midland has had one of the premier junior college programs for the last 10-15 years," said Kerwin. "The league is much more balanced now."
 One of those is Odessa College, which after posting its best season ever last year at 30-5 is undefeated and sitting atop the NJCAA poll.
 Odessa's program got a lift from Helms, in his third year with the Wranglers, and NJCAA player of the year Larry Johnson, who headed to UNLV next season.
 South Plains College in Levelland is stuck out in the cotton fields, but its reputation is ritzier enough for the 13th-ranked Texans to don tuxedos for their media guide photos.
 WJCAC coaches say the NCAA Proposition 48, which set stricter eligibility requirements on athletes entering four-year schools, has given juco programs a boost. Another boost is likely to come from the proposed Proposition 42, which would deny athletic scholarships to players who don't meet the standards.



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