

UNCC defense tested tough

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factor has been the improvement of center Alex Kuehl, who gives the 49ers a shot-blocking big when he returns from an ankle sprain. He's expected back in six weeks, which will force changes.

"This is our season and we want to be as competitive as we can, so we want to give our all on the floor," James said. "We just try to play defense as a unit, help each other out and mainly don't try to give penetration."

Last week's 79-69 win over 24th-ranked Marquette was another step in UNCC's growth. The 49ers' domination of the Golden Eagles was their best win of the season and another sign of their ability to compete in one of the nation's top leagues.

"I'd say it (was) one of our biggest games," Mullins said. "We've had a couple of oppor-

tunities and quite honestly this team was growing up. The parts are getting better and the team is getting better, so it was a very satisfying win."

Big games like the Marquette win left Johnson and the other 49ers feeling they deserve the kind of recognition that goes to Conference USA's marquee programs, which include Louisville, Cincinnati and Memphis.

"We try to get up every night to play against a conference team," Johnson said. "I know you try to get up to play against everybody, but it makes such a big difference to play the 24th-ranked team."

With Kuehl providing a massive presence in the paint, Johnson is relieved of the burden of patrolling the paint. The result has been a stronger defense that prevents opponents from developing any consistency. It was especially evident in the Marquette

game, where the Eagles made less than 40 percent of their shots from the floor.

"By us playing tough defense, we're going to make teams shoot poorly," Johnson said. "By us playing tough defense, I think we've got a chance every night."

The meat of UNCC's season is still to be played, with return games with Louisville, Cincinnati and Memphis to be played in Charlotte. If the 49ers can keep up their pace, they could be a factor in the conference race and a contender for postseason consideration. Downs is confident that'll be the case.

"We think we're a good team, but we can get a lot better," he said. "We're playing in a conference with a lot of great teams and it's a challenge for us every night to come out and compete. We feel we've got a chance to win like every other team."

Cowboys try to make mark on the decade

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including offensive coordinator Ernie Zampese.

"It was an emotional game for me," said Zampese, who worked for three different NFL teams in 16 seasons. "I had never even been to a Super Bowl before as a spectator."

The win culminated a frustrating season for Aikman, who had his problems with Switzer. Among them was an allegation by former assistant coach John Blake that Aikman singled out black players for criticism.

Haley led the parade of players defending the quarterback. "Nobody on this team has a problem with Troy Aikman," he said. And Aikman, who will skip next week's Pro Bowl to have elbow surgery, wanted to take a pass on the Switzer controversy, too. "There is no need to talk about that right now."

Also left for some future date is whether Haley will return next season.

"It depends on what the doc-



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Dallas cornerback/wide receiver Denion Sanders (21) has won back-to-back Super Bowl rings.

tors say," said Haley, who had back surgery seven weeks ago. "I'm optimistic. I think I might continue to play. But if the doctors tell me there's a really good chance that I might rupture my back again, then I probably won't."

Dallas city fathers were

planning a parade late in February, and wide receiver Michael Irvin served notice to owner Jerry Jones.

"I want Jerry to know I want big, big, big diamonds on our rings this time," Irvin said. "Make it giant ones, Jerry."

Herron student of the game

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Their only loss was a 47-36 loss at South Mecklenburg. Herron is wise enough to know that loss following 14 straight wins could be a blessing in disguise.

"I think we needed the loss. It taught me to give it all I got every game not to give up, to go out and give her (coach McDonald) 100 percent, no giving up no matter how many we're down by and how many minutes to go," Herron said.

The Indians haven't been down much this year, beating teams by an average of almost 16 points. The Indians knew they would be good before the season started but didn't think they would be this good. After all, they lost senior captain Jennifer Elliot and power forward Tamika Mackey, who graduated to UNC Charlotte. Still, four starters are back and the Indians have picked up right where their 21-4 season ended last year.

"Our offense and defense last year focused around Tamika and now that she's gone, everybody knows their role, you can't depend on Tamika anymore," Herron said. "I know everybody depends on me and Ashley (senior point guard Ashley Holder, an all-conference and all-county selection last year), but they

know when we're not going right, they've got to step up."

Herron's healthy this season, something she wasn't in '94-'95. Just before the team's first scrimmage last year, she turned an ankle playing basketball at lunch. Though she didn't miss any games, there was a lot of pain and swelling. As a result, she didn't have a typical season. The true Herron is back, but she's not willing to make any state championship predictions.

"One day at a time, one game at a time, got to go win the conference title and then the playoffs," Herron said.

Herron wasn't always a basketball player. When she first started playing sports, it was softball that grabbed her interest. But when the basketball bug bit, at age 10, it bit hard and she's loved the game ever since. Herron said she wouldn't be where she is now without the help and guidance of McDonald, who's compiled a career mark of 230-84 in 20 years of coaching. Herron showed her smarts again when she chose to go to West Meck and learn from McDonald.

"Me coming here is an opportunity for me, it's a good opportunity," Herron said. "If I hadn't come, I don't think I would be as good as I am now."

She has helped me a lot with my attitude, with giving it all I got. I mean, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here."

Under McDonald's guidance, Herron has blossomed into a scorer who loves to attack the basket. She's picked up the scoring slack left by the graduation of Mackey and allowed the Indians to keep on winning.

"She's come around so much just with her attitude. I'm really hard on her and I have the support of her mom and her grandmother," McDonald said. "She listens to me. She doesn't always want to but she does and she's learned to sacrifice. She's always been a team player but she needs somebody to discipline her and be hard on her. Could this be the year the Indians bring West Mecklenburg its first state championship in any sport? McDonald, like her star pupil, doesn't want to look too far ahead."

"We're just trying to take one game at a time, prepare for it, execute well, really work on conditioning, intensity and staying focused and going for the conference title," she said. "Then the conference tournament," she said.

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BLACK FAX

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 BT: What is L.C. Bailey credited for inventing?
 E: Who co-starred with Sidney Poitier in "Porgy and Bess"?
 S: What was the name of the first Black fully salaried professional basketball team?
 LA: What Black poet organized the Black Arts Theatre in Harlem?
 P: How many schools are in the Atlanta University System?

ANSWERS ON PAGE 14B

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