



Starting at Quarterback...

BY JOHN C. MANUEL
SPORTSATURDAY EDITOR

Jason Stanicek may not be a psychic, but he could tell what was going on.

Stanicek, a freshman quarterback, had watched from the sidelines as UNC struggled to a 4-3 start in 1991. The offense, directed by junior signal-caller Chuckie Burnette, was not producing.

Teams were keying on budding superstar tailback Natrone Means, and Burnette was unable to get the passing game going. Further, fellow freshman quarterback Mike Thomas, who had flashed his talent in the first two games of the season off the bench, had torn ligaments in his throwing hand and was out for the season.

UNC head coach Mack Brown did not want to turn to senior Todd Burnett, who had been given a chance to run the team in 1990 but had been replaced by Burnette.

All the while, Stanicek watched patiently. He was supposed to redshirt as a freshman, getting his reps with the scout team in practice, avoiding contact, and building upon his slight 6-foot, 170-pound frame.

He was going to be the future.

On Nov. 2, 1991, Mack Brown made the future come early.

"We needed Jason in the ball game today," Coach Brown said that afternoon, which saw Stanicek make his collegiate debut as a starting one in a 24-0 win against Maryland.

Stanicek became only the second Tar Heel to ever win when making his debut as a starting quarterback. But after the game, in which he completed 12 of 19 passes for a

modest 104 yards, Stanicek insisted he was not the future.

"There was no pressure on me to be the savior," he said. "I'm just going to do my part. I'm definitely not the savior."

While no one would call Jason Stanicek the savior of UNC's football team now, they would acknowledge how integral a part of it he has become. That skinny freshman has added a measurable two inches and

15 pounds to his frame, and immeasurable savvy and ability to his football talent.

He is the quarterback who makes the talented Tar Heel offense tick, and he has developed a knack for running UNC's option attack to perfection. And the option has become the driving force behind North Carolina's impressive start with the ball: UNC has scored 134 points in

three games.

Stanicek said that this year's production ties into chemistry. "I felt comfortable the first two years, but this year, with this team, we feel together more than last year or the year before."

Stanicek has run and passed the ball with equal success this season. In the option, it is as much his job as anyone's to see that UNC has some balance offensively.

"The first two games, we really didn't pass that much, so there were questions about that," he said. "(Saturday) we did it, and we were successful. So we're looking forward to the rest of the season and the next couple of games where we can open it up more."

His decisions on the option have drawn rave reviews from his head coach and opposing coaches, as well as his teammates.

"Jason has just been superb running the option," wide receiver Bucky Brooks said. "We've shown that we can beat people to death with the option, so they definitely have to respect the run. It's naturally going to open up the passing game for us."

North Carolina had a field day against Maryland last week, and it was Stanicek who led the charge. He set school records for first-half passing efficiency and yards, racking up his totals for the day in that stanza: 14 completions, 17 attempts, 288 yards.

"(Saturday) was just a highlight film for both teams," he said. "I felt good pre-game. It was perfect weather for football — cool, nice breeze. The ball just felt good in my hands."

"I was just concerned with going out there and doing my job. We've got players on our team that are going to make big plays, and I'm just glad to have them."

Indeed, Stanicek's greatest quality and asset to UNC is his steadiness, his consistency in getting talented skill players the ball. During the Mack Brown era, UNC has not lacked skill-position talent, it just has not had a quarterback to consistently get those players the ball.

Now it does, and lo and behold, UNC is a national power again. Certainly Stanicek is not the sole factor in this turnaround. But consistent play at the quarterback spot is what has changed the Tar Heels from a pretty good squad to a team whose upcoming game with top-ranked Florida State is seen as one of national importance.

"I'm looking forward to it," Stanicek said last Saturday. "It'll be fun playing the No. 1 team in the nation. It's a great opportunity for the whole program and everybody on the team"

Especially for its starting quarterback. Tonight's game is the kind of storybook careers are made of — smallish, Park Forest, Ill., native comes South to play football, wins his first start as a freshman, leads team to a bowl game and then beats the No. 1 team in the nation on national television.

"We have a good shot to win the ACC," Stanicek said before this season. "Florida State is coming here, and if we're 3-0 at that point, then we have a real good shot."

Now Stanicek has that shot. It's up to him to do something with it.



DTH/Debbie Stengel

Stanicek's running of the option has added a dimension to the Tar Heel offense.