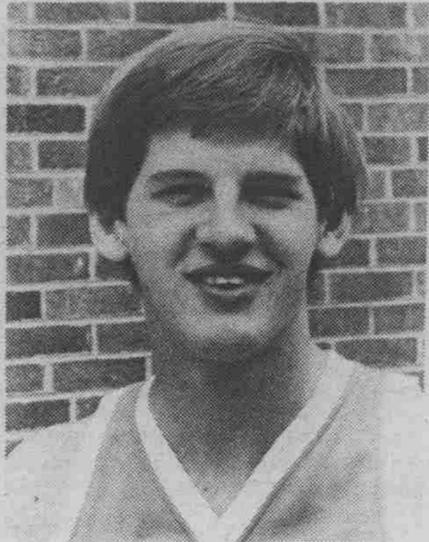


Pan-Am games valuable experience for LaGarde

by Ford Worthy
Staff Writer

Tom LaGarde sat in the darkness of the Granville Towers cafeteria and savored a meal of steak, french fries, and his own mixed drink — a concoction of fruit punch and Mountain Dew. A science fiction movie, *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, illuminated the room from a screen behind LaGarde.



Tommy LaGarde

"Where else can you watch a good horror movie and eat such a tasty meal at the same time," a bystander asked him. "The Village Dinner Theatre maybe, but not in Mexico City."

"Only at UNC, for sure," LaGarde answered. "It's good to be back. It really is."

The lanky UNC forward returned Oct. 22 from Mexico City where he had

concluded several months of international basketball competition by participating in the Pan-American Games. Prior to the Games, LaGarde had spent most of the early part of the summer playing in the Intercontinental Cup series in Europe and in the United States.

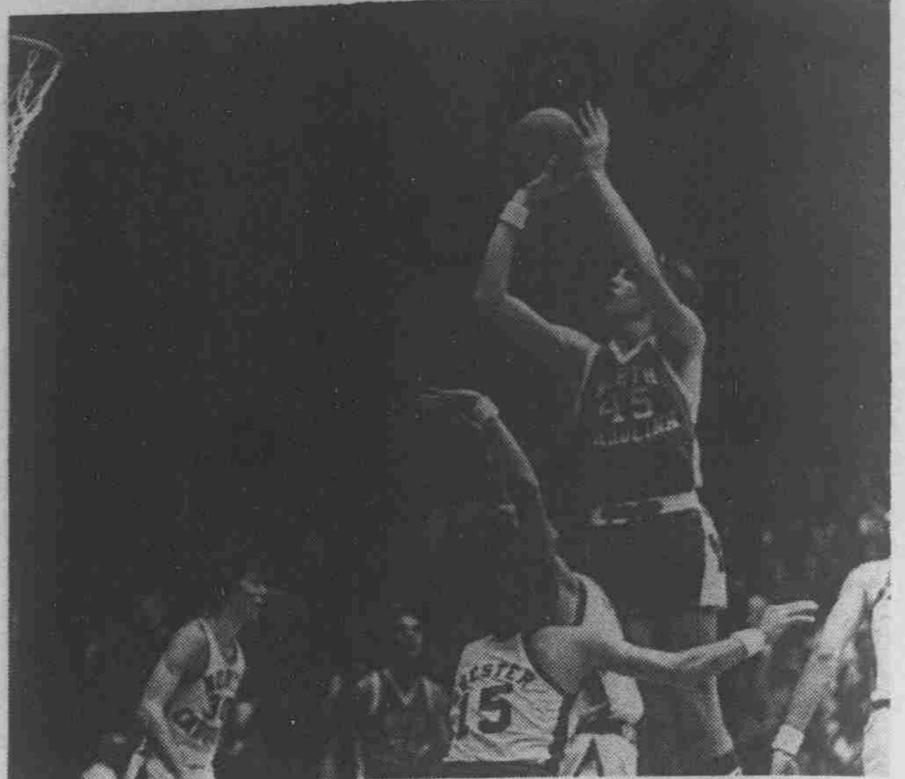
The world travel and the intense competition added up to an experience he will treasure, said LaGarde.

"I had a great time. That is, as an individual," said LaGarde, referring to his experience in Mexico City where the United States team captured the gold medal in basketball. "It was when we were together as a team — as the American team — that we were treated badly. The crowds jeered and whistled at us all the time. It was nationalistic hate, I think."

Although the Games were the scene of several anti-American incidents involving what LaGarde termed "political" motivation, the American team members enjoyed nothing but harmony in their relations with one another. In the past, some American national teams have suffered from internal conflicts which have often served to divide the players.

"There was complete harmony among the guys on the team," LaGarde said. "I think we even banded together more tightly after the crowds gave us such a hard time. Not only was our team made up of excellent athletes, it was composed of just good people."

Those "good people," like "Tree" Rollins of Clemson and Houston's Otis Birdsong, would, according to LaGarde, "probably win the Atlantic



Tommy LaGarde puts up two points in the '74 Blue-White game.

Coast Conference title easily as a team.

"We had twelve great players," he said. "The best ACC teams, like Maryland, have maybe five or six great players, but the Pan-Am team, with the great depth that it had, would be able to wear them out sooner or later."

"In fact, that is how we beat a lot of teams. After they got tired, we still had fresh people playing."

LaGarde and most of his Pan-Am teammates will run into each other again more than likely — in tryouts for the U.S. Olympic squad, which Carolina's Dean Smith will coach.

"The guys on our team asked me a lot of questions about Coach Smith," LaGarde said. "They were extremely interested in what I could tell them about him since most of them will probably go out for the Olympic team. I

also got the feeling that they had a lot of admiration for him."

While Smith may have the Olympic task at the back of his mind, right now Carolina basketball is surely of utmost importance to him. And Tom LaGarde must occupy a prominent spot in any of Smith's strategies.

LaGarde, a highly-touted prep star from Detroit when he signed two and a half years ago, has been plagued by inconsistency. Some have said that this will be his year.

"I don't know whose year it is going to be," he joked. "I think the international experience has helped improve my game. In the international play I gained a better understanding of my personal game. My shooting, my rebounding, my passing, my ballhandling, my defense — I should be stronger in all these areas. Which means I think I'll be stronger in my total game."

Before the cautiously optimistic LaGarde set out on his roundball travels, Smith gave him two sentences of advice.

"He just told me to go out and play ball. And get experience. And I did."

How much will all the experience prove to be worth?

Tar Heel fans should get some indication soon. The Russian national team, which LaGarde competed against in Intercontinental Cup play, invades Carmichael Auditorium on Nov. 15.

Meanwhile, LaGarde is content to sit back and enjoy the Carolina comforts of home — steak, french fries, Robinson Crusoe flicks, and of course, Carolina mixed drinks. That's three parts fruit punch, one part Mountain Dew, and at least a few parts of experience.

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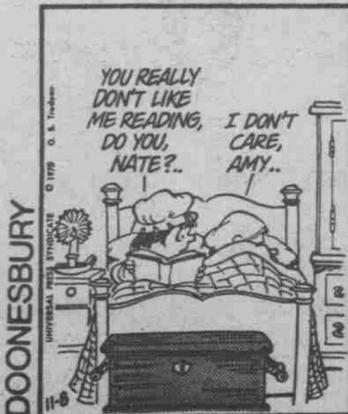
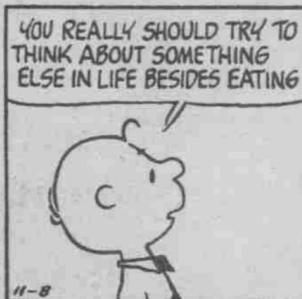
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The Daily Tar Heel is published by the University of North Carolina Media Board; daily except Sunday, exam periods, vacations, and summer sessions. The following dates are to be the only Saturday issues: Sept. 6, 20; Oct. 1, 8; Nov. 11, 25.

Offices are at the Student Union Building, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514. Telephone numbers: News, Sports—933-0245, 933-0246; Business, Circulation, Advertising—933-1163.

Subscription rates: \$25 per year; \$12.50 per semester.

Second class postage paid at U.S. Post Office in Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514.

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