

UNC QBs handle pressure at the helm

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If you want someone to blame, he's always there. If you need someone to praise, he'll be waiting. When the pressure is on, the game inevitably falls into his hands. No guts, no glory. The hero. The goat.

The quarterback.

He's Namath lounging in a lawn chair and guaranteeing Super Bowl III, he's Tarkenton scrambling for his life, he's every little kid rocketing spirals through a tire hanging from a tree. He's Rod Elkins, he's Scott Stankavage, he's Ike Brady.

For each North Carolina quarterback the season that starts tonight holds a different kind of pressure. In this, the most cerebral and closely watched position in football, all three find the additional burden of either trying to makeup for the past or somehow direct their futures.

As North Carolina's starting quarterback for the past two years, Elkins knows what is expected of him.

"I'm not the real vocal type, but by nature of the position, the quarterback is the leader," Elkins said. "He's the one that picks the team up and he's the one that takes the blame. You've got to know how to handle the pressure."

"I've got confidence in my ability, in myself, and in my teammates, and I can't afford to get down. Just because you're the quarterback, people naturally look to you to lead. If I get down, others look at it and get down too. But I'd rather shoulder that burden than anyone else."

Elkins passed for 994 yards and nine touchdowns last season, but he sprained his ankle in the seventh game against South Carolina.

"You've got to try to block it out of your mind; I couldn't afford to think about it," Elkins said. "You've got to go 100 percent, if you go half-speed you're going to get hurt."

During a game, the most crucial time for the quarterback begins when offensive coordinator John Matsko calls the play and ends when the QB takes the snap. Here at the line of scrimmage the defense shifts, here the quarterback must adjust on his own.



Rod Elkins

DTH/Scott Sharpe

"The coaches say that they give me the chalk last," Elkins said. "Their defense dictates the play called at the line and you have to concentrate and think about it. That puts a lot of responsibility on the quarterback, but I'd rather have it that way—on my shoulders."

Because of his ankle, Elkins played for just a short time in last year's Clemson game—billed as the biggest game in ACC history—and missed his shot to perform well in front of a slew of pro scouts. Tonight's game at Pitt could change everything.

"I don't have anything to prove to myself. But it means a lot to me and this team, because if we win it we can give the program some national recognition," Elkins said.

"And I can prove myself a good quarterback; I don't think I've done that yet. I do need to have a good game to reassure people that I can do the good job."

"A good quarterback shows that he can play well under pressure against the good teams. We're playing the best here—Pitt's number one—and if I play well under pressure in the big games, I'll have proved that I can do the job."

Stankavage has had a hard time convincing people that he can do the job. North Carolina's only two losses last year came at the hands of South Carolina and Clemson, and Stankavage was the QB of record for both games. The clincher is that both contests were at home, and the popular, although unjustified, conception of Stankavage is that he cannot win. Pin that up next to Elkins' enviable 20-1 record as a healthy starting quarterback and Stankavage is suddenly a loser in the public eye.

But the statistics show differently. Against South Carolina, Stankavage completed 16 passes in 35 attempts for 181 yards and one touchdown, but the Gamecock's Gordon Beckham went berserk, completing 16 of 17 passes for 195 yards. Stankavage had the North Carolina season-high for passing yardage, but it was Beckham's day.

And the next week Stankavage connected on 17 of 24 passes for 177 yards at Maryland, including a 20-yard touchdown pass to Tyrone Anthony with 1:20 left to win it. Stankavage's South Carolina and Maryland passing games were the top two all year for North Carolina.

Against Clemson, he had a sub-par game—8 for 21 for 93 yards—while the Tar Heels came up short 10-8.

And Stankavage has been dealing with it ever since.

"I try and put that behind me, thinking that no one man loses a ballgame," Stankavage said. "But the ones I was worried about were the coaches. I worked hard in the spring and fall and prepared myself to go in and do the thing necessary to win."

"I have to be ready, because with every play the whole burden could fall on me. The whole team has got to have confidence in me and I've been working hard to get their confidence."

For Stankavage, the South Carolina and Clemson games were what he called "a confidence tester," a time when he wondered not only if he had the faith of his teammates, but of himself as well.

"I know what I can and can't do, and I try to play within my limits," Stankavage said. "I see it as a test of my character, to see if I can rebound."

Elkins has a firm lock on the starting spot. But Stankavage said that there is enough competition between the two to keep each other sharp.

"It's kind of a precarious situation. On the field, I'm competing with him, but I want the team to win; so on the sidelines I'm his biggest fan," Stankavage said. "I want Carolina to win whether it's 10 or 14 under center—that's the most important thing."

"Scott goes out every day and works hard, and he pushed me to work hard," Elkins said. "He went up against a lot of adversity, but I feel real comfortable to have him out there."



Scott Stankavage DTH/Scott Sharpe

As backup to the backup, Brady will probably not see a lot of action this season, but he already knows the pressure that a quarterback lives under.



Ike Brady

"It takes a whole lot of self-confidence, because the quarterback has to pick the team up if something goes wrong and go on," Brady said. "He's got to be a leader on the field, run the offense, as well as off it."

"And the quarterback's got to have a lot of composure and stay calm, not get out his head. He's got to be excited, but he's got to keep his composure."

Elkins agrees.

"I just don't get too psyched up for a certain game, I just want to execute and have good ball control, and complete 60 percent of my passes."

Brady knows that he is not in contention for the starting job, but he had a fine spring which included double-duty for a while during the Blue-White Game, and with Elkins graduating he should move up on the depth chart. So he's got to keep pushing in practice, pushing himself and in turn Stankavage, and in turn Elkins.

"In practice, you've got to be in it mentally, as well as physically. By the end of the day, the coaches want us to be as mentally tired as we are physically," Brady said. "There's competition, because we're all trying to improve. We're each pushing each other."

Pressure by each other, pressure by the coaches, pressure by the fans, pressure on themselves. And pressure now by last year's number one defense.

"I'm aware of all those things," Elkins said. "But I just realize that they put their pants on one leg at a time, the same as us. I think that Pitt's defense is good, but we've seen defenses as good before in Arkansas and Oklahoma."

The game starts at 9 p.m. The pressure is on.

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