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Team managers enjoy rewards that come with a demanding job

By DRAGGAN MIHAILOVICH
Staff Writer

They're more than just students who get free tickets and sit on the North Carolina bench. Ask any of the coaches or players, and they will tell you that the Tar Heels' four varsity managers are as much a part of the team as Michael Jordan and Sam Perkins.

True, they aren't seven feet tall and even though three of them would deny it, they can't dunk the ball either. But in their own way, through their own experiences, Joe Stroman, Julie Dalton, David Hart and Ralph Meekins have contributed to the success of the basketball team.

Stroman began his association with UNC before he ever got to the campus. At Gastonia's Ashbrook High School, Stroman was the manager and trainer for a team that featured a manchild by the name of James Worthy. After a semester at Barber-Scotia College, Stroman transferred to UNC where he would make lasting friendships.

Along with Worthy, one of Stroman's better friends was Al Wood, with whom he roomed.

"I really got along well with him," Stroman said. "It was quite an experience living with him because of all the late night telephone calls and running errands for him."

"I can even remember the time I had to deliver 24 roses for six different girls on Valentine's Day. I still keep in touch with Al and 'Stick' (Worthy). They'll call up late at night to talk about anything."

Stroman's responsibilities include keeping the locker room secure, getting ice for bumps and bruises and, on the way to the game, taking orders for food. The latter job makes him a very popular man.

"I think I'm more organized now, because of all the responsibilities I have."

Stroman said. "Being able to work with Coach (Dean) Smith has helped me in a lot of ways. I've had some personal problems in the past and he has always been more than willing to listen."

Dalton's story is the most unusual. She is the first woman ever to be a manager in the North Carolina basketball program.

"Coach (Eddie) Fogler kids me that it will be a great trivia question 30 years from now," Dalton said.

"I was worried at first what people would think. I didn't want them to think that I was doing it because I wanted to get into the games free or I was a women's libber or that I wanted to date the players. I wanted to get involved with the team."

"I knew that if I worked hard and proved myself there wouldn't be any questions asked."

The players have accepted her, but there have been a few awkward situations. Dalton says that she gives the players a few minutes before walking into the dressing room at halftime and after the game. And then there was the person who asked if she was Smith's wife.

"The experience has made me more assertive and it has disciplined me," said Dalton. "I also have learned to get along with men and how to work as a team."

"Everything runs so smoothly here and it is because everyone does their role. In that respect we are a very important part of the program."

Hart, a Morehead scholar, knew he was "too short and fat" to play basketball for UNC so he got involved in the only other way he knew how — managing.

Along with his normal duties, such as keeping the assist-error ratio on the bench, Hart is also Michael Jordan's roommate. Fans may expect Jordan to room with other "star" players but it is just a regular member of the student body

that gets the honor. "It's been interesting to see what a player's life off the court is like, how they think about the game and how they handle their spare time and all the attention they get," said Hart.

"It does get tough every now and then because of the late night calls and all the autograph seekers. And sometimes the room is an expressway. But it's really funny when you hear people talk about your roommate on national TV."

And Jordan treats Hart as an equal. One of the first sounds one hears upon entering the UNC locker room is Jordan good-naturedly ribbing Hart about his lack of long hair.

Meekins has had the most experience of all the managers and is generally looked upon as the leader of the managing team. Meekins worked his way up from the JV staff to the JV head manager to the varsity staff and then this year to the head manager position.

"It was a very tough road," said Meekins. "After you finish your time with the junior varsity only one is chosen out of five people. I was lucky but I also think they saw that I was dedicated, worked hard and was composed under pressure."

Meekins has enjoyed working with a "winning program and working with the team concept." And he has enjoyed meeting people from different backgrounds. But he also knows that he has paid his dues.

"The job takes so much responsibility, time and effort that you don't have much time for other things," said Meekins. "Yet I think it has been one of the greatest experiences of my life."

And Meekins said that nothing could top the feeling of riding on top of the team bus "knowing that I was part of the team that had just won the national championship."

Whittenburg leads State to 75-76 victory

The Associated Press

OGDEN, Utah — Hot-shooting North Carolina State, led by senior guard Dereck Whittenburg's 27 points, routed fellow upstart Utah 75-56 Thursday in semifinal action of the NCAA West Regional basketball tournament.

The 16th-ranked Wolfpack advanced to the regional final Saturday against the winner of Thursday night's other semifinal between No. 4 Virginia and No. 11 Boston College.

North Carolina State, 23-10, hit 11 of its first 14 field goal attempts in the second half, helping the Wolfpack rally from a two-point deficit to a 20-point lead. During a nine-minute stretch in the second half, N.C. State outscored the Utes 20-5, with Whittenburg scoring six of those points.

The Wolfpack, seeded sixth among the original 12 teams in the West, shot 68 percent from the floor — 28 for 41 — while Utah managed just 45 percent.

Sophomore forward Lorenzo Charles added a career-high 18 points for the winners, while forward Thurl Bailey and reserve guard Terry Gannon had 10 points apiece. Gannon hit four baskets from the 18-foot range and Whittenburg also was accurate from the perimeter.

Utah, which ended its season 18-14, the worst mark of any of the 52 teams who began the national tournament, was led by

Peter Williams with 15 points and Pace Mannion with 13.

Both teams were considered improbable semifinalists. N.C. State had to come from behind in both of its previous tournament games, while Utah upset Illinois and seventh-ranked UCLA.

Charles scored 10 of N.C. State's first 12 points as the Wolfpack took a four-point lead, but Utah battled back to a 16-15 advantage — its only lead of the first half — on Mannion's basket from underneath. Gannon then hit two long-range baskets and Whittenburg added another as the Wolfpack took their biggest lead of the half at 26-20.

Trailing 30-26 at intermission, Utah scored the first six points of the second half to account for its only lead in the final 20 minutes. Whittenburg then converted two free throws and followed with a 17-foot jumper to give the Wolfpack the lead for good.

A three-point play by Williams drew the Utes within five points, 48-43, within 11:21 left to play. But Gannon then sank a 19-footer, Bailey hit a hook shot in the lane and Gannon scored again from 17 feet as North Carolina State took charge.

Three points by Mannion pulled Utah within 10 points with five minutes remaining, but the Wolfpack then sank 10 straight free throws to end the threat.

Whittenburg wound up connecting on nine of 12 shots from the floor, while Charles was 7-of-9 and Gannon 4-of-5.

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