

Pickup games showcase UNC b-ball fraternity

By **LEE ROBERTS**
Staff Writer

Only in Chapel Hill can one find a pickup basketball game with 500 people watching in the stands.

But then, only in Chapel Hill can one find a pickup basketball game with over \$5 million worth of NBA contracts down on the court.

Such was another day last August in Carmichael Auditorium when an assortment of UNC alumni, now in the NBA, current UNC players and pros from other schools got together for some fun and basketball.

"It's a fun way for the pros to run themselves into shape before the season starts," UNC coach Dean Smith said. "It's better than running around a track all alone."

What is more important for North Carolina basketball fans is the experience the current UNC players pick up from going against some of the best players in the game. Most of the UNC team was down in Carmichael almost every afternoon at 3:30 early in the fall playing with James Worthy, Phil Ford, Mike O'Koren, Mitch Kupchak, Walter Davis, Al Wood, Dudley Bradley, Kenny Dennard, and on and on.

North Carolina center Brad Daugherty recalled playing against Worthy and Dennard in a pickup game as a 16-year-old freshman. "At first, it destroyed my confidence," Daugherty said. "I didn't realize anyone could play that well. They were so polished."

Daugherty said he began watching some of the tricks the pros were using against him, started to make similar moves and improved himself as a basketball player.

"I especially improved on my rebounding and defensive skills," he said. "People like Mitch Kupchak, James Worthy and Geoff Crompton helped me a lot."

Guard Buzz Peterson found that the pickup games helped him a lot, but in a different way. "It helps you mentally more than anything, knowing that you're playing with pros," Peterson said. "I was really timid at first, but then I figured out I could play with those guys."

Peterson said the games did not help his playing skills as much as did his one-on-one

sessions with some of the pros. "Sometimes I came down alone and Walter Davis would be down there, giving me tips," he said. "I worked a lot with Phil Ford, too."

Smith said that while the games may be fun for basketball junkies to sit and watch, he can't bear seeing the pickup matches for more than about a minute at a time.

"They're such sloppy games," Smith said, wincing. "The kids aren't under instruction, so they tend to be lazy on defense. They progress a lot further in an organized situation."

While Smith may be right, most basketball fans don't care. The games are usually punctuated with earth-shattering dunks and hot-dog passes that would make Meadowlark Lemon shiver with glee.

"We get together during the day and have a good time," Peterson said. "And then we get together and go out at night and have a good time."

Peterson's comment pointed up another plus of the UNC basketball program: the fraternal feeling that exists among Tar Heel players, both past and present. "We definitely look at it as a family thing," Peterson said.

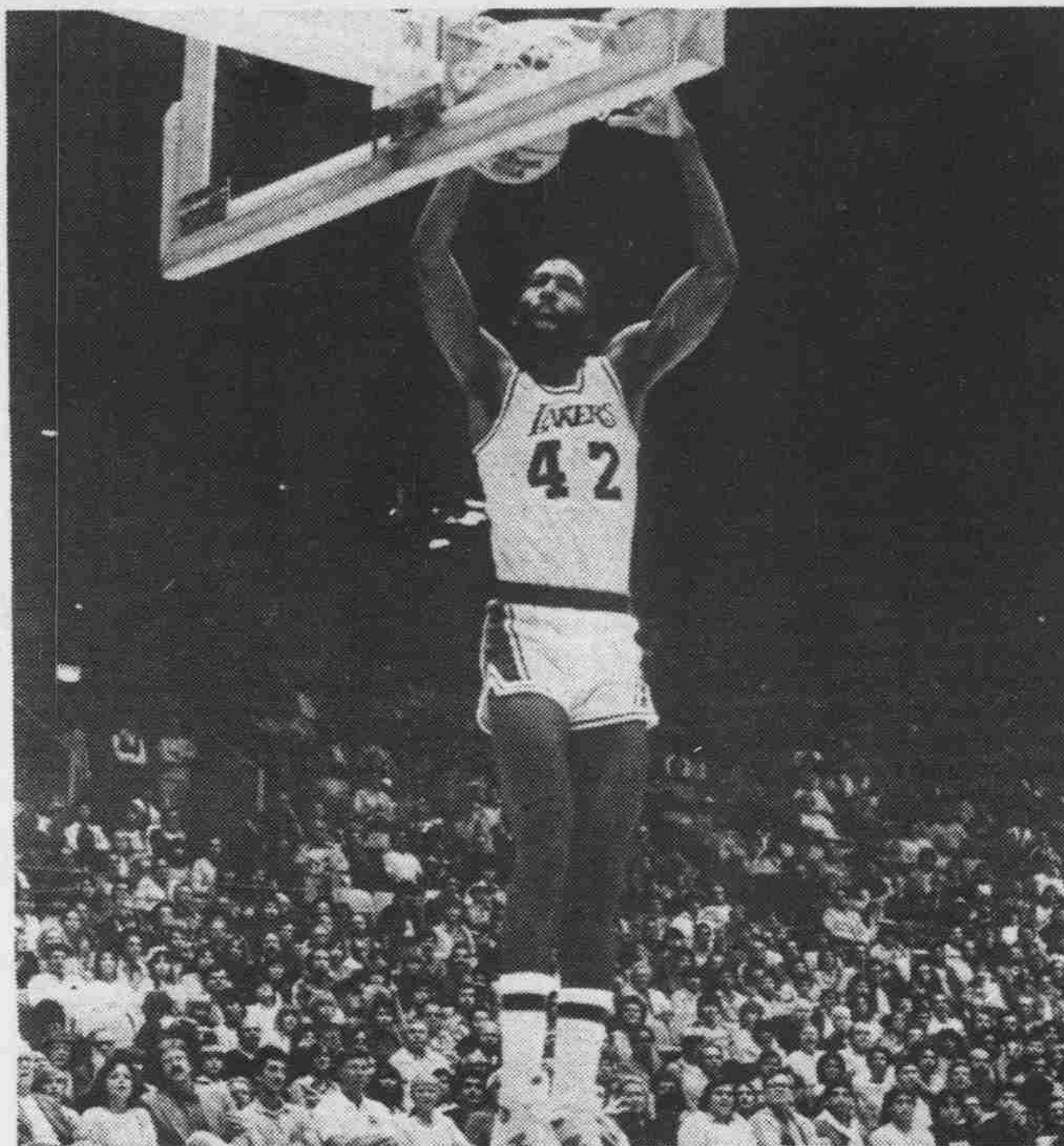
Smith echoed Peterson's sentiments, pointing out that, among others, Mitch Kupchak and Mike O'Koren have become good friends from playing during the summer. This despite the fact that they never played together on a North Carolina team.

"It's a whole basketball family," Smith said. "Even in the pros the anti-North Carolina sentiment among the guys who went to Indiana and UCLA and other places is so strong that the UNC guys have to stick together. When we lose, those guys (UNC alumni) really get needed."

The pros stick together during the season, and then stick together in Carmichael during the summer. Most of the pros and current players come back to Chapel Hill because they cannot find competition as good anywhere else.

"Chapel Hill is one of the better places in the country to come to get some good basketball in," Peterson said. "There's so much talent, it's the best competition around."

Daugherty said the pros also come back because of their basketball "father."



James Worthy, like many other former Tar Heels, keeps coming back to UNC.

"Those guys coming back is entirely attributable to Coach Smith," he said. "They come back to see him, because he's helped them a lot. They feel like they owe a little to him."

Smith's humble comment: "It's fun for me to see all the old players."

The annual ritual of professional players coming back to Chapel Hill during the summer started in earnest about 10 years ago, Smith

said. "Charlie Scott and Robert McAdoo came around and brought their friends," he said. "That really started the trend."

And the trend should continue for a long time, at least as long as Smith is around.

As Daugherty promised, "I'll be coming back when I leave here."

That's good news to a lot of North Carolina basketball junkies.

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