

Sports

Fenner: on or off, always confident

By MIKE BERARDINO
Assistant Sports Editor

Confidence. Many call it the mark of a leader. Others consider it essential for success. Some term it the telling difference between a winner and a loser. But here, submitted for your perusal, is an alternate observation: confidence is the one attribute in which Derrick Fenner has never found himself lacking.

From the time he was a young boy growing up as the only, and somewhat spoiled, child in his parents' home in Oxon Hill, Md., Fenner has carried with him a supreme assuredness, something he prefers to call an "optimistic attitude." Over the years, his positive self-image has reaped far more benefits than it has caused problems.

That is until Fenner stepped out of the warm, sheltered environment of constant reinforcement that his home life provided and entered instead a faraway zone of never-ending pressure. A place where a man was only as good as his last performance, where his superiors continually tried to mold him into a "team player," and where nearly two decades of ego-buildup threatened to come crashing down upon him.

No, Fenner did not enlist in the United States Army. Worse yet, for him, he decided to play football for the University of North Carolina.

That's not a simple proposition for a 19-year-old who drives a candy-apple red, 1986 BMW (his parents gave him the \$24,000 car complete with a red mobile phone). Nor is it easy to subdue the feeling of omnipotence that comes with having more girlfriends ("You got a calculator?"), clothes ("To me, a lot is when you could go for a year wearing something different.") and jewelry ("I'm going to get more for Christmas") than Don Johnson, Bruce Willis and your average Arab sheik combined.

Just a sophomore, Fenner is closing in on the 1,000-yard mark for the season (he needs 122 in the final two games). But in order to appraise his success, one must look beyond the gaudy statistics compiled by Fenner the player and focus on Fenner the person.

Over the past 15 months, the duration of his career as a tailback in Chapel Hill, Fenner has proved to be both a godsend and a devilish enigma. While everything about Fenner — his size (6-foot-4, 220 pounds), his speed (4.5 seconds in the 40-yard dash) and his Herschel Walker-like moves — adds up to certain fame and fortune, he has not yet elevated his star to its potential celestial height.

"It's difficult," he says with a hint of frustration in his voice. "Once I do something well, something else happens and then I'm back down

again. But I'm going to get there. I'm not the type of person who's going to keep his head down."

Here is a Top-Three list of the more famous Fenner Flubs:

1. The Bus Incident — The most celebrated of Fenner's many mishaps directly followed his most productive game. After grabbing the national rushing lead with a 216-yard showing against The Citadel in this year's opener, Fenner missed the next week's trip to Kansas because he missed the team bus.

According to Fenner, here's the real story: On the night before the Kansas trip, his roommate mistakenly set the clock for the wrong time. When Fenner finally woke up at 7:53 a.m., long after the UNC bus had departed, he got in his car and drove to the airport himself. There he caught up with the team, but was told by the coaches that he would not be allowed to go because he had violated a team rule by missing the bus.

2. The Fourth-Down Wimpout — More infuriating than the Kansas mistake for many Tar Heel watchers was Fenner's tiptoe out of bounds on a fourth-and-one play at the N.C. State five early in the game. Fenner's refusal to lower his shoulder to get the critical yardage loomed much larger after UNC lost by one point. In all fairness, he was nursing an injured left shoulder sustained the previous week against Wake Forest. "I was still hurt, but I wanted to play," he says.

3. The Fumble In The Bayou — With UNC down 10-0 to Louisiana State in the second quarter, Fenner fumbled at the Tiger goal line when he tried to leap over the top of the pile. The game eventually became a blowout, but the fumble was still costly in terms of momentum. Afterwards, UNC head coach Dick Crum pointed out there was a "huge hole about a yard to the left if the running back would have stayed on the ground."

A close dishonorable mention was Fenner's bowl-over of Crum in the Florida State game. That inadvertent tumble along the sideline broke Crum's leg and was all the more ironic considering it came the week after the Kansas fiasco.

Why is Fenner the one Tar Heel



DTH/Dan Charlson

Enigmatic tailback Derrick Fenner battles a Georgia Tech tackler

who continually finds his way into the eye of the storm? The answer may lie in his love-hate relationship with the UNC coaching staff.

"I think I'm probably the first player that they (the coaches) have seen with such an attitude as I have," Fenner says. "It's rather hard for me, I guess. Since I can remember I've been a little slack on things. I've always had an optimistic attitude about myself."

"I don't think I'm conceited, though I might get a little arrogant. But to me, I think it's kind of good to be arrogant and optimistic rather than pessimistic. Because if you're down on yourself, you're not going to get anywhere."

Therein lies Fenner's "problem."

He's good, he knows he's good and he has very little difficulty sharing the news that he's good.

His relationship with his teammates is improving, he says. "I think they like me pretty much. Last year, I got a lot of crap about me doing this and having that. But now I think they accept who I am and what I am."

With regard to the UNC fans, most of whom alternately cheer and curse their star tailback's actions, Fenner is just as independent. "I hope they look at me as a great athlete and a pretty good guy. If they don't, well, then they have a problem."

Truly spoken like a teenage tailback with an optimistic attitude.

Soccer set to roll to title in NCAAs

By EDDY LANDRETH
Staff Writer

At the beginning of each year, teams set goals. For some, it is to have a winning season. For others, it may be a conference title. For the UNC women's soccer team, the goal is a lofty one: the national championship.

Anything less than the national title for this group is rated as a disappointment, but they rarely come away disappointed.

Before finishing second in last year's tournament, UNC won four consecutive national championships. This year, the Tar Heels are the favorite to return to the top.

After finishing the regular season 21-0-1 and ranked No. 1 in the country, the team begins the pursuit of another title against Santa Barbara at 1 p.m. Sunday on Fetzer Field.

Santa Barbara beat Cincinnati 1-0 this past Sunday, in the first round of the NCAAs, a round UNC missed by virtue of a bye.

UNC head coach Anson Dorrance said the week off gave the team a chance to rest and get back to the basics.

"We've done some things tactically that are going to help us organize," he said. "It's nice to have a break where we can review things and get back to our fundamental movement."

Dorrance said that although this is a playoff match, there will be no drastic pre-game changes. "We prepared differently only in that we've got more time to prepare, so we can be more committed to total organization."

The team played a blue-white scrimmage this past weekend and star forward April Heinrichs hurt her knee. Senior midfielder Marcia McDermott said that if Heinrichs can't play, she feels the team will come together.

"April is a great player, but we have a capable front line even if she can't play," McDermott said. "This is still Carolina."

Heinrichs said that the condition of her knee is something she and the coaches monitor on a day-to-day basis. "Right now, we're not rushing trying to get back to practice. We're more concerned with being able to play (Sunday). If it's not 100 percent, I should be able to play anyway."

For both Heinrichs and McDermott, this is the last chance for a national title.

"It's special since it's my last tournament," McDermott said. "I think about it all the time."

"If we were to lose, it would be pretty hard to deal with," Heinrichs said. "Two of my friends from home play for Santa Barbara. They end their careers and I end my career, so I'm kinda nervous about that."

The trademark of this year's UNC team is the defense, with 15 shutouts to its credit. Heinrichs said Santa Barbara will test that defense.

"I'm not sure we've played a team with as much scoring potential," she said. "They play very physical and they play a good counter-attack game."

According to Heinrichs, mental preparation is the most important aspect of getting ready for this match. "After losing last year, we want to try to evaluate what maybe went wrong," she said. "In general, we're trying to stay very relaxed and not feel as though this is it, we have to win."

"We're very relaxed. All we have to do now is go out and play with enthusiasm."



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