

Sports

Miller's wild jaunt ignites dormant Heels

Generally speaking, unless you're one of those folks from the field-position-is-everything school of watching football games, a punter has about as much impact on the outcome of the contest as the mikeman. Saturday's UNC-Illinois game provided one of those rare exceptions to the above rule — not to mention what is sure to be remembered as one of the wackiest broken plays of the 1987 season.

Late in the second quarter, with a persistent drizzle baptizing the season opener and the Fighting Illini leading a Dullsville game by the unremarkable score of 7-3, North Carolina punter Kenny Miller trotted onto the field to terminate yet another stalled Tar Heel drive.

On fourth-and-three from the 29, Miller took his place at the UNC 15-yard-line, stretched out his hands in expectation of the snap and, as he does each and every time he punts, drew a long breath of air.

Some 57 yards and a pulled groin muscle later, Miller finally exhaled, disappointed that he didn't have the speed to score, but secure in the knowledge that he had single-handedly ignited a Tar Heel team with a serious case of the blahs.

Two plays later, 15 seconds before halftime, Torin Dorn swept around

Out of Bounds

Mike Berardino

left end to put UNC ahead for good.

"The inspiration factor was outrageous," UNC defensive tackle Cecil Gray said of Miller's run. "We were waiting for someone to light the fuse and that did it. That play told us we could pretty much do what we wanted to on the field."

Dorn's TD began a run of 31 unanswered Tar Heel points, a streak which more than decided the issue. Needless to say, Miller was ecstatic with his cameo appearance in the sparkplug role.

"You could tell by the expressions on the guys' faces in the locker room (at halftime) that they were fired up," Miller said. "You're always hoping that maybe one time you'll get a chance to do something like that. It all happened so fast, I'm not even sure if I was breathing."

In case you missed Miller's time, here's what happened. The snap from UNC center Tony Cooper was a one-hopper, forcing Miller to bend over to field the ball. When Miller looked up, he saw Illinois' Howard Griffith storming in from the left and John

Wachter coming from the right.

A neat one-two step left Griffith face-down on the wet turf and Miller briefly showed punt again ("I was just thinking of getting the thing off as quick as I could"). No dice. Wachter was too close for Miller to kick the ball away so the 6-1, 213-pound senior from Phoenix, Md., did the next best thing. He ran like hell.

Bouncing out to the right side, Miller picked up a couple of blocks to get the first down. But he wasn't through yet. A nice cutback to his left at the 40 sprang Miller for a few more yards and then, suddenly, he was staring at 50 glorious yards of wide-open Kenan Stadium sod. That was all that stood between the Tar Heels' punter/placekicker and glory.

"It was really strange when I came through the hole and had gotten by the last man," Miller said. "I was running as hard as I could, but I pulled a groin on the last cut I made."

Even with the injury, Miller trudged on alone as he made his personal trek to paydirt. Delving back into his high school days as an option quarterback and early collegiate stunts as a converted tailback and wide receiver, Miller held the pigskin close as the yard markers fell. Forty. Thirty-five. Thirty. Twenty-

five. Twenty.

Pandemonium on the sideline and in the stands. And then it ended.

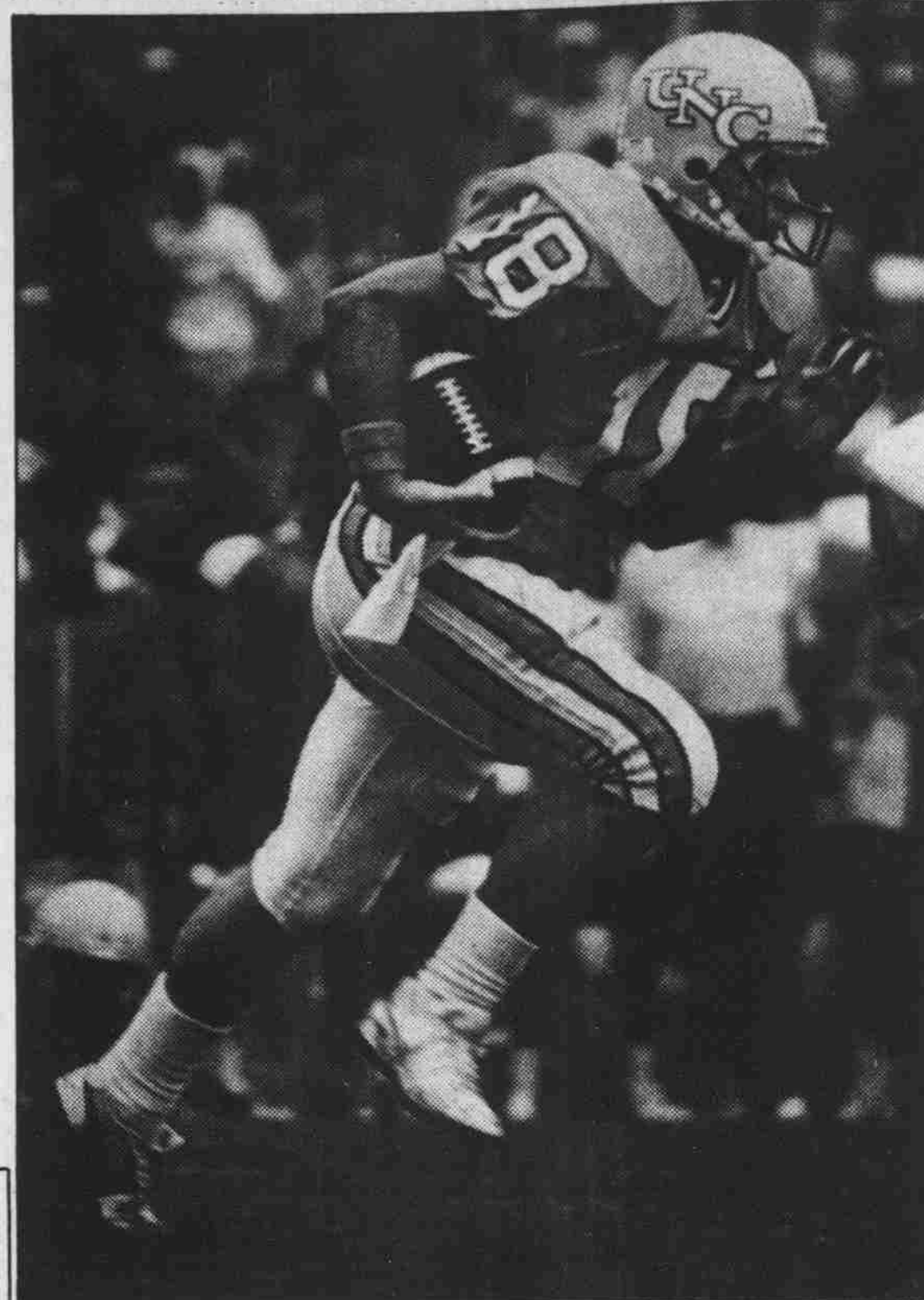
Stephen Jordan, a 5-9 defensive back for the Illini, collared Miller from behind (incurring a five-yard facemasking penalty in the process) and wrestled the Tar Heel punter to the ground at the 14.

"It was a good heads-up play," UNC coach Dick Crum deadpanned. "The thing that amazed even Kenny was that he broke a couple of tackles. But I think even I could have gotten into the end zone faster than he did."

The pulled muscle was actually a fortunate occurrence for Miller. It provided him a shield against the ribbing of his coach and teammates.

"When I got back to the sideline, everybody was coming over and saying 'You've been sitting on the turf too long,'" Miller said. "But I'm not in that bad of shape. Really."

Even if Miller wasn't in bad shape, the Illini were, and coach Mike White knew it. "When a guy can take the snap and wander through the entire defense like he did, it makes a big impact on the game," White said. "After that play, it looked like somebody pulled the cork out on our sideline. We started feeling sorry for ourselves."



DTH/Charlotte Cannon
UNC punter Kenny Miller races downfield during action Saturday

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