

Refreshed Lebo anxious to leave disappointment behind

By **PATTON McDOWELL**

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Even for someone who loves to play the game of basketball as much as Jeff Lebo does, there comes a time when enough is enough.

After finishing a long and physically draining sophomore year with a disappointing loss to Syracuse, Lebo extended his season by becoming the ACC's lone representative on Denny Crum's Pan American Team last summer.

"I was just worn out. And then I was going against some very tough competition every day in a very hot gym," Lebo said.

While facing UCLA's Pooh Richardson and Indiana's Keith Smart on a daily basis was indeed physically challenging, Lebo felt the physical strain was not the biggest problem he had to deal with once the summer was over.

"All the guys on the (Pan American) team gave up their summers to represent this country," Lebo said. "When we didn't get the gold, as everyone expected, you face a lot of criticism. I just became very emotionally tired."

While much of the criticism was directed at Crum, Lebo refused to single out the current Louisville mentor as the reason for the loss.

"Both coach Crum and coach Smith are excellent coaches, and I learned some different styles and techniques from coach Crum," Lebo said. "It just seemed that during the game against Brazil nothing would go right for us."

The difficult summer finally ended for UNC's junior guard, and Lebo decided to use the early part of the fall to get the necessary rest and relaxation that usually is reserved for the summer. While running and shooting to stay in shape, Lebo got away from the game for about five weeks.

When asked to reflect on the decision in mid-October, Lebo said he couldn't be any happier with the results.

"The time off has really helped," Lebo said. "I am excited about the season, and feel fresh and ready to go."

With two years of ACC experience and some international competition behind him, Lebo is ready to tackle the ACC season as a Tar Heel leader and one of the premier players at his position in the country.

After just two seasons in Chapel Hill, Lebo stands eighth on the all-time list of UNC free-throw shooters, bolstered by last season's 85-percent mark from the charity stripe. Had Lebo taken just six more free throws,

he very likely would have qualified to take the ACC free-throw crown that Duke's Danny Ferry won with an 84-percent average.

His good form on the foul line certainly carries over to the field for the sweet-shooting Lebo, who also managed to shoot over 50 percent from the field last season in building a 13.5 scoring average. That was up four points a game from his freshman campaign.

Lebo seems a sure bet to improve on his scoring average again this year, and anyone who watched his 31-point outburst in the second Blue-White game would agree. Lebo's contribution to the Tar Heel effort goes far beyond mere scoring, however, as some other statistics clearly point out.

While many consider the 6-foot-2, 180-pound Lebo a great perimeter shooter, they often fail to mention that he is the ACC's sixth-leading assist man among returning players and first in assists per minutes played.

His ability as a playmaker is further evidenced by his assist-to-turnover ratio of 2.55 to 1, which ranked third in the conference last year, ahead of such notables as former teammate Kenny Smith and Duke grad Tommy Amaker.

Despite all of the impressive assist numbers, some observers question Lebo's ability to run the team from the point guard position. Last season, Kenny Smith took care of the ball-handling chores and made Lebo's role more or less a pass or shoot option.

Lebo did, however, man the point position much of his freshman year, like he did in high school, and played several games in place of the injured Smith as a sophomore. Against Georgia Tech last year, Lebo ran the show and had 16 points, seven assists, and four steals filling in for "The Jet."

One proponent of Lebo's point guard ability is former Duke quarterback Amaker.

"I think he can definitely play point guard. No question about it," Amaker said. "He knows what he is doing. He knows how to do the little things."

Lebo himself does not really have a preference as to his position.

"I don't really care," Lebo said. "But I like the point. You have to think the game more at the point."

When the opposition has the ball, Lebo will be counted on as the Tar Heels' best defender, a role he upholds with both mental and physical skills. Last season he ranked sixth in the ACC in total steals with 46.

Outside of the 3-point line will still be a familiar stopping ground for the native of Carlisle, Pa. Last season Lebo was the most accurate from

behind the bonus arc, hitting 67 of 149 attempts. Lebo's 45-percent accuracy from trey land was the best in the conference and only Kenny Smith and N.C. State gunner Bennie Bolton took more.

Aside from all of the statistical contributions that Lebo will make for the Tar Heel squad this season, one of his biggest will not be noted in the box scores — leadership.

"I will be more of a leader this year, with the graduation of four seniors," Lebo said. "I'm looking forward to this challenge."

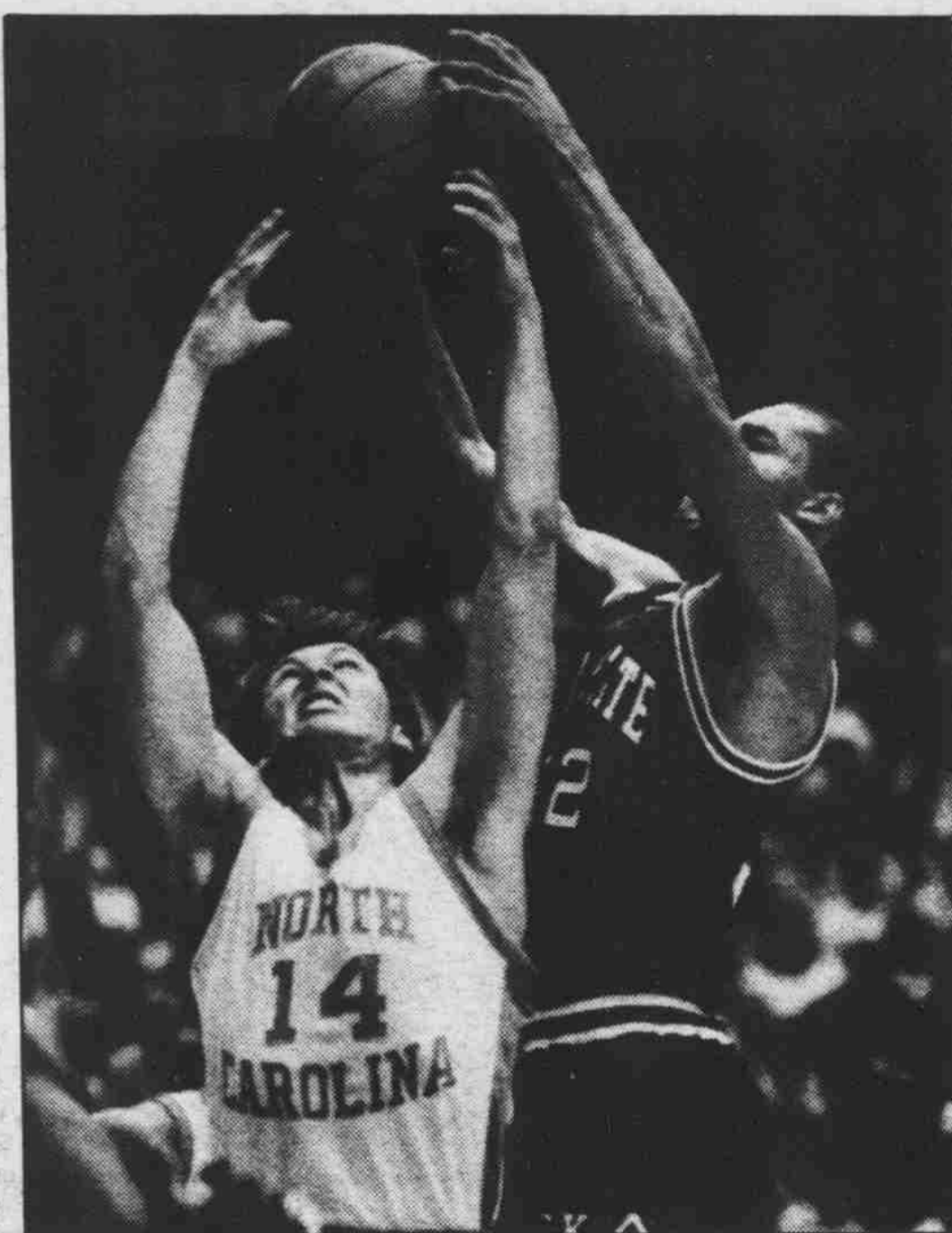
As Lebo looks ahead to the challenges of the upcoming year, he knows there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered.

"It will be awfully, awfully, awfully hard to be as good as we were last year," Lebo said. "Last year we only had to get emotional when we were behind. We were expected to win every game, and even when we did win, we were supposed to win by 20."

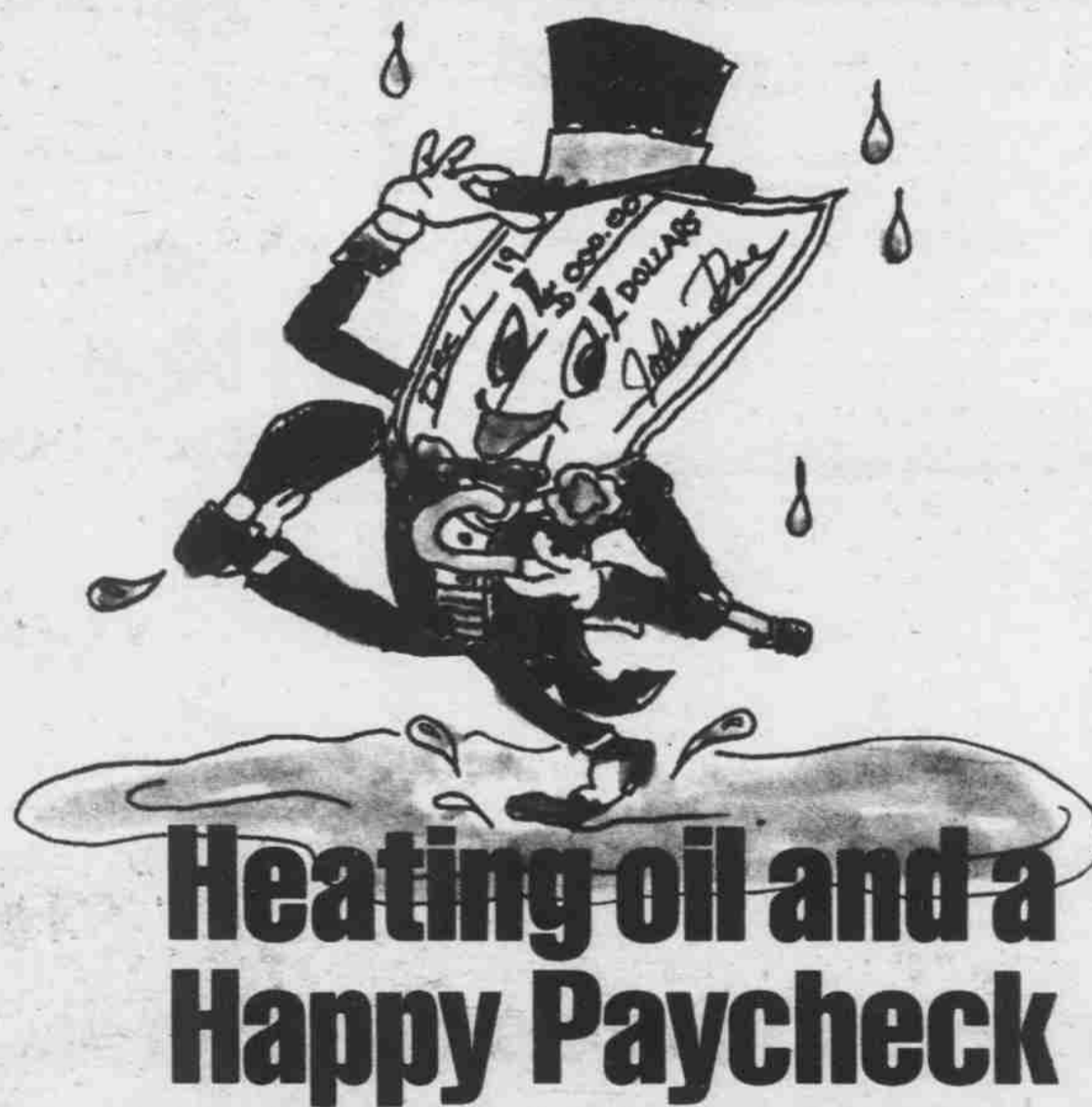
When discussing the promise of freshmen King Rice and Rick Fox, Lebo is cautiously optimistic. "I have been really impressed with both of them, but tradition can really put pressure on a young guy. Fans have come to expect another Michael Jordan out of each new player."

This season should provide many challenges for Lebo, but challenge is certainly nothing new for him.

"I dealt with a lot of disappointment last year, and it hurts to set goals and not be able to reach them. But you learn from these things, and our team will be better off in the long run."



Junior Jeff Lebo is back after a five-week vacation from the game he loves



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