

Dorn hopes to bounce back from season of injury

By MIKE BERARDINO
Sports Editor

Torin Dorn knows the question is coming. He's answered it so many times before — it started during his senior year in high school, but got worse than he ever could have imagined last fall, when the three-word query became the enemy, a recurring reminder of glory so attainable, yet so far removed.

"How's the ankle?"

Dorn smiles thinly. He has to laugh, at least inside, or he would go insane. He answers with eagerness this time, though, in a manner so unlike the way he used to respond to those three words of insinuation. (Is he really hurting that much? Why isn't he playing again this week? Is he just another selfish malingerer?)

"The ankle's fine," North Carolina's junior tailback finally says. "I'm as healthy as I've ever been. Right now I'm just trying to come over some adversity from the injuries last year. I'm just praying and hoping for a healthy year this year, and we'll see what happens."

Dorn's sophomore season of adversity began in brilliant, if misleading, fashion. On an overcast Saturday afternoon in Kenan Stadium early last September, Dorn ran wild through the Illinois defense for 165 yards and two touchdowns — in three quarters.

"The Illinois game was my best game, a fun game," Dorn recalls. "That game was like a running back's dream. Everything was in a groove. It was unbelievable; I can't express it."



Junior tailback Torin Dorn has the moves to become another 1,000-yard Tar Heel rusher

But a funny thing happened to Dorn on his way to the Heisman Trophy.

"Everything was so high at one point, and then one play brought me

down," Dorn said. "I remember the exact play. It was the play after I had run for a 56-yard touchdown, and we ran the exact same play. I mean it was like a duplication. The exact same thing happened, there was one guy to beat and I was cutting back

like I did the previously play.

"But this time I slowed up just a little bit too much and the pursuit caught up and the linebacker came from behind and fell on my leg. I felt the ankle turn over and I just knew that something was wrong. I

got to the sidelines and took the tape off and my ankle started to swell up. That was the turning point right there."

The injury to Dorn's right ankle forced him to miss the next week's game against Oklahoma, but he returned the next Saturday to help UNC beat Georgia Tech. Dorn, while obviously slowed by the injury, picked up 73 yards against the Yellow Jackets, mostly on draw plays.

Dorn missed the Navy game, and reinjured the ankle in practice before the Auburn matchup. Ditto for the next three games, too, amid constant questioning about the status of his troublesome joint.

"The desire to play was there, but my ability was very limited because I couldn't cut, and that was very painful," Dorn says. "That's the hardest part about dealing with injuries, the desire is there, but getting into the game you're wondering if you'll be able to perform at 100 percent. That really takes a toll on a person, but I think I handled it well."

Dorn's tribulations were similar to those he experienced during his senior year at Southfield (Mich.) High School. A sprained left ankle kept him out of 3½ games, but he still rushed for 1,239 yards and was named to virtually every prep All-American team.

Perhaps because his mental outlook was so strong, the 6-foot-1, 200-pound Dorn finished 1987 with a flourish. He came off the bench on Week No. 9 against Clemson and rushed for 92 yards and UNC's only touchdown. The following week at Virginia he tallied 116 yards and another touchdown, but in the season finale against Duke, he was shaken up on the last play of the first half, never to return.

Milo McCarthy, UNC's backfield coach, has worked with some great players in his coaching career — Sammy Winder at Southern Mississippi, Eric Dickerson, Craig James and Reggie Dupard at Southern Methodist. He feels Dorn has the potential to be as good as any of those backs.

"Dorn has the greatest asset a football player can have — the ability to run," McCarthy says. "He has outstanding speed. He has a lot of talent, and as he has the opportunity to be successful on a consistent basis, he'll gain more confidence in himself, which is usually what the great ones have."

In describing Dorn, McCarthy reels off a list of attributes that could just as easily apply to Dickerson or Winder, who have gone on to star in the NFL.

"He's a slasher type runner, an elusive runner," McCarthy says of Dorn. "He has the ability to change directions and go from one angle to another angle and not lose a step. And he's fast enough that when he gets out in the open he shouldn't be caught."

Dorn didn't really get a chance to show off his 4.4 speed in last Saturday's season-opening loss to South Carolina: He did pick up 66 yards, though, on 14 carries.

Afterwards, like every other player in the UNC locker room, Dorn answered the usual questions about the South Carolina blitz, the amazing Todd Ellis and what it would take to get back up for the Oklahoma game.

But the one question nobody had to ask was, "How's the ankle?"

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