

# J.R. Reid and Jeff Lebo

## Mr. Inside

### Reid hopes injury won't hamper him

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Clear your mind and picture this: You're an 18-year-old college kid taking a study break on a balmy night in early June. You're sitting in the Granville Towers West TV lounge, joining a few friends and one or two others you'd like to meet. Sink back into the sofa as another commercial drones on up in the little box on the wall. So many commercials, you think to yourself. Why so many commercials?

Suddenly, a familiar overexuberant voice cuts through the room, halting the jovial banter. It's Brent Mushburger.

"Awwwwright, welcome back to the NBA Finals on CBS. We are at halftime with the Lakers leading the Celtics, 63-52. Joining me now is the Good Doctor himself, Mr. Class, Julius Erving. Doc, how are ya?"

Erving, the legendary Dr. J, seemingly the first man to successfully suspend the law of gravity, has recently retired from the game he ruled for so long. Suddenly Brent pops the question.

"Lemme ask ya, Julius, if you were starting up an expansion team and had to pick one player, college or pro, to build your team around, who would it be?"

*Without hesitation, Erving looks directly into the camera and gives his answer. You!*

That's not exactly how J.R. Reid found out he was Julius Erving's favorite player in the world. Reid, just one month removed from his freshman year at North Carolina, was in Granville that night but had stepped out to check on some laundry during the endless battery of halftime commercials. When he walked back in the room, he was greeted with the news.

Incredulous, at the moment and for some time after that, Reid admits having had to watch Erving's statement on videotape several times just to believe it. Sure, Reid was coming off a rookie campaign in which he averaged 14.7 points and 7.4 rebounds, showing up on the cover of Sports Illustrated along the way. Moreover, he had captured the fancy of such luminaries as Dick Vitale ("I'm tellin' ya, this kid's a real Prime Time Performer, baby!") and Al McGuire (who screamed incessantly during Reid's 31-point outburst against N.C. State, "Put it behind your back, Jay Aaaaah, put it behind your back!")

But the best player, period? Nah.

Quite a lot has happened to Reid since that night in the Granville

lounge. He has been suspended for a nightclub altercation. He has led a graduation-ravaged Tar Heel team back to the NCAA Elite Eight. He has represented his country at the Seoul Olympics, only to be part of the first U.S. team ever to suffer a legitimate loss in men's basketball. And most recently, he experienced the first major setback of his young life — a stress fracture of the fifth metatarsal in his left foot.

UNC will be without its 6-foot-9, 256-pound All-America power forward until late December, early January. It was anything but the ideal way to begin one's junior season, but Reid has taken the setback in stride, even finding a positive in the mishap.

"It could turn out to be a blessing in disguise," Reid says of the injury, which he suffered in practice on Oct. 27. "I had been playing basketball non-stop for a couple of years and I found myself getting a little tired of the game the first few days of practice. It has given me a chance to spend some time in the weight room and relaxing. A lot of time relaxing."

This period of relative inactivity will give Reid time to reflect, time to ponder some troubling questions: How can a sophomore season in which a player averages 18 points and nine rebounds a game and leads his team to the brink of the Final Four be considered a disappointment? Should I turn pro if I have another big season this year? Am I playing to my potential, or just coasting my way to fairly reasonably gaudy stats on outstanding natural ability?

In a recent conversation, Reid addressed the issue of a supposed dichotomy between two types of expectations — the team's reasonable ones and those of the public which are unrealistic.

"At Carolina things are always under a microscope, people are always expecting big things out of us," Reid says. "But if we go out and do the things coach Smith wants us to do every game and he's satisfied, then we're happy. We're not really worried about what the media or the people outside of basketball have to say."

"That's one thing I was taught early — don't try to live up to other people's expectations. I just want to go out and play as hard as I can. If I don't score 30 points every game, if I don't grab 20 boards every night, but I still feel like I've played good pressure defense, dived for loose balls and done the little things to help my team win, I'll be happy with that."

Reid's words take on a sentimental tone when he talks about the growing pressures of becoming an upperclassman.

"It's always easier freshman year, because if you do something well they say you're only a freshman and if you mess up they say it's a freshman mistake," he says. "You just go out and play your game and don't worry about what the media writes."

"(Now there's) too much publicity. You're not as good a player as everybody thinks you are, and all that. That's why I'm not a big press reader at all."



Many fans think that J.R. is heads and shoulders above the rest

Soon after Reid announced he would attend UNC after a dream-like prep career at Kempville High School in Virginia Beach, Va., the propaganda began. "Dallas has South Fork," one bumper sticker read, "but Carolina has J.R." At the end of that season, even before the ballyhooed freshman's arrival, Duke's Cameron Craziest were practicing the chant "J.R. (Can't) Reid."

The environment for his first season with the Tar Heels was ideal. While seniors like Kenny Smith and Joe Wolf absorbed the heat from defenders and writers, Reid was able to roam free in the paint and in the locker room. Ah, but to be a freshman forever, he must have thought.

Reid's turn would come, though, as the seniors' graduation ripped the security blanket right out of his hands. Suddenly, teams were double-teaming Reid at every opportunity. Why, he practically couldn't run to the bench during timeouts without two guys hanging all over him.

Despite such constant attention, Reid had some incredible games early in the season — 30 points at Illinois, 25 points at UCLA, 30 more against LaSalle. Post up strong. Catch entry pass. Hesitate ever so briefly. Fake left. Drop-step right. Two points.

Scoring was usually that simple. But whatever the reason, whether it was the steady stream of stray elbows and outstretched knees oppo-

nents used to stop him, or perhaps the building pressure which accompanies a late-season league race, Reid's numbers began to tail off.

Then there were the turnovers — 127 in all last season, an ACC record. As the year wore on, it seemed Reid's wild spin moves in the low post more often resulted in fast breaks the other way than easy lay-ins for UNC. What's more, Reid wasn't exactly Jerome Lane on the offensive boards. In the 14 regular season ACC games, he ripped down a whopping 17 offensive rebounds.

Despite these chinks in his armor, Reid is still held in high esteem by most everyone in the basketball world. And although it's Danny Ferry's face which adorns the covers of seemingly every preview magazine, a quick flip inside will show Reid on the preseason All-America team. Street and Smith's, in fact, selected Reid and Arizona's Sean Elliott as co-players of the year.

What does the "Air" to Erving's throne think of UNC's Monster Tot?

"I think he could play in the NBA right now," Michael Jordan said during a recent visit to Chapel Hill with his Chicago Bulls. "He's so strong. He's like a Buck Williams or a Kevin McHale, except stronger. One more year will just make him that much better."

One more year?



Reid's physical rebounding will be sorely missed by the Tar Heels