

Fox finds his place in the Tar Heel offense

New confidence has him in the limelight

By JAY REED
Staff Writer

This is the year for 6-foot-7 sophomore swingman Rick Fox to jump into the foreground of college basketball and play the game he is capable of playing.

UNC coach Dean Smith has already said this season he will encourage his players to start using a shoot-quick offense and continue playing a high-pressure defense.

For the Fox, this type of play can only be to his advantage.

Last season Fox was soul searching for his niche in the tradition of North Carolina basketball. Although his statistics show numbers that prove his success, Fox is very critical of himself. He is always striving to be a better player all-around, not only on the offensive side of the court.

"At the beginning of last year I lacked a lot of the confidence that I have now," Fox said. "I feel I have a lot more to contribute to the team this season."

Fox's supposed "lack of confidence" didn't show when he was thrust into a starting role in the first game of his collegiate career. One year ago this week, in UNC's 1987 opener against top-ranked Syracuse, Fox helped the Tar Heels down the Orangemen in overtime, 96-93, without J.R. Reid or Steve Bucknall.

Before Fox and redshirt freshman Pete Chilcutt got the nod against the Orangemen, only six other Tar Heels had ever started their first game as freshmen. They were Phil Ford (1976), Mike O'Koren (1977), James Worthy (1980), Michael Jordan (1982), Kenny Smith (1984) and Reid (1987).

Even in the company of those greats, Fox still downplays himself, instead heaping many words of praise on the team as a whole.

"Last season we were very successful, but we weren't satisfied with our performance in the ACC," Fox said. "I'm really excited about the progress the team has made already (this year). It's great to have almost everybody back again."

Fox's numbers were tops or near the top in many categories for the Tar Heels. Most impressive, however, was his field goal percentage. Fox was barely second in the ACC in overall field goal percentage with 62.8 percent, behind Clemson's Elden Campbell (62.9), and was the top shooter in ACC games with a 69 percent field goal accuracy rate (in second was Wake Forest's Ralph Kitley with a 59.4).

In averaging just under 11 minutes per game in '87, Fox averaged four points and two rebounds per game. Those numbers figure to balloon this season, however, when Fox is given a starting position.

"I don't think Coach Smith will be afraid to call on me to perform in pressure situations this year," Fox said.

"I feel I have a lot more to contribute ... this season"

— Rick Fox

So far this season Fox's prediction has come true. Smith started Fox in the two preseason matches, and the Bahamian native of Nassau has performed well, exciting the Smith Center crowd with his strong defense and high-flying slam dunks.

Fox scored 10 points in the win over Marathon Oil and 17 in the loss to the Soviet National Team. But his presence was felt all over the court as he contributed six rebounds and two steals in both games.

"I'm going to be better both offensively and defensively this season," Fox said. "I'll be able to execute better because I'll be more relaxed on the court."

Fox is also confident the team will perform well this year. He said he learned very quickly last year what the rivalry between UNC and the other ACC schools, especially Duke, meant to the squad.

"I got first-hand experience last year how much pressure is on the team in ACC matches," Fox said. "I'm looking forward to those games this year."

Fox feels Duke's preseason No. 1 ranking will not faze the Tar Heels at all in their attempt to break the Duke jinx of 1987-88.

"I think we have more depth than Duke - not in numbers but in experience," Fox said. "We can only send eight or nine on to the court whereas Duke can send 10 or 11. But our eight or nine have a lot more game time than their numbers."

Many fell the loss of Reid for the first part of the '88-'89 season will eventually benefit the Tar Heels. Fox, especially, figures to improve during this stretch.

Without Reid, Fox will get early season experience at the power forward position and will get tested defensively as well. Whereas Reid would normally draw the center, Scott Williams will now be faced with that job. This switch will leave Fox to get the attention of opposing power forwards.

If all goes well this year for North Carolina and Rick Fox, college basketball's gurus such as Dick Vitale and Al McGuire will, by season's end, be singing the praises of Dean Smith once again. But this time they will be touting Fox as one of the quietest college superstars ever to play the game.



Rick Fox has developed into an aggressive rebounder, but he will have to score more this year

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