

Fox steps out of shadows into the limelight

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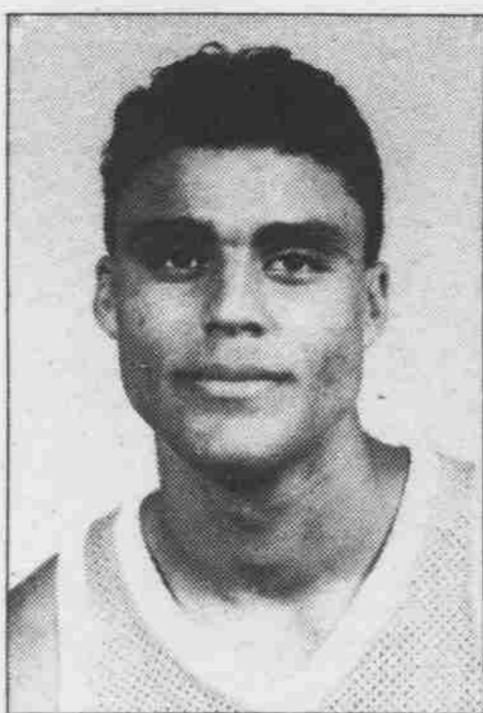
There's a certain someone among this year's high-powered UNC hoopsters who may soon make the names J.R. Reid, Steve Bucknall and Jeff Lebo only vaguely familiar.

Even the most devout Tar Heel basketball fan may find himself saying to his neighbor, "Reid, Lebo and Bucknall... Those guys used to play for us, didn't they?"

Yes, there is one walking the crooked brick paths of this campus who, if he is able finally to master his 6-foot-7, 231-pound frame, can make coach Dean Smith and the rest of the North Carolina basketball community less concerned with what they lost and more grateful for what they didn't.

His name? Why, rich H. Fox, of course — better known as Rick to most and as the "Bahama Mama" to his staunchest admirers.

While adjusting to life without three of last year's big guns will no doubt be a group effort, what makes Fox such a valuable commodity is



Rick Fox

his ability to take up at least some of the slack for all of them. He can rebound and drive to the hoop as Reid did; he can shoot from the outside as Lebo did; and he can take on and shut down an opponent's top scorer

as Bucknall did.

It remains to be seen, however, if Fox can put together on a consistent basis these attributes and become the veritable Renaissance man he has been lauded as. Fox's talent is unquestionable, but developing it has been the biggest problem during his freshman and sophomore years.

He showed flashes of brilliance last year with a soft shooting touch, smooth moves and stifling pressure defense en route to an 11.4 points per game average, a .583 shooting percentage and a team-high 47 steals. His best effort — 24 points, four steals and three blocked shots against Missouri in the final game of the Tournament of Champions in Charlotte — earned him tournament MVP honors and had onlookers abuzz over his rising stardom.

But then there were the 88 turnovers (second only to Bucknall's 100 in 200 fewer minutes), 122 personal fouls (tops in the entire ACC) and eight disqualifications (again, the most in the conference). That put an end to the anticipation, at least for a while.

"Last year was a growing process," Fox said. "I think I showed that I was capable of being a threat at times, but then sometimes I would try to do too much at the wrong time, and it would bounce back on me and create a problem.

"It's about time to break through and do things on a consistent basis."

Though his size enables Fox to play inside or outside, Smith plans to



With confidence in his jumper, Rick Fox hopes to conquer new

have him mostly on the perimeter, where his shooting and defensive skills are most valuable.

"He's really what I call a wing player more than a post player," Smith said. "We'll post him up some, but I think more in terms of position defensively, and Rick can cover outside defensively."

If there are shoes that Fox specifically wants to fill this year — and those of you who saw his 35-point outpouring in the Blue-White game may have trouble believing this — they are those of Bucknall, known last year more for his defense than anything else. At the same time, however, Fox wants to increase his contribution on the offensive end as Bucknall did in his senior year.

"I see myself as taking Buck's spot, and I'm going to find myself matched up with a lot more offensive-minded people this year," he said. "But I also need to have the confidence he did as a scorer his senior year and not let offense take a back seat to defense."

Fox also needs to keep his hands to himself a little more often. His 122 personal fouls last year equals the highest ACC total in the last five years.

It seems, though, that everyone wants a piece of the Rick. Center Scott Williams expects to have his help on the boards and yet have him shooting the jumper to make room for UNC's inside game.

"I think he's going to have to look to rebound more for us, and he's going to have to shoot the outside shot and really open things up for Pete (Chilcutt) and Kevin (Madden) inside."

Defense. Scoring. Rebounding. That's a tall order, maybe too tall even for Fox. But maybe not.

"Being a junior you feel a lot more responsibility," he said. "You feel like you have to do more, but at the same time what I've been having to realize is that it's not an individual game, and I'm not supposed to take up all the slack for everyone that left."

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