

SPORTS

Linebackers starring as UNC's hit men

By JASON BATES
Staff Writer

WINSTON-SALEM — The Tar Heels have cut the Wake Forest lead to 24-17 with 29 seconds to go in the first half. On the ensuing kickoff, Wake's Tony Rogers has beaten the initial coverage and is on the UNC 48-yard line about to break into the open. The one Tar Heel left in his path brings him down, and the half ends before the Deacons can capitalize on the excellent field position.

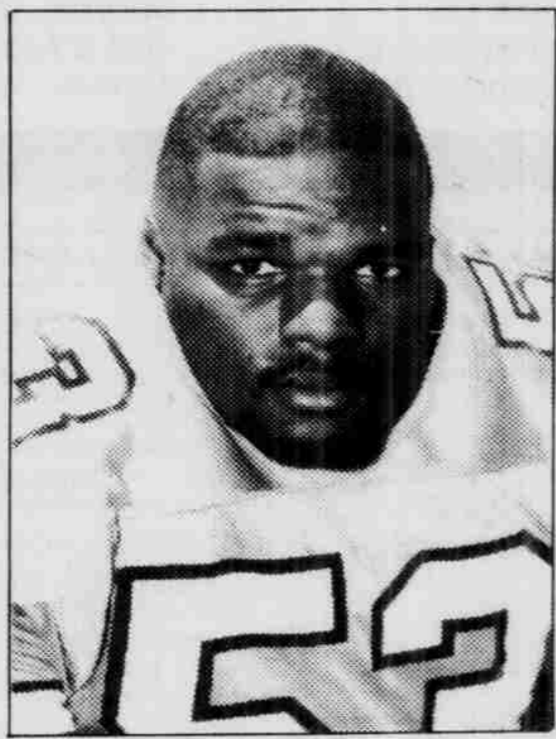
In the second half, UNC has tied the score at 24-24 with 3:07 to go in the third quarter. After the kickoff, the Deacons move from their 31 to the Tar Heel 37 in five plays and look ready to regain the lead. The next three Wake plays go for two net yards. On fourth down, the Deacons' Wade Tollison is short on a 52-yard field goal attempt.

Those key defensive stops were just two examples of the many times the UNC linebacking corps rose to the occasion in the Tar Heels' 31-24 comeback from behind win over Wake Forest Saturday night.

Redshirt freshman Rick Steinbacher was the man who tripped up Rogers on the kickoff return. Sophomore Tommy Thigpen and junior Dwight Hollier were responsible for stopping the Deacon drive in the third quarter.

The linebackers accounted for 47 of the Tar Heels' 79 tackles during the game, including all three special teams hits — and three of the top four UNC tacklers were linebackers.

Thigpen, normally a starter, was questionable for the game for most of the week after suffering a thigh bruise Sept. 29 against N.C. State. He didn't start, but then came off the bench to lead the team with nine solo tackles and five



Dwight Hollier

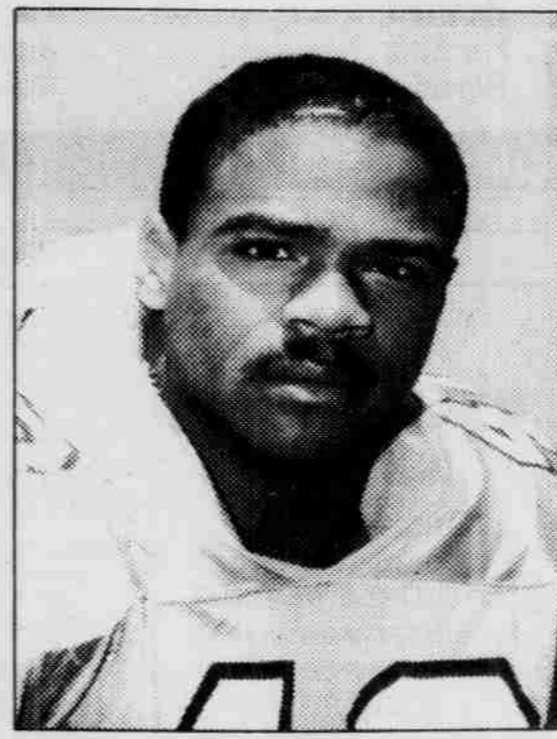
assists. He also broke up one pass and had a sack for a 10-yard loss.

"I knew I was going to play," Thigpen said. "I just didn't practice any this week. Coach Brown kept me off my feet, but we knew the whole time I was going to play."

Sophomore Jonathan Perry, a starter at outside linebacker, collected six solo tackles and three assists while breaking up one pass.

Dwight Hollier, a second team All-ACC performer last season after leading the conference in tackles with 159, had five solo hits, two assists and recovered a fumble.

Despite the linebackers' statistics, the UNC defense had a shaky first half. The Deacons seemed to be able to move the ball at will, jumping to leads of 7-0, 14-3 and 24-10.



Tommy Thigpen

"It looked like the old Carolina," Thigpen said. "It was a long one, then another long one, then another long one. They were running a track meet against us."

Said junior outside linebacker Eric Gash, "Coming out in the first half we weren't prepared mentally. I know I made a few key mistakes that led to a few touchdowns. But we came back in the second half and found ourselves."

In the second half, the linebackers led a rejuvenated defense which held Wake scoreless.

"Up front we got a lot more pressure on them," Hollier said. "We just got back to basics. We busted a lot of things in the first half, but in the second half we put it together."

"If we stopped them offensively, we knew our offense could score points on

them. That was our main objective in the second half."

The performance of the linebackers is not a new phenomenon to Tar Heel football. The linebackers are considered by many to be the strength of the improving defensive unit.

"I don't look at it as pressure; I look at it as motivation," Hollier said. "It's a great motivator to have people look at us as the top linebacking corps in the ACC or maybe close to the top."

For the season, linebackers hold five of the top seven spots on UNC's tackle list. Thigpen leads with six sacks for 34 yards. Gash is third with 34. Perry's performance against the Deacons moved him into fourth place with 27, and Gash's backup, senior Reggie Clark, is tied for sixth with 23.

As a unit, the Tar Heel defense leads the ACC in sacks with 27 and is on track to set a new school season record for sacks. Of those 27, the linebackers have 14. Thigpen leads with six sacks for minus-33 yards. Perry is second with four for minus-18 yards. Gash is third with three sacks, but he leads the team in total tackles for losses with eight.

And what are ACC offenses going to do to contend with a group that just seems to know where the ball is?

"Running the ball, (offenses) are not going to avoid us," Thigpen said. "We're going to be there. We're just hoping that people start respecting us and go ahead and try to pass the ball, because the run is not going to be there."

"Right now we're still young. This year we're still getting together and molding together. By the end of the year, hopefully we'll play better as a team. Gash, Dwight and Perry are as good as anybody in the ACC."

Hurricanes receive Big East invitation

From Associated Press reports

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — The University of Miami on Monday received an invitation to become the 10th member of the Big East Conference, and the school's board of trustees will decide Wednesday whether to accept the offer.

Big East officials have been courting the independent school for several months, and had reportedly been awaiting a signal that Miami would accept an invitation before extending one.

But Miami athletic director Sam Jankovich and university president Edward Foote declined to predict how the 55-member board would vote on the matter.

If the invitation is accepted, the role of Miami's juggernaut football program in the Big East would be decided later, Jankovich said. Boston College, Pittsburgh and Syracuse are the only Big East schools that play major-college football, and they're independent in that sport.

As a Big East member, Miami might remain independent in football, at least for the time being. There has also been talk of the Big East adding other football schools, or of the league aligning with the Southwest Conference or Atlantic Coast Conference in football only.

"There would be a number of options if this thing took place," Jankovich said. "But there would be no timetable, and we would just take our time."

Approval of the Big East's invitation by the board of trustees would require a simple majority.

Reds take 2-1 series lead

PITTSBURGH — The Cincinnati Reds broke their hitting slump and Zane Smith's magic on Monday to take a 2-1 lead over the Pittsburgh Pirates in the National League playoffs with a 6-3 victory.

In 10 starts for the Pirates after being acquired from Montreal on Aug. 8, Smith gave up nine earned runs in 75 innings. In Game 3, the Reds got five runs off Smith in five innings.

Former Pirate Billy Hatcher hit a two-run homer in the second inning and Mariano Duncan snapped a 2-2 tie with a three-run homer in the fifth and drove in another run in the ninth with his third hit of the game to make it 6-3.

Game 4 is scheduled for 8:18 p.m. tonight.

A's Weiss out of playoffs

OAKLAND, Calif. — Oakland shortstop Walt Weiss, injured in a collision at second base Sunday night, will miss the rest of the American League playoffs with a sprained left knee.

Weiss' status for the World Series, if the Athletics advance that far, will be determined at that time. But the former UNC star said Tuesday that doctors had told him it was "doubtful" he would be able to play any more this year.

ACC Football Stats

RUSHING LEADERS

PLAYER, CLASS, SCHOOL	G	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Terry Kirby, SO, Va.	5	78	521	6.7	7
Nikki Fisher, JR, Va.	5	50	463	9.3	6
Anthony A. Williams, JR, WF	5	87	459	5.3	4
Ronald Williams, FR, Cle	5	66	456	6.9	6
T.J. Edwards, SR, GaT	3	35	174	5.0	0
Randy Cuthbert, JR, Duke	5	63	269	4.3	2
Troy Jackson, JR, Md.	6	82	318	3.9	2
Eric Blount, JR, UNC	6	81	315	3.9	2
Aubrey Shaw, SO, NCS	6	73	281	3.8	6
Natrone Means, FR, UNC	6	56	280	5.0	6

PASSING LEADERS

PLAYER, CLASS, SCHOOL	G	ATT	CMP	PCT	INT	YDS	TD
Shawn Jones, SO, GaT	4	86	50	.581	4	800	4
Shawn S. Moore, SR, Va.	5	120	68	.567	1	1121	13
Billy Ray, SR, Duke	4	55	31	.564	3	385	1
Scott Zolak, SR, Md.	6	256	140	.547	13	1597	5
Charles Davenport, JR, NCS	5	81	43	.531	4	538	2
David D. Brown, JR, Duke	4	119	62	.521	5	636	2
Todd T. Burnett, JR, UNC	6	119	59	.496	4	780	3
DeChane Cameron, JR, Cle	6	98	46	.469	1	571	4
Phillip Barnhill, SR, WF	5	141	63	.447	4	758	5

RECEIVING LEADERS

PLAYER, CLASS, SCHOOL	G	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Herman H. Moore, JR, Va.	5	20	409	20.5	7
Barry Johnson, SR, Md.	6	21	409	19.5	1
Frank Wycheck, FR, Md.	6	45	397	8.8	1
Terry Smith, FR, Clem	6	21	290	13.8	1
Marc Mays, SR, Duke	5	19	238	12.5	1
Aaron Shaw, JR, Duke	5	18	196	10.9	0

PUNTING LEADERS

PLAYER, CLASS, SCHOOL	G	NO	YDS	AVG
Scott McAlister, JR, UNC	6	42	1854	44.1
Ed Garno, JR, Va.	5	17	735	43.2
Preston Poag, SR, NCS	6	20	841	42.1
Chris Gardocki, JR, Clem	6	29	1216	41.9
Dan DeArmas, JR, Md.	6	41	1653	40.3
Kim Sheek, SO, WF	5	22	870	39.6
Scott Aldredge, SR, GaT	4	22	854	38.8

FIELD GOAL LEADERS

PLAYER, CLASS, SCHOOL	G	FGA	FGM	LONG	PCT
Clint Gwaltney, JR, UNC	6	16	12	0	.750
Chris Gardocki, JR, Clem	6	12	10	0	.833
Scott Sisson, SO, GaT	4	9	6	0	.667
Damon Hartman, JR, NCS	6	10	8	0	.800
Jake McInerney, SR, Va.	5	8	6	0	.750

Means garners ACC rookie honors

From staff reports

North Carolina freshman tailback Natrone Means was named Atlantic Coast Conference football rookie of the week Monday for his performance in the Tar Heels' 31-24 victory over Wake Forest.

Means, a 5-foot-10, 231-pounder, carried 24 times for 134 yards and two touchdowns while catching three passes for 78 yards and another score.

After the Demon Deacons had jumped to a 24-17 halftime lead, Means scored both of UNC's touchdowns in the second half to propel the Tar Heels to the win.

He burned the Wake secondary late in the third quarter, taking a 35-yard pass from quarterback Todd Burnett and turning it into a 72-yard scoring play with 3:07 left in the period. Then, in the fourth quarter, Means capped a 51-yard Tar Heel drive with a 1-yard run for the go-ahead tally at 4:59.

Saturday's numbers give Means season totals of 280 yards on 56 carries for a 5.0 average, good enough for a No. 10 ranking in the ACC. His three touchdowns give him six for the year, tops on the Tar Heel squad and third in the conference.

A Harrisburg native, Means rushed for 4,399 yards and scored 63 touchdowns during his three-year career at Central Cabarrus High School.

This season, Means has been splitting time in UNC's backfield with junior Eric Blount and fellow freshmen Malcolm Marshall and Michael Watkins.

The 5-9, 187-pound Blount was listed first on the depth chart Saturday, but,



Natrone Means

according to Rick Brewer, assistant athletic director for sports information, head coach Mack Brown opened the game with plays designed for the larger Means, and once Brown saw that Means was hot, he elected to stay with the freshman. Blount did not carry in the game but did return four kickoffs and three punts.

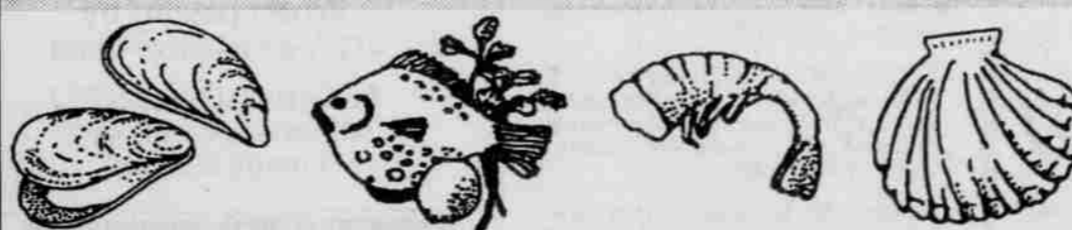
There is good news and bad news on the Tar Heels' injury front.

For the good news, starting quarterback Todd Burnett, who exited Saturday's game in the fourth quarter after bruising his elbow on the helmet of Deacon defender Tony Hollins, will not miss any action.

ACC Standings

	Conference				Overall			
	W	L	T	Pct.	W	L	T	Pct.
Virginia	2	0	0	1.000	5	0	0	1.000
G. Tech	2	0	0	1.000	4	0	0	1.000
Clemson	3	1	0	.750	5	1	0	.833
N.C. State	2	2	0	.500	4	2	0	.667
UNC	1	1	0	.500	4	2	0	.667
Maryland	1	2	0	.333	3	3	0	.500
W. Forest	0	2	0	.000	2	3	0	.400
Duke	0	2	0	.000	2	3	0	.400

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