

MATT WENSTROM

Lost among the trees

With 7-foot quartet, Wenstrom does best work off court

By Michael Workman
Assistant University Editor

Twenty minutes after leaving the Smith Center court, Matt Wenstrom again emerged from the locker room tunnel.

It was media day, and while other players stayed on the floor to talk to reporters, Wenstrom had headed back to the locker room.

"We sent him back in because no one was talking to him," explained a Smith Center official.

No one wanted to talk to the 7-foot-1, 250-pound Wenstrom, a senior player for one of the most prestigious basketball programs in the nation.

Wenstrom seems left out of the excitement that surrounds a new season. Three years after graduating from high school and being selected to the prestigious McDonald's All-America team, Wenstrom is a self-acknowledged role player.

At another school, he probably could have been a starter.

But the Houston native still believes



Matt Wenstrom

he made the right choice in coming to North Carolina, even though a logjam of 7-footers has kept him out of the starting lineup. The emergence of 7-1 junior Kevin Salvadori and 7-0 junior Eric Montross has limited Wenstrom's playing time.

"The package here is the total package — you have a great coach, you have a great program, you have a great life outside of basketball," Wenstrom said.

"I could have gone somewhere else and played more, but I'd rather come here, learn more and be coached by a better coach."

That coach, Dean Smith, appreciates Wenstrom's contributions.

"Matt has improved," Smith told Carolina Court magazine. "Everybody saw what he can do. When he got his chance to play against Cornell, he got points, he got rebounds."

Just because Wenstrom is a role player does not mean he won't contribute to this year's team on the court and off it.

On the court, Wenstrom has shown flashes of brilliance, such as the 21-point, six-rebound performance against Cornell last season.

Off the court, Wenstrom, a political science major, looks to be a solid leader for the underclassmen.

"Matt's pretty vocal," said teammate and fellow Pi Kappa Alpha member Scott Cherry. "He'll tell you what he thinks."

"He's usually there, not just vocally but physically."

Wenstrom is looking forward to his new leadership role this season.

"I'm really excited about being a leader," he said. "Not so much a leader on the court — I try to be a leader off the court (and) with my teammates in practice."

"With me and Scott Cherry being reserve players and George (Lynch) being a real team leader, I think there's a place for me to step up in the locker room. My roles are more off-court."

Although the leadership of Hubert Davis, who now plays for the NBA's New York Knicks, will be difficult to replace, Wenstrom said this year's seniors were ready to take that role.

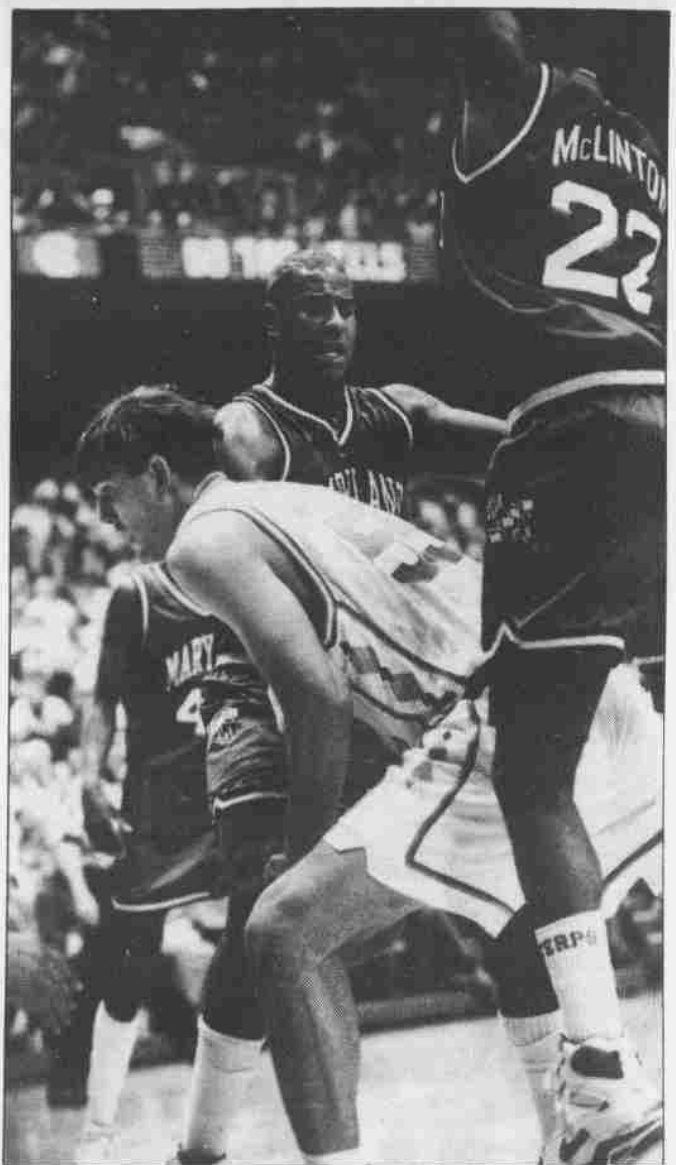
"The seniors are always looked to provide leadership and guidance for the younger players," he said. "Hopefully, we'll continue to do that. Hubert did a great job last year."

He knows that the season, and the seniors' careers, have to end sometime.

"When it does come to an end, it's going to be a sobering thought, but it's also going to be a day when we look back on all the successes," he said.

Wenstrom worked this summer on his post moves and on his outside shot, hoping to diversify his on-the-court contributions and improve on his 2.1 points and 1.3 rebounds per game last season.

"I think my overall game improved this summer — being a year older and



Wenstrom (55) says he would like to play professional basketball overseas next year

more experienced just gives me an edge," he said.

If Wenstrom does get more playing time this season, he knows he will have to make the most of it. But he doesn't want to try to do too much.

"That's something Coach (Smith) always talks about," he said. "It's easy to get caught up in that when you get in the game — you're excited about being in the game, you try to do too much."

"When you get out on the court, don't so much try to help the team, because your existence out there will help. Execute the plays, and you'll make good things happen."

Wenstrom hopes to make enough

good things happen during his senior year to earn him a chance at continuing his basketball career.

"I just want to play well when I'm in there and do good things for the team and hopefully get enough time during the year to possibly continue my career overseas next year," he said.

The immense height of this year's team will make things happen, Wenstrom said.

"It is going to be exciting this year with all that height," he said. "I don't even know — we'd probably be the tallest team in NCAA history."

"On the court, there's not going to be a lot of lane left."

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