

'It's like he's a magnet': Lynch dominates on boards

By Bryan Strickland
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It's an undersized, jam-packed community gymnasium, and he is there.

Deliberately pacing the narrow sidelines, his finely tailored suit perfectly accentuates his fashion-wise eyeglasses. The gym is smoldering — the sportscoat must come off.

He takes his struggling player aside, looks at the youngster with those piercing eyes, and pats the kid on the back.

If UNC senior forward George Lynch finds himself coaching on the high school level five years from now, he'll be happy enough.

But don't count on it happening. The gym very well could be Lynch's chosen career venue come 1997 or so. But the gyms he is likely to roam more aptly are referred to as coliseums.

"I'm just going to take things one at a time," the Roanoke, Va., native said. "If basketball holds a future for me, then I'll play basketball. If not, then maybe I'll think about coaching on the high school level."

Pro basketball is far and away the most popular post-graduation aspiration of collegiate basketball players, and for good reason. What could be more desirable or rewarding than a career that pays — and pays well — for performing a task that one loves?

And like anyone who's ever clutched a basketball close to his chest, Lynch admits he has thought about what life in the NBA would be like. But after a couple of conversations with UNC head coach Dean Smith, Lynch is keeping his perspective about him.

"Of course, I'd tell a lie if I said we hadn't brought it up a couple of times," Lynch said, "but basically our conversation is locked on me having a great year my senior year and the team playing as well as possible.

"I'm not going to have a favorite (NBA) team this year. Hopefully, I'll just go somewhere where I'm needed and will have a good chance of playing."

What NBA franchise possibly could need a player like Lynch? Any one that is in the market for a consistent scorer, a scrappy defender and just about the most tenacious rebounder Chapel Hill has ever seen.

"George, he really goes after the ball," said UNC center Eric Montross. "It's like he's a magnet, and that ball's the other end of the magnet."

North Carolina senior guard Scott Cherry counts himself among the admirers of Lynch's penchant for grabbing the errant shot.

"It's just amazing some of the rebounds that he comes up with," Cherry said. "He's got such great athletic ability and he just works extremely hard.

"If the ball's up on the glass, he's going to try to go up and get it."

And more times than not, Lynch will get it. That's been the result 732 times in his career. And if Lynch repeats his 291-board performance of last year, he'll quietly go down as UNC's third all-time rebound leader.

But man cannot live on boardwork alone.

"I want to be known for more than just rebounding and playing inside strong," Lynch said. "I think in order

for me to take my game to the next level, I have to be able to shoot the jump shot consistently."

So to improve, Lynch spent the better part of his off-season honing his outside touch.

"I think most teams have looked at me as an inside player," he said. "It would be a different look if I would come down on the secondary break and pull up and shoot the jump shot from the free-throw line or the top of the key."

Senior Henrik Rödl believes Lynch, who is 9 for 21 from 3-point range in his career, can exert some perimeter pressure on the opposition.

"During the summer, he's shown to me and his teammates that he can shoot from the outside," Rödl said. "He's maybe not an outstanding shooter — like Hubert (Davis) — but he can definitely shoot from the outside."

But in a selfish sort of way, Montross doesn't feel quite the same. Montross doesn't want to lose his buddy in the paint.

"I think George should just stay inside," Montross said with a laugh. "No, I think he's got a relatively good shot, but I think the place he can help us the most, at least from my perspective, would be from 15 feet and in.

"We lose so much more than we gain when he moves outside."

And for the time being, it looks like Montross' view will win out. For the third consecutive season, Lynch has been pegged to start in the power forward spot, a tall order for a 6-foot-8, 211-pound player.

"I prefer to play the small forward because of my size and my quickness," Lynch said. "I think I would probably be more valuable to the team, but I don't think it's going to happen this year.

"Three years have passed, and I've always wanted to play there. But I'm not going to worry about that too much this year — I know it's not possible."

But Cherry predicts Lynch might log some time at small forward, with the 7-foot Montross manning the center spot and 7-footer Kevin Salvadori filling the power forward position.

"That's probably something Coach will experiment with early in the season," Cherry said. "That's a lot of size, and actually, that's a lot of quickness."

But whatever position Lynch takes on the court, his teammates will look his way for leadership. You see, Lynch is a senior, and seniors at UNC are leaders — even the quiet ones.

"In the past, I think it's been the seniors that have had to be the vocal ones — to be the ones that get the team going," Lynch said. "I think this year, I'm going to look forward to that role and expect myself to speak out more.

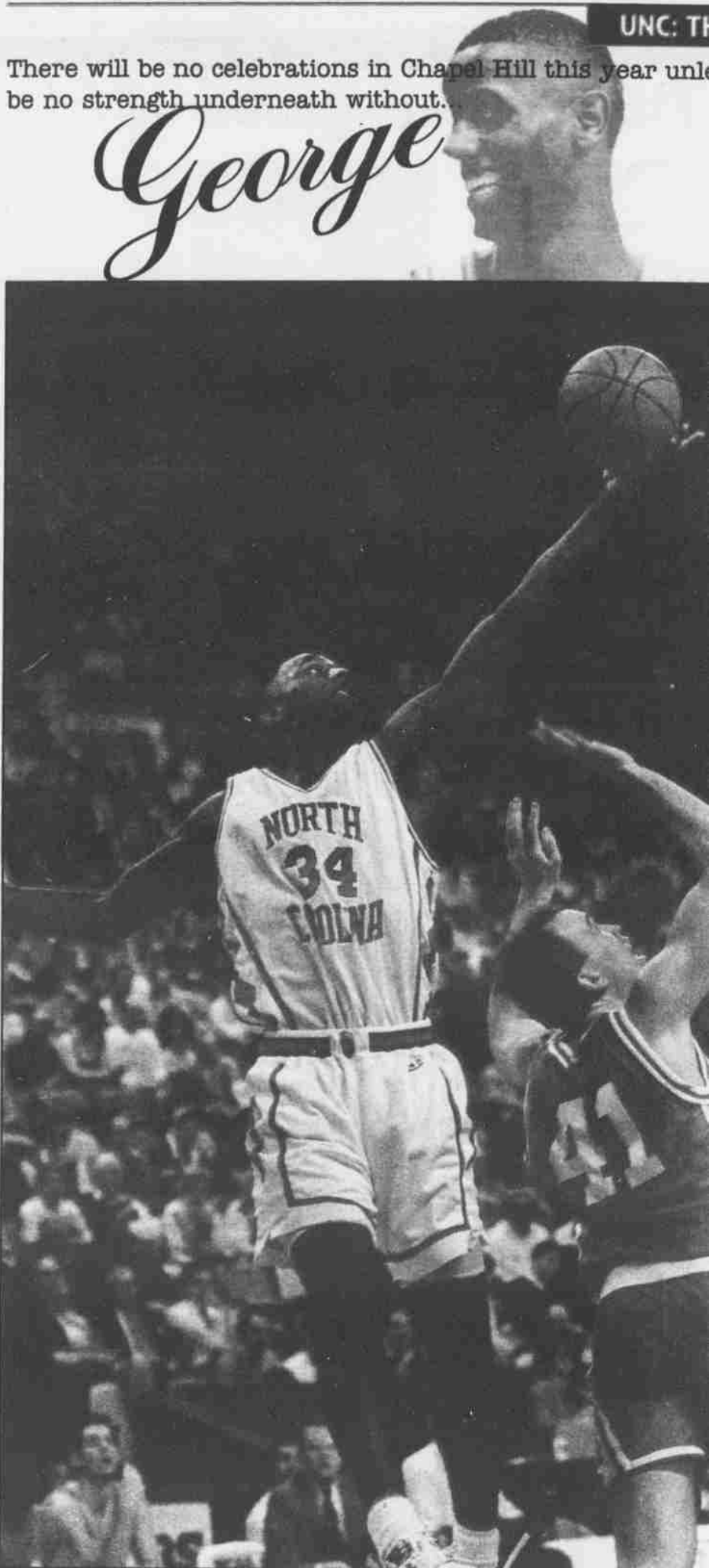
"I think when you're speaking your mind and saying what's on your mind, it helps your game."

Maybe so, but Montross hasn't seen much of an increase in vocalism as of yet. "This year, I've seen him being a little more vocal, but overall, George leads by example," Montross said. "He's pretty quiet on the court, but his actions aren't quiet."

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There will be no celebrations in Chapel Hill this year unless there be no strength underneath without.

George



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