

SPORTS

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Opinions from the Sports page

Remember the Bucs



Ashleigh Austin
Sports Columnist

I am from Tampa Bay, as anyone who reads this will *obviously* know, and in my opinion this has been an exciting year in professional sports. Moving to North Carolina two years ago made watching my favorite sports teams nearly impossible. It was frustrating on football Sunday trying to scramble to one of the few places in Asheville that play the Buccaneers' games. You have to secure a seat, plus you have to spend money because you can't take up space in a restaurant without buying anything. This is extremely bothersome.

Because the Bucs became the National Champions in the Super Bowl last January, almost every game they play in the upcoming season will be televised nationally, and I can finally again enjoy my team in the comfort of my own home.

Although we are already into the draft picks for the 2003-2004 NFL season, I want to take this opportunity to praise Tampa Bay for what I feel was and is an outstanding year in the sports world. Tampa Bay's football program has come a long way.

For all you people wondering how in the world this article could possibly relate to those who live in North Carolina, just think of it as support for Bucs quarterback Brad Johnson who just happens to be a native of Black Mountain.

I used to go to Tampa Bay Buccaneer games in their old stadium, when they wore those hideous orange uniforms and the stadium was never full because they never won.

When the Bucs were first established in 1976 they lost all 14 games in their first season; a complete losing streak. The years after that became a slow crawl towards winning a few more each year, but never winning more games than they lost in a season.

Since the new Raymond James Stadium was built in 1998 with the famous cannon-shooting ship at the end of the field, the team gained a new logo, new colors, a new coach and a new winning attitude.

Since 1998, the Bucs have never lost more games than they've won.

Although Ex-Head Coach Tony Dungie raised the level of performance and expectation of the Bucs to an incessant play-off appearance, he never got beyond that invisible barrier to gain a National Championship.

Dungie brought great change to Tampa Bay's program and much of their turn around is owed to him, but Ex-Raiders Coach Jon Gruden was hired in 2002 as the Bucs seventh head coach in history and the play-off plateau that the Bucs were stuck on finally vanished.

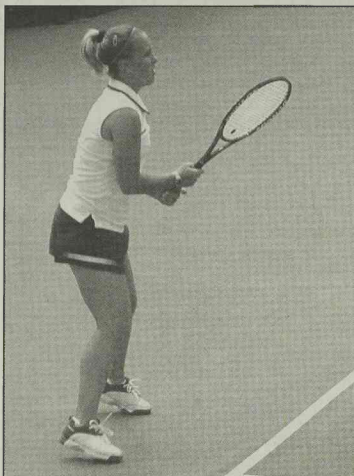
Everyone questioned the decision to fire Dungie and take a \$17.5 million risk on Gruden, not to mention the \$8 million the Bucs paid Oakland and the draft picks that they gave up. It was a huge risk, but well worth it in the end.

What a thrill it was to see the Bucs so in control and dominant over the Raiders in Super Bowl XXXVII, something fans have been expecting for a long time and will remember forever.

This Super Bowl win for the Buccaneers was long overdue and it finally validated them as the champions their faithful fans knew they were.

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Tennis squads play in BSC Tourney



ALAN AMBROSE/ONLINE EDITOR

UNCA sophomore Natasha Lucki (above) paired with junior Emily Acker-Estes for a Bulldog win against High Point University.

Adam Brooks
Sports Reporter

The UNCA men and women's tennis teams competed in the Big South Tournament Apr. 17-18.

The men's team defeated Liberty University with a score of 4-1 in the quarterfinal round before facing off against Winthrop University. The women's team faced High Point University in the quarterfinal round, when they were unable to defeat the Panthers, falling to them 4-1.

"We were seeded sixth, they were seeded third. We got off to a great start against High Point," said Head Coach Chase Hodges. "We won the doubles point, and then they were just too much for us in singles."

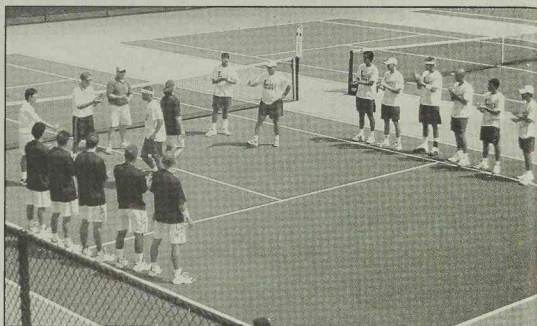
"We've been preaching doubles

all year and (the women's team) really came together, which was a bright spot for us to catch that doubles point. It gave us a good lead going into singles, but High Point was just a little bit better than us."

The doubles came in from two doubles match victories. Sophomore Natasha Lucki and junior Emily Acker-Estes defeated their High Point Panther opponents with a score of 8-6.

Sophomore Oksana Zaluzhna and senior Ashley Jones brought a victory in the Bulldogs with an 8-3 score.

"I'm certainly proud of the girls. We finished 7-10 this year. Last year they won two matches. In my first year, we were more than tripled the win total," said Hodges.



ALAN AMBROSE/ONLINE EDITOR

The Bulldog tennis squads faced Liberty (above) and Winthrop Universities in the BSC Tournament.

"That's definitely an improvement. We set the foundation on the women's side and I've got players coming in that'll make us better and better. I expect us to do even better next year."

The quarterfinal tournament match for the men's team saw them competing with the Liberty University Flames at Burlington Tennis Facility.

Senior Alan Ambrose won his match with a score of 6-3, 6-4, freshman Paul Ambrose won 6-4, 6-2 and sophomore Adam Branks won 7-5, 6-3. Sophomore Damian Mulhane and junior Nick Neal won by did-not-finish (DNF) decisions.

"On the men's side, we were the fifth seed. We pulled a minor upset against Liberty, the number four seed, in the first round," said Hodges.

The victory against Liberty was particularly welcome given that the Flames defeated the Bulldogs earlier in the season, according to Hodges.

"We just played extremely well that day."

Bulldog victories also came in during the doubles matches. Alan Ambrose and Neal, both recently

selected to represent UNCA for the all-conference academics team, defeated their Flame opponents with a score of 8-3.

A score of 8-5 made it a win for Paul Ambrose and Mulhane, as well. The Bulldog's final score for the game was 4-1 over the Flames.

"To be honest, we beat Liberty fairly easily. The match probably would have turned out to be 6-1, but once you get four points, they call the match because they don't want to finish it out," said Hodges.

"We pretty much dominated play against Liberty. We came out with more intensity, and my guys wanted to win more than they did. We just took it to them right from the doubles point. We beat a very good Liberty team. I have a lot of respect for Liberty and their program."

The win at the quarterfinal level allowed the men's team to go on to face Winthrop University at the semifinal level. Winthrop was the number one seed in both men's and women's tennis.

No wins came in for the Bulldogs in either singles or doubles matches, giving the Eagles a 4-0 victory. The Bulldogs met a similar defeat against the Eagles earlier in the season.

"In the semifinal round, we lost to Winthrop. Winthrop was the number one seed. We lost the doubles point. Winthrop's very good," said Hodges. "We lost to them earlier in the season. They've just got a lot of talent over there, and they're well coached. They were the better team that day."

Looking back over this season, the teams have made great improvements which should continue into next year, according to Hodges.

"The men finished with a record of 14-5, which is the best record in school history. This same team last year (had a record of) 6-14. In my first season, to have the same players and have a record of 14-5 is to attribute to the players and how hard they worked," said Hodges.

"They showed a big commitment this season. We surpassed all expectations anybody had of us. We've basically had a great season. I'm very happy with what we've accomplished."

"(The women) were 2-16 last year. (It was) something horrible. This year we're 7-10, so we're gradually making our way up. Eventually, we'll have a winning program here. It just takes time."

Meet the coaches: tennis head coach Chase Hodges

Jeremy Shrader
Sports Reporter

Like all athletes growing up, Head Tennis Coach Chase Hodges dreamed of making it big and winning Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. Although those dreams didn't come true, he did fulfill one of his goals: becoming a Division I tennis coach.

"I've always known that this is what I want to do," said Hodges. "Some people don't know until after college. I knew all the way through that I wanted to be a head coach."

The Player

Before he knew he wanted to be coach, he was simply Chase Hodges, the three-sport athlete from Hickory, NC.

"I played a lot of sports growing up," said Hodges. "I played high school football, basketball and tennis. It kind of worked out because all three of those sports are in different seasons."

But for Hodges, the future always looked better on the hardwood than on the gridiron or basketball court. "I had the best future in tennis to play in college so I went with that," he said. "I enjoy tennis and the one thing that attracted me to it is that there are a lot of mental aspects to the game."

"It's kind of like a boxing match without the gloves and without the

physical contact because you have to think your way through matches a lot and it's an individual sport so you have no one to blame except yourself."

Hodges' comparison of tennis to boxing was, in many ways, a description of the type of player he was during high school and college.

"I was extremely intense as a player," said Hodges. "I wasn't intimidated by anybody. I mentally went into a match with the frame of mind that it was a war and I didn't want to lose. I hate losing."

Losing was something that Hodges didn't have to encounter often during his high school and college-playing days. In high school, this Hickory High School alumnus won four consecutive high school-singles state championships.

After two years of ACC tennis at NC State University, he decided to leave the triangle area and pursue warmer and better days on and off the tennis court by transferring to UNC Wilmington.

"I left State (NC State) for a lot of reasons, number one being the coach," said Hodges. "The UNC-W coach recruited me out of high school and it was my number two choice."

Hodges' number two college choice turned out to be his best college decision as he earned all-conference honors as a senior and was the team's MVP his junior and senior seasons. In addition to his



TARA BARONE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chase Hodges made great strides in his first year as tennis head coach. Both men and women improved upon last season's records.

achievements on the court, he also got the job done in the classroom. He was a two-year Colonial Athletic Association Scholar-Athlete.

After college and three years as a graduate assistant coach at UNC-W, Hodges took his skills to the west coast and for a year played

professionally in California where he shared a one-bedroom apartment with his famous cousin, Evan Marriott from Joe Millionaire. It is also where he suffered the most embarrassing moment of his tennis career.

"I've only been bagged (losing 6-0 in a set) once in my life and that was while I was playing professionally in California," said Hodges. "Getting beat 6-0, I think any tennis player would tell you, is definitely a test of your nerves and of your manhood. You don't want to get beat like that."

The Coach

After the professional tour didn't work out, Hodges returned to his goal of being a collegiate tennis coach and accepted a head coaching position at Longwood College in Farmville, Va. "I took the job at Longwood College because I wanted to get even more experience," he said. "It was a good experience for me. When the UNCA job opportunity opened up it was a great opportunity for me to get back to this part of the state and try to build something successful here."

In only one year Hodges has done a pretty good job of building a successful tennis program at UNCA as he helped lead the men's team to its best finish in school

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