

Men's basketball looks to lock up third seed against UNC-G

With victory, Phoenix would win tiebreaker against Spartans and face easier first-round opponent

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The Elon men's basketball team hasn't had a game like this in years.

Saturday's contest at Alumni Gym against UNC-Greensboro looms large over the Phoenix, as a victory would secure the third seed for Elon in the upcoming Southern Conference tournament.

If Elon wins, both teams will wind up with 7-9 records in the conference. So why does Elon receive the third seed, then?

The first tiebreaker is the head-to-head matchup.

An Elon win Saturday would split the season series at one game a piece. The second tiebreaker is how the teams fared against the highest ranked team not involved in the tie.

In the north division – home to Elon and UNC-G – that team is East Tennessee State. Both teams are 0-2 against ETSU, so the next comparison is to UT-Chattanooga, where Elon holds the edge.

The Phoenix defeated Chattanooga 88-70 in December for its first Southern Conference victory.

In the event that Elon loses to UNC-G, the Phoenix would move into a fourth-place tie with Western Carolina. Elon holds the tiebreaker in that instance as well.

Despite the seemingly huge implications of Saturday's game, head coach Ernie Nestor said it doesn't come up in practice.

"No, we don't talk about it. It can't help you win the game," Nestor said. "It's like when you play in a tournament. If you have to tell your team they're playing for the tournament championship, you don't have a good chance of winning. The thing you're most focused on is winning the game."

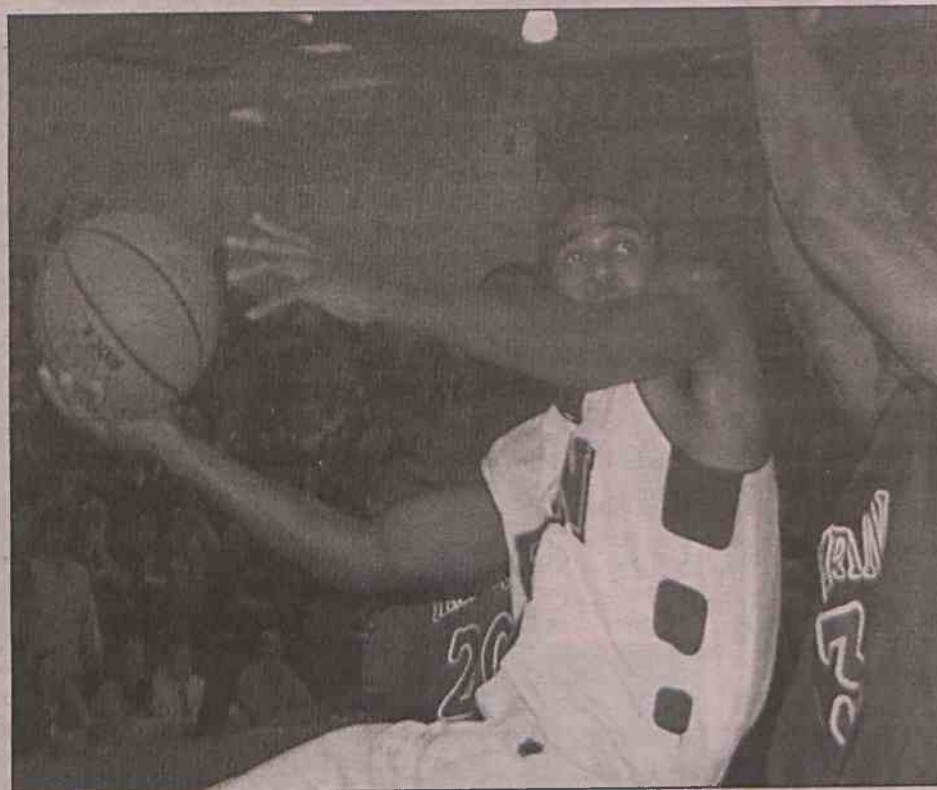
"I don't make it a big thing. We talk about performance, we talk about playing well, we talk about winning the game. I really believe this in all my heart, that you really never talk about the implications of the game. The kids know what those are."

Guard Scottie Rice does. After Elon's 68-53 drubbing of Western Carolina, Rice said playing well at the close of a season is vital to a team's chances in the conference tournament.

"It's always important at the end of the year because you get seedings for the tournament," Rice said.

The Phoenix, though, hit a snag Monday when it lost to Georgia Southern 83-80 in overtime. Elon was up 44-27 at halftime, but it couldn't hold the lead, something that has concerned Nestor all year.

"[When] the lead swells a little bit, then all of a sudden we start getting tricky," Nestor said. "We try to throw over the top. We try to go for



Alex Corey / Photographer

Montell Watson (with ball) scored 25 points in a loss against Georgia Southern Monday. Watson will be counted on to control the pace of the game Saturday against UNC-G.

passes and take ourselves out of play. It's like wildfire in the forest. One guy does it, one guy does it, one guy does it, and it has to be stopped.

"Sometimes when people get successful, they believe they're just going to get more success and more success, but they forget why they became successful."

With 8.6 seconds remaining, Elon's Matt Nowlin hit two free throws to give the Phoenix a 74-71 lead. But Georgia Southern guard Terry Williams nailed a 3-pointer from 35 feet out to force the overtime.

Georgia Southern never trailed during the extra frame and won 83-80.

Montell Watson led Elon with 25 points. Front court mates Jackson Atoyebi and Rasmi Gamble added 18 and 16 points, respectively. Rice had 10.

Perhaps Elon's most consistent effort of the season came Feb. 21 in its victory against Western Carolina. The Catamounts brought Kevin Martin – the nation's leading scorer – into Alumni Gym.

But the Phoenix defense allowed Martin to score only 12 points.

In fact, he could've tallied fewer, but in a Busch-league turn of events, Martin became the only offensive option with less than a minute remaining, scoring four points as a result.

Atoyebi had 16 points and 13 rebounds. Nowlin had 20 and Rice added 11.

In the last four games, Rice, who's playing with a torn left medial meniscus, has exuded the grit and determination he's become known for over the last two seasons. In Rice and Nowlin, the Phoenix have a potent one-two punch from the outside.

"When they get their feet set and their shoulders toward the basket, they're pretty good shooters," Atoyebi said of Rice and Nowlin. "It takes a lot of pressure off the rest of the team when they're making their shots."

Phoenix Notes: Rice said his custom-made brace is causing his knee no discomfort, and he said he feels as confident now as before he sustained his knee injury.

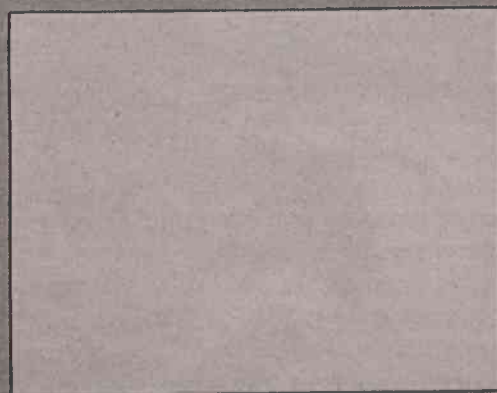
"It doesn't bother me at all," Rice said. "I don't feel it at all. [The brace] is just protective. I don't want anything more serious to happen to it."

Rice wore a soft brace during Elon's Tennessee road swing two weeks ago, and he said he played more tentatively. He plans to play brace-free next season.

"I want to lose it," Rice said. "I'm not going to wear it next year."

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