

Phoenix determined to avoid injury excuses entering 'crunch time'

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Senior Reporter

One thing Elon University women's basketball coach Charlotte Smith does not want to hear is excuses.

Not from her players, not from her staff and especially not from the thousands of other "coaches," also known as fans, that attribute the Phoenix's struggles to either the rash of injuries the team has faced or the youth that has been pressed into action as a result.

"We've never focused on the fact that we have all these injuries," Smith said. "We know we have injuries, but we feel we have so much depth that anyone can step in, and I feel like we won't miss a beat."

Senior guard Kelsey Harris, the Phoenix's most experienced upperclassman, has had to log more than 600 minutes of game time while her teammates recover from injuries. She admits that it can be discouraging to see so many of her teammates unable to suit up. But Harris knows that her team can't lose focus and begin to feel sorry for themselves. They must move forward with whomever is healthy and

fight through the storm until the team is back to full strength.

"It can be frustrating [to lose so many teammates to injury], but everything happens for a reason," Harris said. "I think adversity, in the long run, is going to make us better. We have to learn to deal with it."

The Phoenix has seen junior center Shannen Cochraham and more recently,

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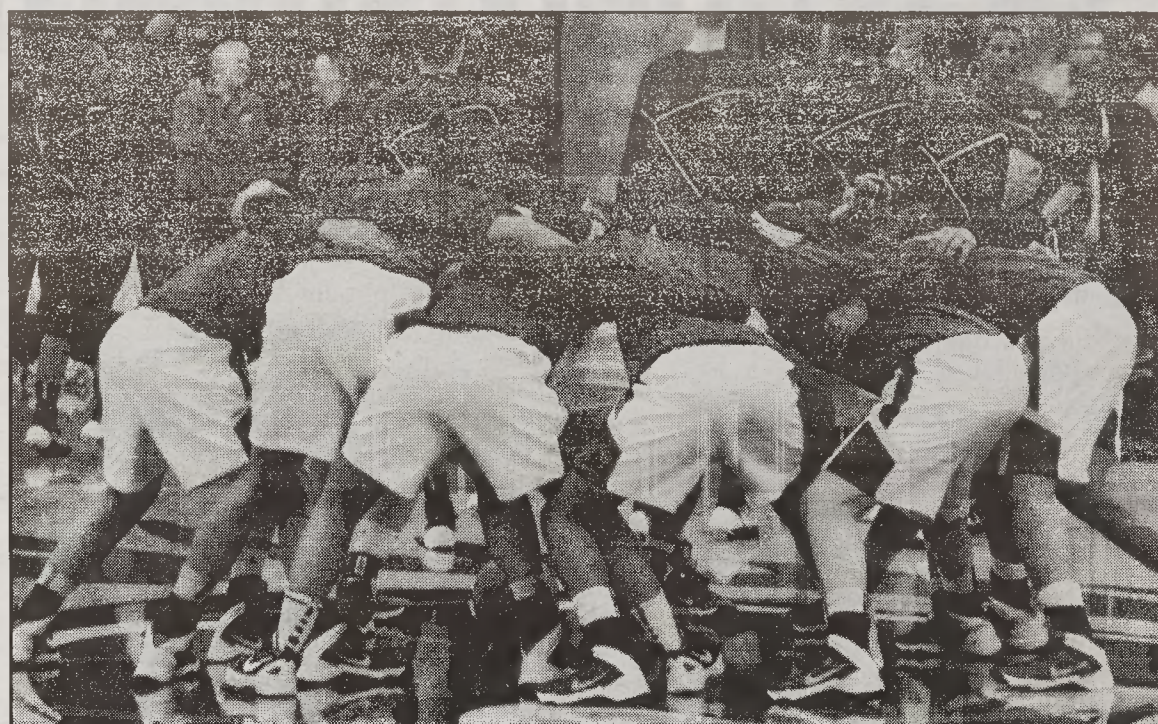
CHARLOTTE SMITH
WOMEN'S HEAD BASKETBALL COACH

junior guard Zora Stephenson, go down with injuries, opening up space for freshman guard Lauren Brown, fellow freshman forward Jenifer Rhodes and sophomore forward Autumn Carter in the starting lineup.

It was a difficult adjustment for Brown to make initially, but she has since seen her game and her confidence grow as she has become more accustomed to the high level of play in Division I basketball.

"I definitely think [playing significant minutes] has allowed me to see how much faster college basketball is, especially compared to high school," Brown said. "Girls are bigger, faster and stronger. But I definitely feel as though I'm starting to get a rhythm and figure out how the game is."

Smith has had just one player, Harris, start all 17 games, while three — Ste-



RACHEL INGERSOLL | Staff Photographer

With players starting to gain experience, Elon has now won three straight games.

phenson, Brown, and junior forward Sam Coffey — have started 16. In the fifth spot, Smith has started all but three players on her roster in at least one game as she tries to find the right combination of experience and youth.

Smith sees enormous benefit in mixing and matching her starting five and has no problem doing it. In fact, Smith said she's been impressed with what she has gotten from her reserves, especially those asked to play outside their comfort zone.

"The resilience of the players [has been a key to the team's success]," she said. "People are stepping in and playing in positions that aren't their natural position and doing whatever they're called to do."

Smith said she isn't worried about her healthy players becoming fatigued because of the quality and depth of her highly productive bench.

"At this point, it's crunch time," Smith said. "It's the second part of the season, and I feel like we're in condition enough that we can log a lot of minutes and still be effective. But we have depth, so we really don't have to burn anybody out. We can rotate people in."

Harris has taken it upon herself to give support and encouragement to her younger, less experienced teammates whenever she can because she knows none of them believed they'd be as important to the team as they are so early in their careers.

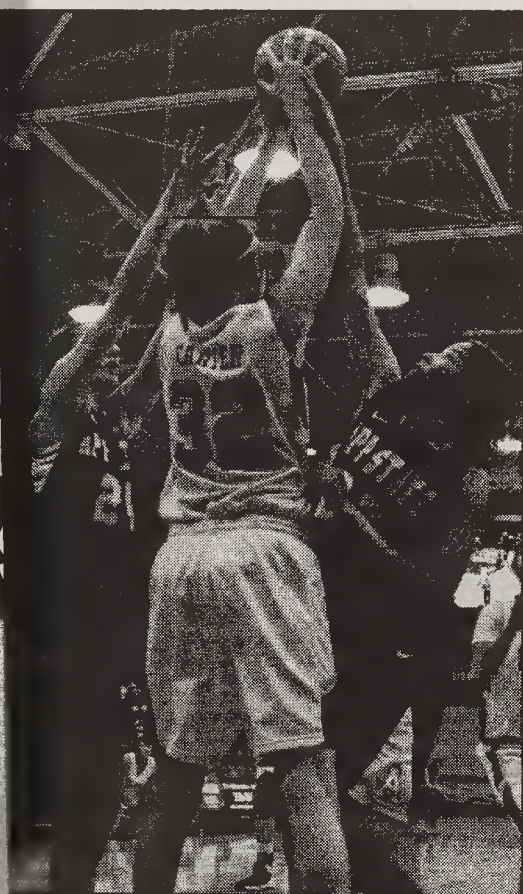
"I try to [mentor] all the freshmen and younger players, just because we have so many underclassmen playing so many minutes," Harris said. "Any player coming from high school wants to play as much as possible, but not many come in thinking they'll play 30 minutes a game. But I think they've done a great job realizing what their roles are."

The rapid improvement of her underclassmen has been a source of great pride for Smith and her coaching staff, especially now as they begin to factor into the game's outcome.

"For the most part, we have youth pretty much across the board," Smith said. "So, when you're a coach and you're looking at the things you're accomplishing despite youth and the things you're accomplishing despite injuries, it makes you smile."

Smith can't help but be excited about the remainder of the season as her underclassmen continue to grow and develop with more experience and her injured players return. When the Phoenix is back to full strength, Smith sees no reason why her team shouldn't compete for the Southern Conference title.

"Hopefully in the latter part of the season we'll be healthy and we'll have all the pieces [together]," Smith said. "Because I can only imagine what this team would look like if we had all our players healthy."



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Autumn Carter is one of many Elon players seeing increased playing time due to teammates' injuries.