

UNC's slick safety packs big punch

By JOSEPH ROLISON
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Imagine being perched high above the Kenan Stadium turf, staring down on a deciding play during an important North Carolina game.

It's do-or-die for the Tar Heel defense as it lines up against the opposing offense. The quarterback drops back, pumps once and lofts a tight spiral that floats through the air. The receiver rockets down the sideline, outstretches his arms and waits expectantly for the ball to hit its target.

Then, just after he makes the grab, CRACK! A tiny mite clad in blue crashes into the receiver, jars the ball loose and saves the day for UNC. Over 50,000 Tar Heel partisans breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Such is a day's work for UNC sophomore strong safety Omar Brown. In his three years in

Chapel Hill, Brown has become a hitter, a headhunter of sorts, patrolling the defensive backfield with a vengeance. But that hasn't always been the case.

"I'm starting to begin to like hitting a guy and knocking the ball out of his hands more each week," Brown said. "At first, I was kind of finesse, looking for interceptions, but now I'm getting the same type of excitement when as soon as the guy touches (the ball), meeting him at the same time and getting a hit.

"You can excite the crowd and hear the 'oohs' and 'aahs.' Everyone likes to get the interceptions, but I also like to make big hits."

Brown displayed his fondness for terrorizing receivers in UNC's 22-17 upset of then-No. 9 Virginia on Oct. 7. With precious few seconds remaining on the clock, UVa. quarterback Mike Groh located receiver Demetrius Allen and fired the ball in his direction. In the nick of time, Brown smashed into Allen, sending the ball to the turf and securing the win.

Brown also showed that he won't stand for obscurity.

"Omar is developing into a great

player," North Carolina coach Mack Brown said after the Virginia game. "He's tough, he's smart, he's a hitter."

But Omar Brown's arrival onto the scene almost didn't come about. Brown was accused of second-degree rape and assault and battery of a juvenile girl in June of 1993 in Ocean City, Md. However, his accuser failed to appear in court for the trial, and the case was dismissed.

Not an inauspicious start to his college career. But Brown has placed that in his past and is now making a name for himself on the field.

"It's over with — it's just something that happened," Omar Brown said. "It maybe made me a stronger person just because of the adversity, but I don't even think about it any more."

As he has grown on the field. The York, Pa., native has also experienced a personal transformation. Though the early part of his career was rocky, Brown has sailed on smoother waters in 1995.

"He's really matured," Mack Brown said. "He was a guy that came in and had some bad publicity that was unfair to him ... and I think that's probably forced him to grow up fast."

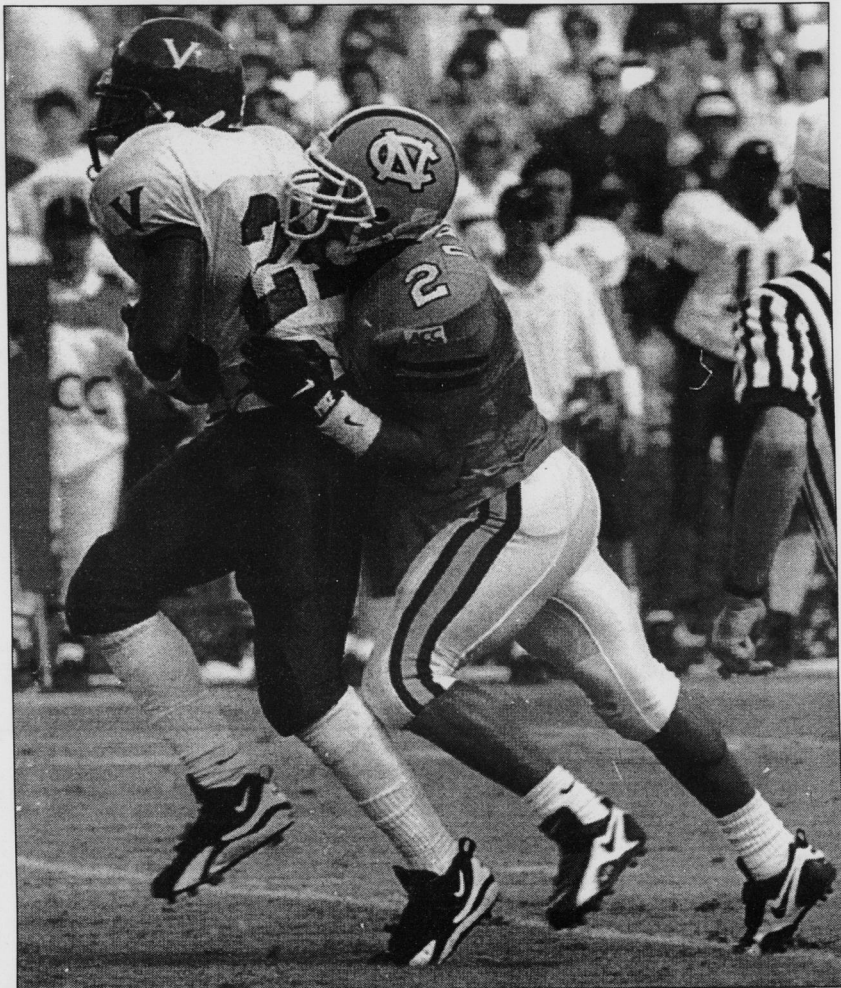
One thing that Omar Brown has never lacked is a natural feel for the game. Some attributes, like knowing exactly when to hit a would-be receiver, can't be taught. But Brown has had those intangibles since day one.

"I have real good football instincts, kind of like understanding the game and knowing where the ball is going to go," he said. "My quickness and ability to make breaks on the ball is also an asset."

One of the negative aspects of roaming the defensive backfield is that on many pass plays, all eyes are focused on the DBs. When the ball begins its ascent into the sky, fans immediately zero in on the athletes streaking down the field.

If the defender is successful, he'll march back to the huddle with adrenaline rushing through his veins. If the receiver snares the pass and coasts to paydirt, all the defensive back wants to do is crawl under a rock and avoid the crowd's jeers.

"It's tough covering someone man-to-man," Omar Brown said. "If you mess up, everyone in the stands is going to know it, you're going to know it and you're teammates are going to know it."



DTH/JOHN WHITE

After facing personal troubles early in his career, UNC sophomore safety Omar Brown (2) has blasted onto the scene.

On plenty of occasions, UNC's defensive backs have been the goats rather than the heroes. Opposing offenses have burned the Tar Heel DBs more than once this season.

But for Brown, recovering from such demoralizing plays is just part of life.

"The first thing my high school coach told me when I played defensive back is that I had to have a real short memory," he said.

Brown has had plenty of positives to ponder over the past several weeks, including a photo of his heroics against the

Cavs that appeared in Sports Illustrated.

"I wish it was me catching the ball," he said. "It showed my vertical, so I got kind of excited about that."

Yet there are still mountains to climb for the 5-foot-10 Omar Brown. His horizon is illuminated with lofty dreams and

goals, but Brown realizes that the jury is still out on his young career.

"I want to have my number hanging in this stadium," he said. "I feel as though I'm just beginning to reach some of the heights I can reach. There are a whole lot of goals, but only time will tell."

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