

UNC's Run to Indy Salvages Season

By EVAN MARKFIELD
Senior Writer

North Carolina's march to the Final Four seemed about as unlikely as the downward spiral of a regular season that preceded it.

The Tar Heels were ranked No. 2 in the nation in November, and nobody really expected the crash-and-burn regular season that followed.

The ACC Tournament was the absolute low point. UNC was starting to hear the doubters' voices sing out in full force after being held to its lowest point total and shooting percentage in a first-round loss to Wake Forest.

There was all kinds of talk about three letters not heard in Chapel Hill in decades: N-I-T.

But the Tar Heels got their NCAA berth, and the drama began.

They were seeded No. 8 in the South Region. At that moment, there was little reason to believe they would end up in Indianapolis as the only North Carolina team to make a Final Four seeded lower than second.

There was little reason to believe the Tar Heels would get past Missouri, a quicker, smaller team — the kind of team that had given the bigger, slower Tar Heels fits in the regular season.

There was little reason to believe,

Getting Defensive

The North Carolina men's basketball team rebounded from a subpar defensive performance during the regular season and shut down opponents from the field in the NCAA tournament.

	FG-FGA	FG Percent	3FG-3FGA	3FG Percent	Scoring PPG	Result
Regular Season (31 Games)	838-2032	.412	197-622	.317	71.3	18-13
NCAA tournament						
Missouri 3/17	27-66	.409	8-31	.258	70	Won 84-70
Stanford 3/19	20-58	.345	6-22	.273	53	Won 60-53
Tennessee 3/24	21-59	.356	6-21	.286	69	Won 74-69
Tulsa 3/26	22-59	.373	5-20	.250	55	Won 59-55
Florida 4/1	25-64	.391	7-28	.250	71	Lost 71-59
NCAA Totals	115-306	.376	32-122	.262	63.6	4-1

period.

Apparently, coach Bill Guthridge and his squad were the only ones who did. After a season of inconsistency, the Tar Heels finally came together. They played stifling defense. And game by game, they started making believers of more and more people.

North Carolina 84, Missouri 70

Brendan Haywood had to shake the haunting memories of last year's NCAA tournament somehow. He put up a one-point, zero-rebound performance in last season's first-round loss to Weber State,

and there was only one way to silence the talk about it — to blow up against the smaller Tigers.

Plus, the Tar Heels had to worry about Missouri's 3-point shooting because their perimeter defense had been suspect in the regular season.

Both questions were answered strongly in UNC's first-round win.

Haywood threw down a career-high 28 points and added 15 rebounds, the way a big 7-footer should against a smaller lineup.

At the other end, the Tar Heels dep-

ended the 3-point attack, holding the Tigers to 8-of-31 shooting from the arc. That first win was out of the way. But there was no way the Tar Heels would be able to take out No. 1 seed Stanford in round two. Right?

North Carolina 60, Stanford 53

Both sides called it the most physical game they had ever played. No more mismatches — the Tar Heels versus the Cardinal was big on big.

And UNC's big men made a defensive statement against the Stanford frontcourt. Tar Heel reserve forward Julius Peppers held Stanford's Mark Madsen to five points and, along with Haywood and forward Kris Lang, limited the starting Cardinal big men to 18 points.

The defense didn't stop up front. UNC forward Jason Capel was on Stanford's leading scorer, Casey Jacobsen, like shrink wrap.

Capel held Jacobsen to five points on 2-of-12 shooting, including 1-of-8 from 3-point range. The Cardinal shot just 34.5 percent overall in the game.

But UNC didn't do it with defense alone. Coming out of a timeout with less than seven minutes remaining, leading scorer Joseph Forte had to step up. He had missed eight of his 10 shots in the game, including his last five in a row.

"Coach Gut said to me, 'Either stop shooting like you're scared or stop shooting,'" Forte said after the game. "I didn't want to stop shooting."

And he didn't. Forte hit a pair of 3-pointers to give UNC a 53-47 lead and send the Tar Heels to the Sweet 16.

But with Tennessee looming in Austin, Texas, UNC would have to switch gears once again.

North Carolina 74, Tennessee 69

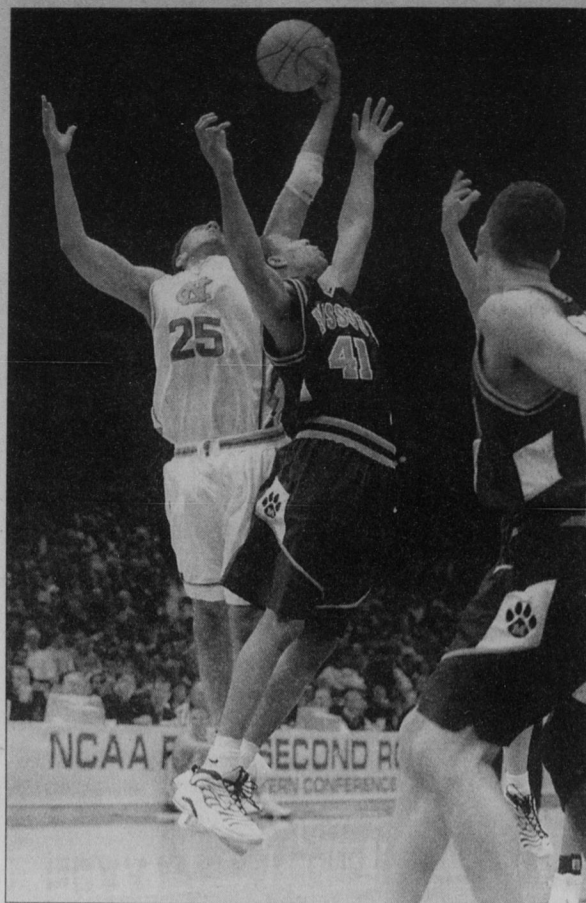
Before this matchup, Guthridge called Tennessee "a more athletic version of Virginia," a team that beat the Tar Heels twice in the regular season.

"They like to press," Guthridge said. "Their guards take a lot of shots."

The Volunteers sounded a lot like Missouri, only better. And as the game went on, things started to look worse.

Haywood, who had dominated Missouri and helped stifle Stanford, fouled out of the game with 8:03 remaining.

But senior point guard Ed Cota took matters into his own hands, getting two consecutive buckets to give UNC a 66-64 lead with 1:59 to go that it wouldn't relinquish. Thanks to a 12-5 run in



DTH/MILLER PEARSALL

North Carolina forward Jason Capel hauls in one of his 11 rebounds in the Tar Heels' first-round win against Missouri. Capel added 14 points.

the final three minutes, UNC had a date with Tulsa in the South Regional Final.

North Carolina 59, Tulsa 55

Same story, same result. The story: a quick, small Tulsa team that liked to pressure and cause turnovers. The result: Tough UNC defense and a big-time performance from Forte sent the Tar Heels to the Final Four for the third time in four years.

The freshman scored a career-high 28 points, and UNC held the Golden Hurricane to 37.3 percent shooting from the field. Forte was named the South Region's Most Outstanding Player, and it was on to Indianapolis.

Florida 71, North Carolina 59

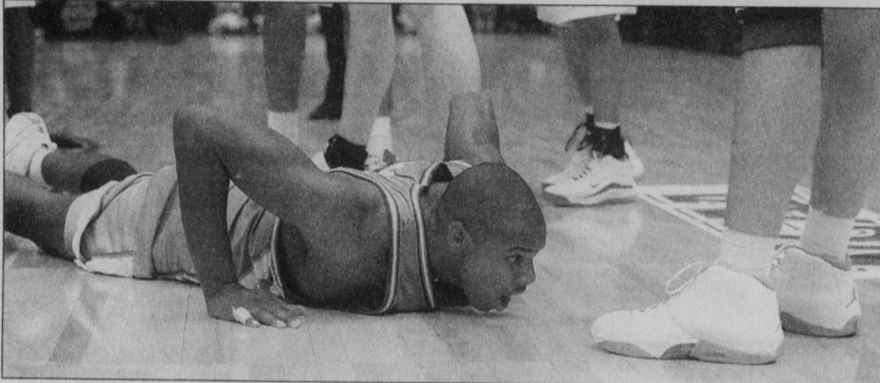
For all the times it could have hap-

pened earlier in the tournament, the Tar Heels' lack of depth finally caught up with them.

North Carolina recovered from an early 18-3 deficit to take the lead in the second half, going up by as many as six points.

But foul trouble and fatigue plagued UNC down the stretch as Florida's relentless 10-man rotation continued to press throughout the game. The Gators' bench outscored the Tar Heel reserves 37-2, and the magical, unexpected run had finally come to a less-than-fulfilling end.

"I'll remember that everybody gave up on this team, except this team," Haywood, who had 16 first-half points, said after the loss. "I'm proud this team made it as far as it did."



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UNC center Brendan Haywood was down but not out in UNC's 60-53 upset of No. 1 Stanford. He scored 12 points and grabbed eight rebounds while helping hold the Cardinal's starting frontcourt to 18 points.

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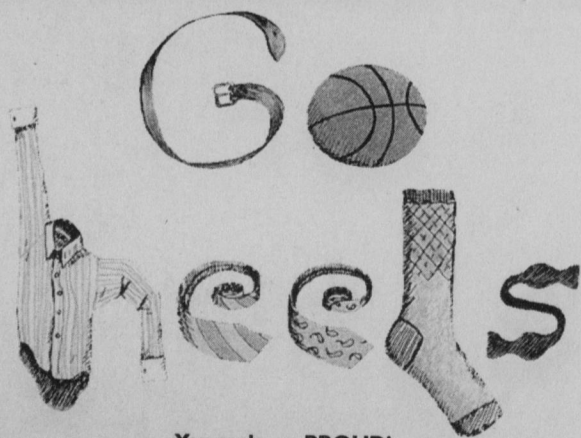
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