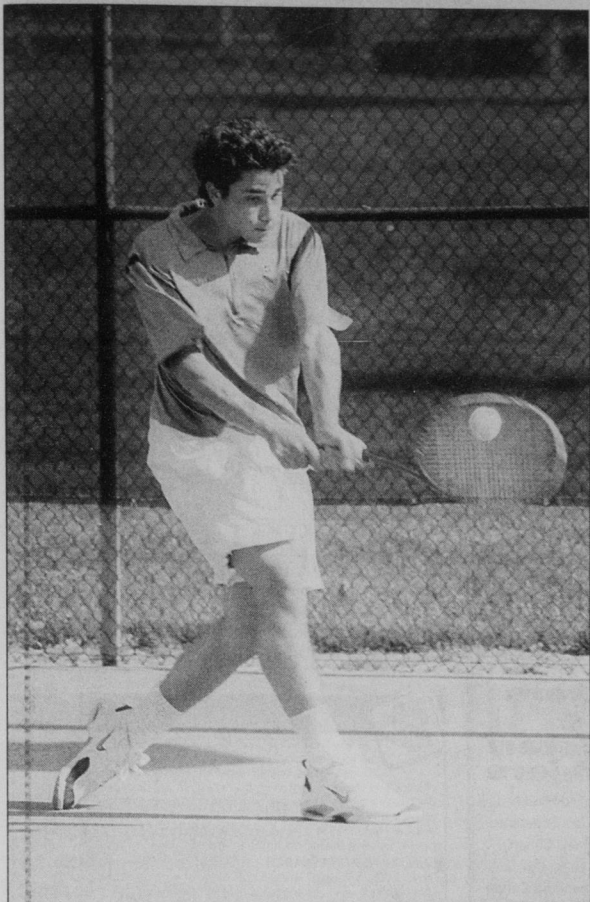


Lower Seeds Play Major Role in UNC Win Streak



DTH/KATE MELLNIK

North Carolina freshman Trystan Meniane has played at No. 5 singles for most of the Tar Heels' season. He clinched their win against VCU.

By IAN GORDON
Staff Writer

As goes Chad Riley, so goes North Carolina.

Well, maybe not. But consider this: During the Tar Heel men's tennis team's current nine-match winning streak, Riley has also reeled off nine straight.

Although the timing of the two streaks is probably mere coincidence, Riley has not been alone in his production from the bottom half of the singles lineup.

Greg Archer, Trystan Meniane, Marcio Petrone and Riley, all of whom have seen time in the No. 4 through No. 6 spots, are a combined 24-4 during the past nine matches.

"It's great that we can rely on those guys at four, five and six," No. 1 seed Tripp Phillips said.

Riley and Co. will look to help UNC (12-2, 4-0 in the ACC) get its 10th straight win this weekend, when the No. 19 Tar Heels take on ACC foes Georgia Tech and Clemson at Cone-Kenfield Tennis Center.

UNC's success has been somewhat unexpected following last season's 11-14 finish. But despite suffering their first losing season since 1986, the young Tar Heels were able to gain valuable match experience that Phillips said had been a huge factor in the team's current streak.

The return of Phillips from a shoulder injury also has been a key. As a junior in 1998, he was 8-4 at No. 1 singles and finished the year ranked No. 67 in the nation.

This year, he has returned to that form, posting an 11-3 record at No. 1 singles while being ranked 47th nationally.

Phillips' return, though, is important for more than just his personal success. Without him in the top spot of the rotation, each member of the team would have to play a spot higher in the lineup.

But Riley pointed out that opportune scheduling had also helped boost the team's confidence and its level of play.

"In the beginning of the season, I had two losses, one at (Texas) A&M and one at Purdue," he said. "I started out winning because we played weaker teams."

Indeed, Brown, Davidson and UNC-Charlotte aren't exactly tennis juggernauts. But the Tar Heels might have really started their streak March 14th, when they won their fourth straight against a tough South Carolina team.

"I think (my personal) turning point was against South Carolina when I won in straight sets," said Riley, who defeated David Nelson 6-2, 6-3 in the Tar Heels' 4-3 triumph.

UNC followed its win in Columbia, S.C., with two dominating wins against Florida State and Wake Forest.

Since then, the Tar Heels have record-

ed 4-3 decisions against Notre Dame, N.C. State and Virginia Commonwealth to run the streak to nine.

And with each win, UNC's confidence continues to grow.

"We looked back and said, 'Wow, we're catching up with everybody,'"

Meniane said.

Said Riley, "Because our ranking has gone up, we're not doing the hunting anymore - we're the hunted."

The Sports Editor can be reached at sports@unc.edu.

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