



UNC coach Bill Guthridge celebrates his team's upset victory against No. 1 Stanford in the second round of the 2000 NCAA tournament.

# Guthridge Seizes Opportunity to Exit

According to Sprite, image is nothing. Sprite could never be the official soft drink of North Carolina basketball.

Bill Guthridge's decision to retire last week, like many of the actions of the men's basketball program, had as much to do with the image it painstakingly works to maintain as it did with anything else.

He did leave under his own volition. He was not pressured to leave in any way and was welcome to stay for the remaining two years of his contract and beyond if desired.

In fact, Guthridge insisted throughout the 1999-2000 season and up until a few weeks ago that he intended to take advantage of that opportunity. He said he still loved the job, and felt he could continue for years to come.

Was he lying through his teeth or ultimately did he recognize the slim window of opportunity from which to escape that his team had provided him with?

The latter is most likely. Until the Tar Heels' Final Four appearance in March, Guthridge had been walking a plank. But the trip to Indianapolis rolled out the red carpet for his graceful, early exit. Guthridge chose to stride down that carpet instead.

During the royal treatment of the last week, many following UNC basketball were likely convinced of



MIKE OGLE  
SPORTS EDITOR

Guthridge's seeming sainthood.

How soon they forget.

Only four wins ago, fans were far from praising him. They were committing blasphemy and praying for a one-way Roy Williams trip from Lawrence, Kan., to Chapel Hill.

Guthridge could be remembered in a number of ways.

He compiled one the greatest three-year head-coaching careers ever, statistically speaking. Only he and N.C. State's Everett Case enjoyed 80 wins in their three years. He led his team to the Final Four in all but one of those seasons.

He rather smoothly followed the legend of legends, Dean Smith.

Truthfully, years from now he probably won't be remembered much at all. He'll likely be that guy sandwiched by two greater, longer Tar Heel coaching careers.

But if fans reflect back on the past three seasons with honesty, Guth-

ridge's career would be characterized by disappointment.

It began with the '97-'98 team that will go down as one of the biggest disappointments in UNC history. Led by the National Player of the Year in Antawn Jamison, the next season's NBA Rookie of the Year in Vince Carter, another future NBA starter in Shammond Williams and UNC's all-time assists leader in Ed Cota, Guthridge's team was supposed to run away with the NCAA title. But it returned from San Antonio with another semifinal defeat.

That was OK, though. Guthridge was correctly forgiven. The best team regularly does not win the NCAA tournament, and the fans had forgiven Smith so many times before for the same fate. They were ready to witness the potential of Guthridge's next team.

That young group had an understandably shaky regular season but seemed to get it together by March. Then the bomb dropped: North Carolina exited the big dance in the first round.

Unthinkable in Tar Heel country.

But even after that, fans understood the program was in a rebuilding year. They looked forward to seeing what it could do in the future and to giving coach another chance.

They didn't get to see what the team could do until the 2000 Final Four run.

Guthridge overscheduled his talented '99-2000 squad. It lost several games it should have lost to foes such as Cincinnati and national champion Michigan State. But it also lost a lot it shouldn't have (read Florida State and Virginia in Chapel Hill).

It seemed the Tar Heels couldn't bounce back like a well-coached team should, and forgetful fans began looking up how many more years remained on coach's contract after a first-round departure from the ACC Tournament.

Then somehow the Tar Heels put it all together and saved Guthridge's image with four wins. Guthridge was paroled once again.

Guthridge realized something at that point: Maybe this head coaching thing wasn't his bag after all.

He had his moment in the sun and saw a way out. An exit that preserved the maximum amount of dignity and the most positive legacy that he likely could have gained.

And so, too tired to go on or not, he resigned, and his career was rightly celebrated.

Perhaps Guthridge will spend his retirement years in Las Vegas. He certainly knows how to quit while he's ahead.

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**WILLIAMS**  
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"I'm going to go with a gut feeling. It will have to be a gut decision - what's best for me, and what's best for the family."

Time is of the essence in this situation as the period for recruiting rising high school seniors opens Saturday.

Williams' credentials speak for themselves: a 329-82 career record with the Jayhawks and 11 NCAA tournament

appearances in 12 years. He can recruit with anyone in the nation, and his power would only be enhanced if he had the North Carolina name as a drawing card.

But what ultimately makes Williams the top candidate for the job are his connections to the University.

Williams was born and raised in North Carolina and graduated from UNC in 1972. He served as an assistant to Smith from 1978-88. His son, Scott, graduated from UNC in 1998 and

played on the Tar Heel basketball team from 1997-98, and his daughter, Kim, is a rising junior at UNC and a member of the High Kicking Heels dance team.

Should Williams decline the invitation to guide the Tar Heels, several members of the North Carolina basketball "family" - former players and assistant coaches - would be next in line. South Carolina coach Eddie Fogler probably ranks second in line, followed by several others.

Notre Dame's Matt Doherty, Middle Tennessee State's Randy Weil, Tulsa's Buzz Peterson and current UNC assistant Phil Ford are among the college names. NBA coaches Larry Brown (76ers) and George Karl (Bucks) have also been mentioned.

The futures of the three current Tar Heel assistants - Ford, Dave Hanners and Pat Sullivan - will be decided upon by the new head man. He can choose to retain them or bring in his own staff.

**GUTHRIDGE**  
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It was a kind gesture on the players' behalf. But it was the least they could do after all that Guthridge had done for them.

"He followed a legend, and he did it with grace and dignity and athletic and academic success," UNC athletics director Dick Baddour said. "The University will forever be grateful to Coach Bill Guthridge."

Guthridge, never one that craved the spotlight, gave his own thanks to the players.

"I'll really miss this next year's team and what those guys have done for me. And the new recruits - I'm going to miss those," he said. "But I think it's time to turn it over to somebody else."

And now Guthridge and Smith can finally ride off into the sunset together.

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