

A New Beginning

By T. Nolan Hayes ■ Sports Editor

November 11, 1999, changed a lot about college football in the state of North Carolina.

N.C. State was scheduled to play North Carolina, and one of the two head coaches involved in that game was supposed to lose his job after the season. The other, although not totally secure, looked as though he would be able to

hold on to his position for at least one more year.

It's funny how things play out. What happened was what everyone thought would happen, but at the same time it was what no one expected.

One coach was indeed fired. But his name wasn't Carl Torbush, whose Tar Heels had entered Nov. 11 winless in conference play and 1-8 overall. His name was Mike O'Cain, whose Wolfpack came into that Thursday evening at Ericsson Stadium in Charlotte needing to win just one of its final two games to become bowl-eligible.

The story is well-documented by now, a part of ACC lore. Six inches was the difference. Chris Coleman, N.C. State's pre-season All-ACC candidate at wide receiver, couldn't quite make it. David Bomar and Errol Hood, two guys Torbush wanted to keep off the field at the beginning of the season because he thought they lacked big-time athleticism, just barely did.

The victory, a 10-6 decision, went to North Carolina. O'Cain wasn't far behind. Fired by N.C. State after failing to take the 'Pack to a bowl game for the fourth time in five years, he was looking for work.

Torbush, who had to fire three offensive assistants after his team's dismal performance, wanted O'Cain. He got his man, bringing about one of the biggest off-season changes in college football.

Two men who were fighting against each other to save their jobs were now on the same side. The potential was unmistakable — a defensive-minded coach (Torbush) getting help from an offensive wizard (O'Cain). It made perfect

sense to them, even if fans in Chapel Hill and Raleigh didn't understand it at the time.

"The worst thing that could have happened to the University of North Carolina, our football program and Carl Torbush is to have to go out to Timbuktu to hire an offensive coordinator that I didn't know anything about other than he's a good football coach," Torbush said. "The way it worked out was ideal. It could not have worked out any better than it did."

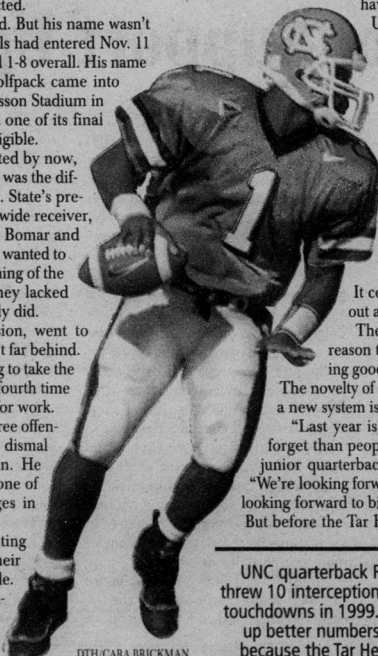
The change is a major reason the Tar Heels are feeling good about the year 2000.

The novelty of a new coordinator and a new system is refreshing.

"Last year is a whole lot easier to forget than people make it out to be," junior quarterback Ronald Curry said. "We're looking forward to this year. We're looking forward to big things."

But before the Tar Heels head out for big

UNC quarterback Ronald Curry threw 10 interceptions against three touchdowns in 1999. He should put up better numbers this season because the Tar Heels will have more weapons in the passing game.



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things — Curry's term for a bunch of wins — they've got some work to do on offense. The biggest task is learning O'Cain's new system, which even one day before the first game is still an ongoing process.

O'Cain has tried to make things as simple as possible. For instance, the running play "46 Slant" meant one thing at N.C. State last year and another at UNC. Instead of making the Tar Heels forget what "Slant" meant last year and learn his version of it, O'Cain threw the term out all together. The play now has a new name.

O'Cain's offensive philosophy — the combination of balance and explosiveness — is basically the same as it was at N.C. State, where he led the Wolfpack to school-record totals for passing yards (3,401) and total yards (4,871) in 1998. The thing that's new is the terminology. He has given his formations new names this season.

"We've just kind of done some overhauling, and this was a good time to start over because nobody knew anybody," O'Cain said. "We have different coaches and different players. A good bit of it is different, but at the same time it's similar."

It's all different to the Tar Heels, meaning they'll need to get some game experience with the new scheme before they can master it. But early-season struggles moving the ball could cause problems, especially for fans who view O'Cain as some sort of savior wearing a headset.

A loss to Tulsa or Wake Forest — two teams North Carolina should beat — could put O'Cain under heavy pressure in the season's first two weeks. But if O'Cain is worried about that, he's doing a fine job of hiding it.

"I like it. I've always enjoyed the pressure," O'Cain said. "You want to be somewhere where they expect big things from you. We place such high expectations on ourselves and on our players anyway."

The man having to deal with many of the expectations is Curry, who is coming back from a ruptured Achilles tendon that he suffered in the fifth game of 1999.

Curry wasn't especially effective in the games he played last year, throwing 10 interceptions in 110 attempts, but he didn't have much help. Wide receivers didn't just drop passes — they batted them into the air for defenders to pick off. Also, the pass protection was often nonexistent.

O'Cain's task is to fix all of that, and he plans on doing it with a hands-on approach. O'Cain will spend this season in the fire on the sidelines as opposed to up in the air-conditioned press box. Both locations have

their advantages and disadvantages, and O'Cain knows them well because he has coached from both places.

O'Cain said that this year he needs to trade the great view from upstairs for the raw emotion of being on the field.

"I decided to be on the sidelines here because of the inexperience we have at quarterback," he said. "I want to be able to communicate with them face to face. Having not been around them before and not knowing them, I want to be able to look in their eyes and talk to them. Obviously, you can't do that from the press box."

Curry and Co. should benefit from O'Cain's presence on the field because some confusion is inevitable. O'Cain has thrown almost the entire playbook at



Bosley Is Back

Wideout Bosley Allen's return from knee surgery gives the Tar Heels a much-needed big-play threat. Here, Allen goes for a 70-yard reception against Wake Forest as a freshman in 1998. ■ Photos by Sean Busher

