

Quiet Forte Makes Noise on Court

Joseph Forte, last season's ACC Rookie of the Year, has gained seven pounds and improved his ball handling.

By T. NOLAN HAYES
Sports Editor

Joseph Forte comes off as an unassuming guy. He's seemingly never in a hurry to get anywhere, and he speaks so softly that he's often difficult to hear.

His game is another story.

It maintains the smoothness of Forte's personality but is loud and bold at the same time, complete with long-range bombs, pull-up jumpers and drives to the basket. It's in your face whether you like it or not — as in the case of his teammates — or not — as in the case of opponents.

Forte becomes another person on the court. If he beats a defender in practice, that guy might hear about it. After practice, the media probably won't.

"I'm not going to sit here and brag to you guys about how good I am," Forte said, talking to a group of writers. "But when we're in pickup games in certain situations, I may talk a little trash or whatever. But that's between us because I feel comfortable with those guys. I don't know if I'd do it against another opponent because that's not how I am."

Forte seemed plenty comfortable around the opposition last year, his freshman season. That much was evident from the opening tip. He launched — and made — a 25-foot 3-pointer during the first five seconds of North Carolina's season. That shot set the tone for his season.

Forte led UNC in scoring at 16.7 points per game, a school record for a freshman.

And Forte, the reigning ACC Rookie of the Year, is supposed to be even better this year. He has put on seven pounds of muscle to bulk up his 6-foot-4 frame to 192 pounds. He has also improved his ball handling to the point where he

could see some minutes at point guard.

Forte was second on the team in assists last year with 94. He is especially effective with the ball on the pick-and-roll, which allows him to read his defender and then react. If the defense sags, he hoists his effortless jumper. If the defense comes at him, he whips the ball into the post or kicks it out to the wing.

"He can create situations," UNC coach Matt Doherty said. "He knows how to pass, and he knows where to deliver the basketball. And he's a scorer. He can put the ball in the hole."

The scoring part is crucial. No matter how good of a passer Forte becomes, UNC needs him to keep putting up points to keep pressure off the team's low-post players. That's why not that all of his teammates are excited about the prospect of him playing the point.

"I feel he can play point guard if we need him to," center Brendan Haywood said. "But at the same time, if you have such a good scorer, why do you want to limit his shots? Your point guard can't be the guy who shoots the most shots."

Forte said it doesn't matter to him where he plays, just as long as he's on the court. But how much longer will the Smith Center be his court?

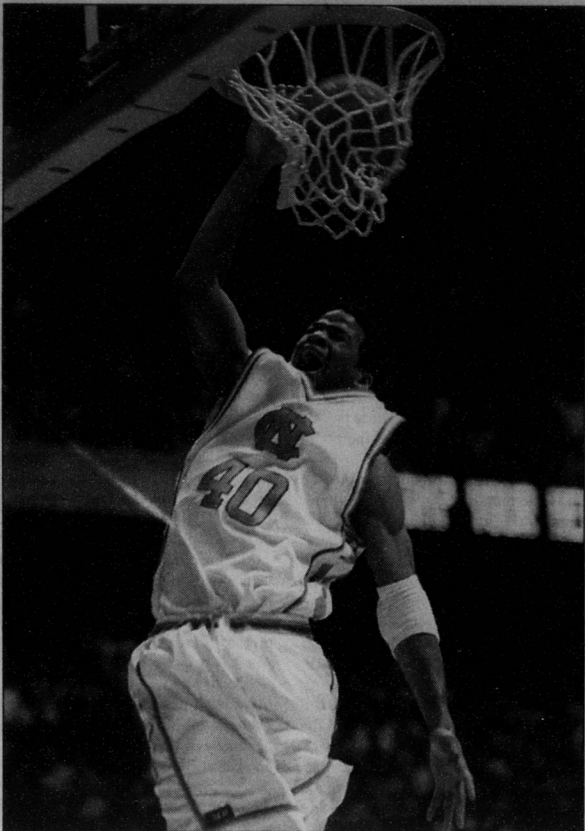
The current trend in college basketball is for players who excel in the open floor to leave school early and finish their development in the NBA. Forte has that kind of talent.

This summer, he was able to see firsthand where he stands in relation to the world's best. Forte was part of the U.S. Men's Select Team that helped prepare the 2000 Dream Team for the Olympics.

Forte started in an exhibition game against the NBA stars, going scoreless in 18 minutes with three rebounds.

It wasn't his best game by any means, but it did nothing to curb speculation that he might leave school if he has a huge sophomore season.

Forte, not surprisingly, shrugs off all the talk about his pro career. He still has



DTH/MILLER PEARSAI

As a member of the U.S. Men's Select Team this summer, Joseph Forte played against the Dream Team while preparing it for the Olympics.

business to take care of in Chapel Hill.

"I don't know what you really even say to people or whatever," Forte said. "I guess your actions speak louder than words, and my actions have kind of put

me in this position.

"I'm just going out and trying to have a good college year and focusing on the team and us getting back to the Final Four and going all the way."

Bersticker Returns From Injury, Politics

By MIKE OGLE
Assistant Sports Editor

The last time anybody heard from Brian Bersticker, it was during student government elections last year at the University when he was the subject of a write-in campaign for student body president.

Now with millions of U.S. voters stepping behind the curtain this week to fill out their national presidential ballots, Bersticker is back — back with North Carolina's basketball team as it opens the season.

And this time he has a healthy left foot.

The 6-foot-10 forward/center from Virginia Beach, Va., originally broke the foot last summer and healed enough to return by the start of the 1999-2000 season. But he refractured it against the College of Charleston in the fifth game of the season and eventually decided to take a medical redshirt and undergo surgery.

He had a bone graft and screw inserted Dec. 6, but all is back to normal this fall.

"It feels good," Bersticker said. "It feels real good. I haven't had any problems with it."

Now his only problem is getting playing time in the post behind Brendan Haywood and Kris Lang. Bersticker played sparingly but well off the bench in his first two seasons, and it looked as if his role might increase in the early going last year.

He scored 25 points (12-of-17 from the floor), grabbed 14 rebounds and blocked four shots before reinjuring his foot.

"I can see myself as a sixth man, coming off the bench, giving Kris and Brendan minutes to rest," Bersticker said.

"I think I can contribute like I did early in the season last year. I just hope I can stay healthy this year."

Although at 241 pounds, "Stick" can have difficulty banging with the other post players of the ACC, sometimes becoming a liability.

The addition of the bulkier Julius Peppers to the team after football season could cut into Bersticker's minutes. Stick shouldn't end up back at the end of the bench, though, where he gained notoriety for exuberant celebrating with his benchmates — even with his broken foot.

To earn more floor time he'll have to build upon his already existing tools — shot blocking and a middle-range jump shot.

"I know Coach has got confidence in me shooting the ball from the foul line, but I need to be able to score with my back to the basket as well," Bersticker said. "I've still been working on my jump shot as far as one dribble on the floor and pull up. And shooting a bit farther out from the basket as well."

But "Stick" is just glad to be healthy again for now. The rest will take care of itself with patience and continued improvement.

"I'm so excited to get back out and play again," Bersticker said. "I've been sitting down for too long."

If the whole college basketball thing doesn't work out for Bersticker, of course there's always politics to fall back on.



UNC junior Brian Bersticker played five games before he refractured his foot and redshirted last year.

Owens Enters Senior Season Facing Uncertainty

Shooting guard Max Owens saw his role decrease last year as Joseph Forte evolved into the Tar Heels' go-to-guy.

By JAMES GIZA
Assistant Sports Editor

His senior season hasn't even started yet, and Max Owens is already in limbo.

The streaky shooting guard saw his minutes dwindle precipitously after he averaged more than 14 points over the first 12 games of last season.

As his playing time decreased, so did his scoring output. Owens put up just more than four points per contest for the remainder of the season and all but disappeared down the stretch.

The 2000-01 season has brought new

coach Matt Doherty and, perhaps, a more involved role for Owens.

"I don't know the role expected of me," Owens said. "The coaches expect me to go out and just play as hard as I can and do whatever I can for this team, not only on the offensive end, but especially on defense. Just playing my hardest and giving my all each and every game. That's my thing."

Not only did Owens not have a role by the end of last season, but he also barely even needed to wear his uniform.

The man who earned first-team All-ACC Tournament honors his sophomore season attempted just 21 shots and scored 10 points in UNC's final 10 games.

The uncertainty Owens faces as the season gears up represents just another odd turn that has become the saga of his Tar Heel career.

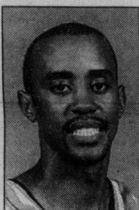
He turned heads as a sophomore when

he started at shooting guard in the ACC Tournament. He responded with 23 points against Maryland and 22 against Duke in the final.

That coming-out party, in which Owens shot a combined 11-for-22 from the floor, including 4-of-8 from 3-point range, appeared to clinch him the following year's starting spot.

But along came Joseph Forte. And the rest is now painful history for Owens.

Owens began last season as the sixth man and acclimated himself to the job



North Carolina senior Max Owens averaged better than 14 points during the first dozen games of last season.

quickly, scoring in double figures in eight out of the first 12 games.

He subbed in frequently for Forte as well as small forward Jason Capel. However, as Forte established himself as the Tar Heels' main scoring threat and big man Julius Peppers joined the team after football season, it was only a matter of time before Owens was faded out.

But Owens said he isn't one to dwell on the past.

"I don't look back on it," he said. "I try to look ahead to the upcoming season. Whatever happened, I don't really look back on."

In all likelihood, Owens will come off the bench again this season to let Forte catch his breath and to provide UNC with an extra shooter when it needs one.

But he still has the potential to light it up when he gets in a groove and provides UNC with a 3-point threat, which

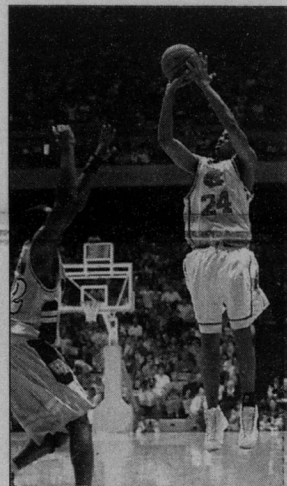
can be crucial late in games.

The 6-foot-5, 198 pound Owens has also displayed improvement on defense and has worked on his ball handling and conditioning since last season — qualities that could earn him more floor time.

"He has a chance to be a good defender," Doherty said. "I know how good he shoots. I want him to do the right things — remember plays and guard people. If he does those things and takes care of the basketball, he'll have an opportunity to play because he can put the ball in the basket. You can never have too many guys who can shoot."

Whatever happens to Owens, if it's anything like the ones of years past, it's probably best to expect the unexpected.

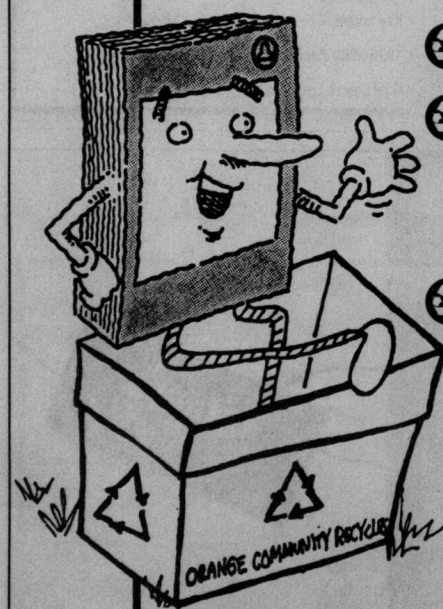
"I am going to go out with a bang," Owens said. "But right now we're just trying to work hard as a team. I'm just trying to improve."



DTH/MILLER PEARSAI

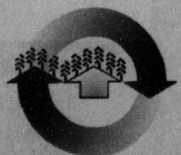
Max Owens made the first-team All-ACC Tournament team in 1998.

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