

Relaxed Forte Glides to Success

UNC coach Matt Doherty said sophomore guard Joseph Forte seems most at ease during 'crunch time.'

By T. NOLAN HAYES
Senior Writer

Joseph Forte is racing toward stardom. Only, he's in no hurry to get there. That much has become apparent to followers of North Carolina the past two seasons, and it will be evident when the Tar Heels play Duke on Thursday at 9 p.m. in Cameron Indoor Stadium.

Nine of the 10 players on the floor will compete at regular speed, moving around the court with frantic intensity and strained facial expressions. The other player will navigate the court at Forte pace, with relaxed and fluid forms of motion reserved for UNC's No. 40.

Forte never rushes on the hardwood, but he manages to get wherever he wants to go, whenever he wants to get there.

"He reminds me of (Wayne) Gretzky on ice," Virginia coach Pete Gillen said. "He just kind of glides. He flows, and he's graceful. He has a tremendous poise about him. He doesn't play too fast. He's certainly one of the best players in the country."

And Forte has been playing like it in recent games. He has reached the 20-point plateau in nine of his last 13

contests, leading UNC in scoring 11 times during that span.

But he's been even better than that in UNC's last three games. He has averaged 27.3 points (on 54.4-percent shooting) and 7.0 rebounds to help the Tar Heels extend their win streak to 14.

Forte has done a large portion of his damage late in games. He scored 20 of his game-high 26 points in the second half to lead the Tar Heels to a win at Maryland and ran off 14 straight points during a span late in the game to help them hold off Florida State.

He was similarly tough against Virginia, scoring 10 of UNC's final 13 points to thwart a Cavalier comeback.

When UNC's sometimes-deliberate inside-out offense stalls, he's the get-out-of-jail-free card.

"I think the thing that is probably unique is that when the game is at crunch time, that's when he really focuses and seems most relaxed," UNC coach Matt Doherty said. "That's unusual for a lot of players."

Not for Forte. He loves to shoot the basketball and will do it whenever he gets the chance. Early. Late. Whenever.



Sophomore guard Joseph Forte has scored 82 points (an average of 27.3) in the Tar Heels' last three games.

"Why not? I feel as though I can make it," Forte said. "I want to take any shot during the game."

That goes for the entire season, whether he's shooting well or poorly.

One of the early-season stories surrounding UNC was Forte's inability to hit from long range. His pillow-soft intermediate jump shot was falling, but he was just 8-for-32 (25 percent) on 3-pointers during one seven-game stretch.

Forte never blinked. He insisted he would keep shooting as he always had. And with those shots came the results he was used to seeing. Forte enters Thursday night's game having made 17 of his last 42 3-point attempts (40.5 percent).

And just as he was low-key about his shooting slump, he's unconcerned with how the Blue Devils might defend him. Nate James, a wiry 6-foot-6 guard who is Duke's designated stopper, will check Forte much of the time.

Forte dealt with Chris Carrawell, last season's ACC Player of the Year, when he played Duke as a freshman. He responded by averaging 22 points, 4.5 assists and shooting 51.3 percent against the Blue Devils.

Forte said he means no disrespect to James, but he sees no reason for things to be different this season.

"I guess he holds guys down," Forte said. "I'm not familiar with his defensive game. But I don't worry about that. I worry about what I'm doing."

So is Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski.

"He plays the game, and all the sudden, he'll hit you in flurries," Krzyzewski said. "He comes up with a lot of points in such an efficient manner. I really love the way he plays."

With that last statement comes a scary thought: Forte in a Duke uniform. What type of numbers could he put up in Krzyzewski's anything-goes perimeter offense?

It boggles the mind, but it's a question even Forte himself has considered.

"I think about it, you know?" Forte said with a laugh. "It'd be a lot of freedom, but I'm at a great place. I'm at the right place for me."

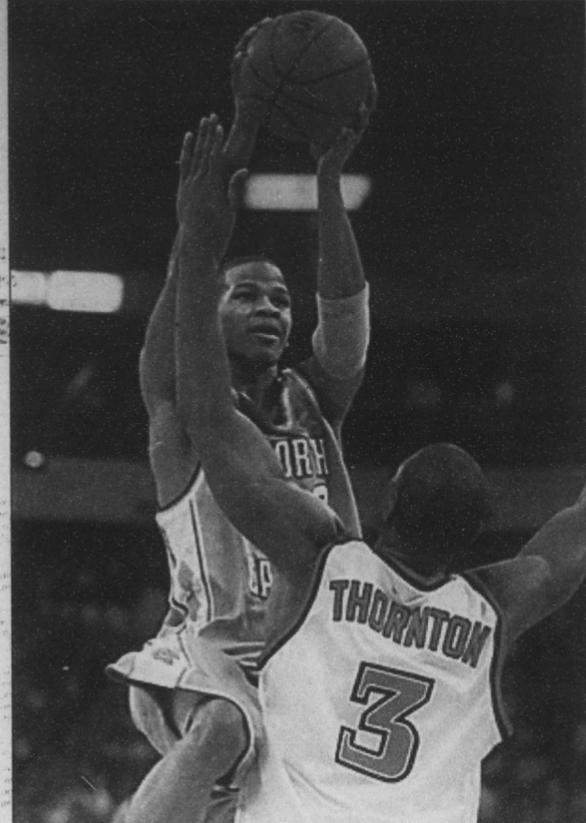
That's sweet music to the ears of UNC fans, who hope Forte doesn't take his game to the NBA next season.

But Forte isn't thinking much about professional basketball right now. He's got other business to attend to — mainly helping his team knock off Duke.

"I try to remain focused and just understand where my team needs me the most," Forte said. "Sometimes I don't have to score that much, or I may score seven points in a row."

Whatever he does, he does it at his own pace.

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



DTH/BRENT CLARK

Sophomore guard Joseph Forte (left) shoots a jumper over N.C. State's Damon Thornton. Forte scored 21 points in Sunday's game.

Old-Fashioned UNC Hopes to Beat Duke Down Low

Stanford and Illinois, teams with similar frontlines to the Tar Heels, gave Duke its most difficult games to date.

By BRET STRELOW
Senior Writer

Kris Lang would go out to the hoop at his Gastonia home as a youngster and pretend that he was Christian Laettner.

Laettner, a standout at power forward for Duke from 1988-91, excelled thanks to a free-wheeling offense that allowed players to break down defenders with one-on-one moves.

North Carolina played a different style during Lang's youth. The Tar Heels ran set offenses and did most of their damage in the halfcourt. Not much fun to emulate. And difficult to accomplish unless nine of your closest friends are nearby.

Somewhere, in some backyard of a home in the Tar Heel state, some kid is probably imitating current Duke power forward Shane Battier. Lang has become

an ACC star of his own at UNC, but little has changed in the way the two Tobacco Road rivals go about their business.

"We're a little throwback," Lang said. "I believe it's more old-fashioned. It's something that has worked."

The Tar Heels and Blue Devils meet Thursday with first place in the ACC on the line. Considering UNC's 17-2 overall record and 7-0 mark in league play, an old-fashioned style has worked for the Tar Heels.

It also has worked against Duke. UNC forward Jason Capel said he could think of only two teams in the country that start a conventional power forward like Lang, who is 6-foot-11, and a center like 7-footer Brendan Haywood.

Those two particular teams — Stanford and Illinois — gave Duke fits this season. Illinois lost 78-77 to the Blue Devils on Jan. 28, and Stanford handed Duke its only defeat with an 84-83 win on Dec. 21.

Stanford's duo of Jarron and Jason Collins, who are 6-11 and 7-0, respectively, combined for 24 points and 21 rebounds against the Blue Devils.

Illinois center Marcus Griffin scored

16 points and pulled down nine rebounds against Duke, and the Fighting Illini finished with a 42-27 edge in rebounds.

Capel said he thinks the Tar Heels can capitalize on Lang and Haywood's height advantage in the post against Duke's Carlos Boozer, a 6-9 center, and Battier, who is 6-8.

"I think if we really pound the ball inside, they're not big," Capel said. "They don't have a big frontline like we do, and that's our advantage."

Boozer and Battier both fouled out in the Blue Devils' loss to the Cardinal. Boozer was limited to 29 minutes of playing time, and Battier was disqualified with 35 seconds left.

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski got upset on Tuesday when he thought a reporter was insinuating that the officials had a role in allowing both players to stay in the game in a physical contest against Maryland on Friday.

"Our kids play a lot of minutes, and you try to teach foul discipline," Krzyzewski said. "There's certain things that you do to deter foul trouble, play off somebody. I'm not going to go through a coaching clinic."

The Blue Devils run a 4-around-1 offense that will force Lang to chase Battier around the perimeter. Boozer sets up in the lane, but he might leak out to force Haywood away from the basket.

Lang said that shouldn't pose a problem for the Tar Heels.

"I feel very comfortable with Brendan back there," Lang said. "There's also help side from other wings."

Boozer averaged 11.5 points and 6.5 rebounds in two wins against the Tar Heels last season. The Blue Devils have won six of the last seven games against UNC.

Lang hopes the old-school Tar Heels can assert their dominance over the Blue Devils like they did from 1993-98,

when UNC had a streak of nine wins in 10 games against Duke.

He was a mere youngster when the streak began.

"Back then it seemed like Carolina was more traditional," Lang said. "It was such a habit for them to win. All they did was win, win, win."

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