

Swimming Captures ACC Victory

UNC swimmer Erika Acuff (left) won two events, the 500-yard freestyle and 400 IM, in the women's win against N.C. State. See Page 9.



On the Road:

■ Softball started the spring season off with a split at South Carolina.
 ■ North Carolina's women won at a Virginia Tech indoor track meet; the men finished second. 12



JAMES GIZA
 ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

Tar Heels Make Case For No. 1

When the result flashed on the scoreboard, the announcement went over the public address system and the fans inside the Smith Center started cheering Saturday afternoon, the North Carolina basketball team couldn't help but notice.

UCLA 79, No. 1 Stanford 73. Combined with the Tar Heels' defeat of No. 2 Duke on Thursday and No. 3 Kansas' loss to Missouri on Monday, UNC was in prime position to claim its first top ranking in nearly three years.

Of course, there was still 15:54 left in its game against Georgia Tech.

"Who announced that by the way?" UNC coach Matt Doherty asked during his postgame press conference. "That was terrible timing, terrible timing. I got mad because I noticed it; some of our players' eyes darted up to the scoreboard. That's the kiss of death right there."

Fortunately for the Tar Heels, who held on for a 82-69 win, they were able to kiss and tell.

UNC now seems assured of its first No. 1 ranking since finishing the 1998 regular season on top.

It debuted as the top team in the ESPN/USA Today coaches' poll Sunday night and should receive the same distinction in The Associated Press poll when it is released today.

The Tar Heels (19-2, 9-0 in the ACC) boast the longest current win-streak in the country at 16 and are 9-0 in the ACC for the first time since the 1986-87 season, but with two losses, are they really the best in the nation?

"Oh, definitely," Joseph Forte said. "No doubt about it. There's only one way to prove it - to keep winning."

"Hard to say who's the best team in the country right now," Brendan Haywood said. "Even if we are the best team in the country right now, being the best team in the country right now doesn't mean anything."

UNC is clearly a different team than it was at the beginning of the season.

The two losses to Michigan State and Kentucky came before football players Ronald Curry and Julius Peppers stepped on the hardwood.

Curry has cemented himself as the team's starting point guard, adding a physical defensive presence on the perimeter, carrying a 1.4-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio and shooting just under 40 percent from the 3-point line.

Peppers is arguably one of the most athletic big men in the nation, putting up 6.4 points and 4.3 rebounds per contest and giving the Tar Heels an intimidating inside presence off the bench.

UNC also showcases a leading candidate for player of the year honors (Forte) and a big man who makes up for his inconsistency on the offensive end with his size and shot-blocking (Haywood).

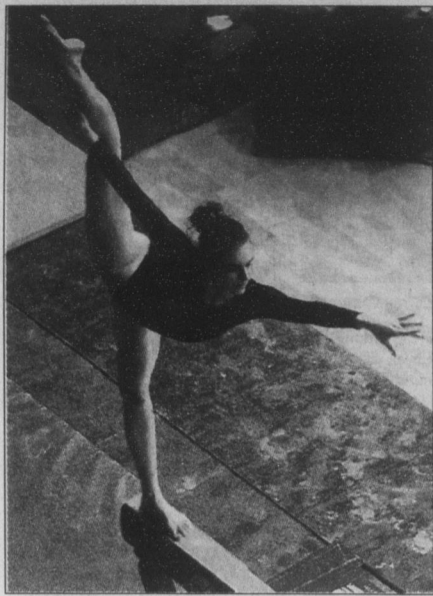
Throw forwards Kris Lang (13.2 points, 6.4 rebounds) and Jason Capel (10.4 points, 6.7 rebounds) into the mix with a bench that can legitimately run four deep, and the team that many picked to finish third in the ACC this season suddenly looks like a true national contender.

But the Tar Heels have to overcome their poor free throw shooting (Capel and Forte are the only two starters shooting better than 80 percent from the line) and avoid the Arizona-like arrogance that can come with being the top dog.

Haywood knows what it's like. He was a freshman the last time UNC was No. 1, when Vince Carter and Antawn Jamison patrolled the Smith Center, and said this year's Tar Heels are giving him that old nostalgic feeling.

"With Vince and Tawn, when we lost, I was really really shocked just because of the work ethic and how good those guys were," Haywood said. "Over the years, we've had pretty good basketball teams, but we haven't had a team as good as that. And right now, we're getting back to where we were."

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DTH/SEFTON IPOCK

UNC sophomore Natalie Halbach performs her beam routine, which earned a 9.95 at the Governor's Cup.

Gymnasts Save Their Best for Last

The Tar Heels combined for a score of 49.000 on floor exercise, just enough to push UNC ahead of Towson to win the meet.

By BRAD BROTHERS
 Staff Writer

The North Carolina gymnastics team was in an early funk Saturday at the Governor's Cup at Carmichael Auditorium.

But not to worry. The Tar Heels saved the best for last.

UNC, after a less than superb opening performance on vault, saw itself in last place.

"The vault scores in general were a little tight, but we knew if the judges were consistent, we would be OK," UNC coach Derek Galvin said.

The Tar Heels came up big in their last two events to edge Towson 194.450-194.225. Maryland and N.C. State finished third and

fourth in the quad-meet, respectively.

On balance beam, UNC sophomore Natalie Halbach and senior captain Brooke Wilson dazzled throughout, tallying respective scores of 9.95 and 10.00.

Wilson's mark broke her previous best effort on beam of 9.95.

Halbach credited the score to constant practice and attention to detail.

"It's the little things like pointed toes and polishing the dance that makes a difference," Halbach said. "Taking out the tiny wobbles and hitting it rock solid instead of staying on the beam and wiggling a little bit."

UNC, after a near flawless team effort on beam, trailed Towson by .350. The Tar Heels entered floor exercise needing another stellar team effort to overtake the Tigers for the Governor's Cup.

Mission accomplished.



Senior captain Brooke Wilson scored a perfect 10 on the balance beam, breaking her previous record of 9.95.

"We were second after beam, so we went to floor," Wilson said. "At a home match, that is an event you love to do, because you've got your music and the home crowd, so we just decided we were going to win it on floor, and we did, we really did."

UNC mixed energetic routines and hit several challenging flip combinations en route to a 49.000 team score, enough to down Towson by .225.

Although the victory was the result of a team effort, another storyline emerged with the performance of Maddy Curley.

Curley, a freshman from Tallahassee, Fla., finished fourth in the all-around, setting personal bests on floor, beam and uneven bars.

"It's definitely a payoff, it feels great," Curley said. "You don't really think about your individual score at all when you are doing a meet, but (doing well) is always a nice bonus."

Said Wilson: "She is absolutely amazing; for a freshman, her consistency is key. She has helped us out a ton. She's walked into college gymnastics like she has been here forever."

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Balanced Attack Paces UNC

The North Carolina bench outscored Georgia Tech's reserves 26-13 en route to the Tar Heels' 13-point victory Saturday.

By WILL KIMMEY
 Senior Writer

Brendan Haywood had a message for his North Carolina teammates before Saturday afternoon's tilt against Georgia Tech.

"I just went out there and told the guys, 'Listen, what happened Thursday is in the past,'" the senior said referring to UNC's 85-83 win against No. 2 Duke. "If we focus on it too long, we're going to get smacked in the mouth, so we need to get out there and focus on this game."

The Yellow Jackets delivered that blow to the jaw, grabbing an early 11-3 lead. But the No. 4 Tar Heels responded with a 27-2 run of their own and cruised to a 82-69 victory.

It marked the 16th straight win for North Carolina (19-2, 9-0 in the ACC) and put the Tar Heels in position to claim the top spot in The Associated Press poll, which comes out today.

Saturday's game showcased UNC's balance and depth. Five players scored in double figures; five players grabbed at least five rebounds. Joseph Forte led all scorers with 23 points and added nine rebounds. Kris Lang went for 15 points and seven rebounds. Jason Capel had 11 and 11.

But the bench made the difference. UNC's reserves outscored Georgia Tech's 26-13. Adam Boone posted a career-high 10 points, and Julius Peppers matched his career-best with 14.

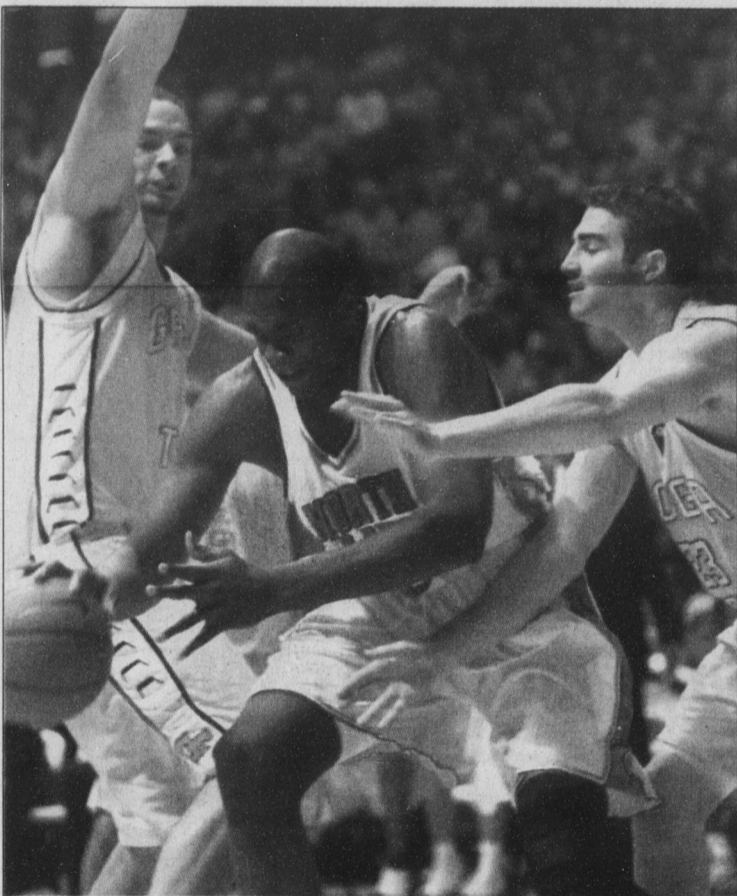
"We have great players coming off the bench that can keep the game steady," said Boone, who also grabbed a career-high five rebounds.

"I thought it was just a good team effort," UNC coach Matt Doherty said. "It was a good, old-fashioned team effort."

Never was that effort more evident than during UNC's first-half run. Six different players scored during the 27-2 run. The Tar Heels made 10 of their 14 field goal attempts during that span and scored 23 straight points to take a 30-13 lead.

"I didn't realize it was (23) points," said Haywood, who also blocked five shots. "We have a good blend of inside players, outside players and when it all comes together at one

See MEN'S BASKETBALL, Page 5



DTH/MIKE MESSIER

North Carolina center Brendan Haywood (center) dribbles the ball through a Georgia Tech double team. Haywood had five blocks and seven points on the afternoon.

Tar Heels Shoot Past Deacons

North Carolina started the game 7-of-9 from the field and tied a season-high with nine 3-pointers made.

By MIKE OGLE
 Senior Writer

When Wake Forest's women's basketball team started the game red-hot from the Carmichael Auditorium floor, it was a bad omen for Charlene Curtis' club.

The Demon Deacons hit eight straight shots, including three 3-pointers and two just inside the arc, after missing their first attempt of the game. The early success caused Wake to settle for outside shots for much of the game, but it couldn't connect with the same proficiency.

North Carolina, which started the game 7-of-9 from the field itself, didn't cool off quite as much, as it pulled away from Wake Forest for a 72-60 win Sunday afternoon.

"When you hit jump shots early, you tend to go that way," Curtis said. "At halftime we talked about that, and yet we came back in the second half, and I thought we were pulling the trigger a little early."

The Deacons (11-11, 3-8 in the ACC) shot 32 percent from the field and 16.7 percent from 3-point territory in the sec-

See WOMEN'S BASKETBALL, Page 9

Swimmers Keep Wolfpack at Bay

By BRAD LEWIS
 Staff Writer

RALEIGH - How do swimmers tell how fast they're swimming?

They usually just look at the scoreboard after touching the wall.

But this was not an option Friday afternoon at the Willis Casey Aquatics Center during the North Carolina and N.C. State men's swimming and diving meet.

The 14th-ranked Tar Heels could have been accused of causing the temporary short-circuit in the computer system via the white froth they created in the water, burning the Wolfpack 175-61.

Midway through the meet, just before the 50-yard freestyle, the scoreboard went out. The old swimming complex generated a mix of heat and chlorine that shorted out the computer keeping the times.

The meet was put on hold for about half an hour while the problem was assessed, and the swimmers risked losing their winning mind-set.

But the Tar Heels didn't let the conditions cool off their balance of power and speed in their last regular season meet. Now UNC looks poised to make a run at the ACC championships.

"This is the most exciting time of the year," UNC coach Frank Comfort said. "This is why I coach all the other weeks of the year."

Yuri Sugiyama had a tremendous showing in the endurance events as he took first in the 1,650 freestyle (15 minutes, 32.87 seconds) and the 500 free (4:35.37).

UNC (6-2, 4-1 in the ACC) swept the 400 individual medley event with Chris Helin (3:56.83), Dave Slawinski and Casey Coble taking first, second and third, respectively.

Michael Chenier, Justin Donato and P.J. Vick swept the 100 free with Chenier

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Tar Heel Wrestlers Roll Over Cavs

UNC used the momentum from Brad Byers' comeback win to propel it to an easy victory against Virginia.

By RANDY WELLINGTON
 Staff Writer

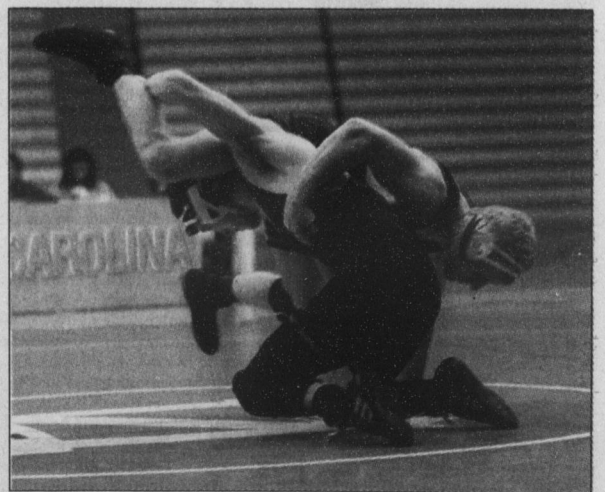
Last-gasp comebacks are an exciting part of sports.

Usually, those sports don't include wrestling.

But don't tell that to North Carolina (5-4, 2-0 in the ACC), which continued its march toward a fifth consecutive ACC championship with a tidy 24-12 victory against Virginia (4-6, 1-2) on Saturday.

For the second time in two ACC matchups, UNC used the momentum of a last-second takedown to propel itself to victory.

Junior Brad Byers faced Virginia's Joe Alexander in the 133-pound weight class with UNC leading 8-0. Byers struggled through the first two periods, trailing 7-2 with one period remaining.



DTH/MIKE MESSIER

UNC junior JohnMark Bentley (top) defeated Virginia's P.J. Bory 10-3 in the 149-pound weight class Saturday.

The recipe for a comeback, though, was not gourmet.

"I knew I had to get a takedown," Byers said. "And then I had to get out and

get another one. I couldn't get them all at once, so I had to get them one at a time."

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