

Bells Ring in Another Year of UNC Doubts

Quarterback Ronald Curry and defensive lineman Julius Peppers return, but doubts still linger for 2001.

By MIKE OGLE
Senior Writer

North Carolina's players might want to consider wearing wedding veils instead of helmets this season.

They have everything a bride needs — plenty of old, plenty of new and Carolina blue.

As veteran stars Ronald Curry and Julius Peppers try to end their collegiate careers with a bang, their new coaching staff will be eager to get off to a good start at UNC. However, the schedule and lingering questions could make for a rocky honeymoon.

Something Old

Curry's back for his last chance to prove all the high-school hype was more than hype and that he could have an NFL future.

Not that Curry hasn't been successful for the Tar Heels. He set the school record with 2,676 yards of total offense in 2000 and stands 520 yards short of UNC's career record. But people expected him to be going after ACC and national records by this point.

"I did it to myself," Curry said. "I had a pretty good high school career then I came here and then didn't put up the numbers that people expected me to.

"I've heard that this is the year. A lot

of people are not worried about the things I did in the past. They're worried about me improving myself this year. I'm just going to go out there and play and treat it like any other year. I'm not going to put the pressure on myself because I think it's going to affect the way I play."

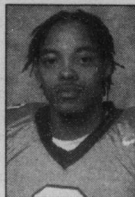
He'll have to improve his accuracy, something the new coaches have worked on with him in the off season. Curry has completed 50 percent of his passes and thrown 29 interceptions in two and a half seasons.

He has a more-than-capable stable of wideouts to throw to, led by Bosley Allen, Kory Bailey and Sam Aiken. The trio averaged 15.9, 17.2 and 14.1 yards a catch, respectively, in 2000.

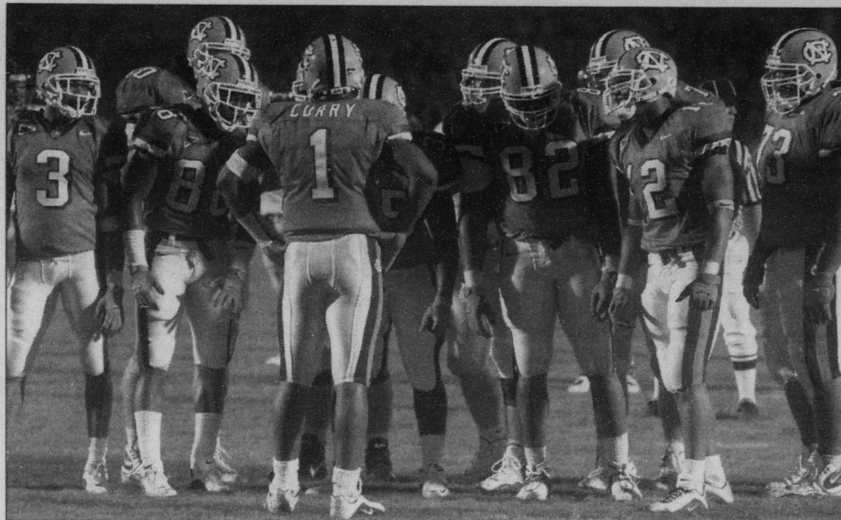
Still, the same old questions remain at running back, a position the Tar Heels have struggled to figure out for the past three seasons when Rufus Brown's 534 yards in 1998 has been the best showing. Not only has UNC been unable to establish its ground game, but it hasn't been able to establish who's running the ground game.

Eight different players have started at tailback during the span, none taking command of the job.

Peppers, like Curry, has been chasing some records of his own. The defensive



UNC senior Bosley Allen looks to be a double threat for the Tar Heels as a wideout and punt returner.



Quarterback Ronald Curry (1) has his last chance to have a breakout year before his eligibility runs dry. Last year, Curry set UNC's school record with 2,676 yards of total offense.

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end set the school record for tackles for loss last season (24) and led the nation with 15 sacks, one shy of Lawrence Taylor's school record. The fourth-year junior planning to exit for the NFL after this season needs 12 more sacks to own the career record.

"I don't think anyone can block me," Peppers said.

"Coach (John) Bunting has been mentally getting us a lot tougher. That's most of what he's helped us with. (Other ACC teams) have just had more confidence than us. We haven't had that in the last couple years."

Something New

The emergence of North Carolina's defense coupled with the new attitude of the coaching staff has helped bring back some of the old swagger from the late '90s.

With one of the nation's most dominating linemen in Peppers, linebacker Merceda Perry's return from a broken ankle and linebacker Quincy Monk's and tackle Ryan Sims' coming into their

own as seniors, UNC's defensive unit is starting to get the feeling of old.

"When I was getting recruited they had the top linebacking corps and the top defense," Perry said. "So I expected to be part of that. I can still be part of a great defense because we have a chance to do that this year. It'll be a good feeling to play like that again."

Bunting and company's hard-nose coaching approach has had a lot to do with that.

Bunting's lifetime of football contributes to the no-nonsense demeanor that has lit a fire under his team.

An honorable mention All-America linebacker at UNC in 1971, he then started 119 games in 11 years for the Philadelphia Eagles and coached defense eight years in the NFL in addi-

tion to a stint at a Division III school.

Something Blue

Bunting will likely have a blue honeymoon as the sun sets on Curry and Peppers' time in Chapel Hill.

The Tar Heels open with three road games for the first time since 1893 and face three of the nation's top six teams (No. 3 Oklahoma, No. 5 Texas and No. 6 Florida St.) in their first five games.

Not the prettiest way for Bunting to start his dream job with a team that went 6-5, 3-5 in the ACC a year ago.

"Obviously, the season opener will be measured to an extent as to what progress we've made," Bunting said. "Obviously, that's a measuring stick and Game 2 and Game 3 will be other measures of what progress we've made."

"Coach (John) Bunting has been mentally getting us a lot tougher. ... We haven't had that in the last couple of years."

JULIUS PEPPERS
Defensive End



DTH/JEFF POULAND

Julius Peppers (49) was named a second-team All-American last year after falling one shy of Lawrence Taylor's single-season sacks record.

UNC '01 Schedule

Aug. 25	at Oklahoma
Sept. 1	at Maryland
Sept. 8	at Texas
Sept. 15	SMU
Sept. 22	Florida State
Sept. 29	at N.C. State
Oct. 6	ECU
Oct. 13	Virginia
Oct. 20	at Clemson
Nov. 1	at Georgia Tech
Nov. 10	Wake Forest
Nov. 17	Duke

North Carolina

2000 record: 6-5 (3-5 in the ACC)
Head Coach: John Bunting (38-14-2 overall, 0-0 at UNC)

Home Field: Kenan Memorial Stadium (60,000)

Returning Starters: 6 offense, 6 defense

Key Returnees: QB Ronald Curry, WR Bosley Allen, DE Julius Peppers, DT Ryan Sims

Key Losses: TE Alge Crumpler, LB Brandon Spoon
Strengths: Both offensive and defensive catalysts return in Curry and Peppers. All of Curry's receivers return in 2001, including Bosley Allen. Place kicker Jeff Reed solidifies an already solid special teams.

Weaknesses: On the defensive line, the Tar Heels are short on depth behind their senior corps. The offensive line beyond Adam Metts is relatively inexperienced.

Keys to season: UNC must avoid an 0-3 hole on the road to open the season. A questionable backup QB unit makes it vital for Curry to stay healthy. Defense must step up beyond Peppers, who will face constant double teams.

Key Game: Sept. 1 at Maryland



John Bunting