

Capel Relishes Redefining Role

With Joseph Forte and Brendan Haywood in the NBA, Jason Capel must step up his scoring production.

By JAMES GIZA
Sports Saturday Editor

Jason Capel has heard it all. He can't beat people off the dribble. He's not quick enough. He's a role player: talented and dependable, but a superstar? No way.

But, for better or worse, it's his show now. He knows it. The media know it. The fans know it.

The exodus of Joseph Forte has left a scoring void on the North Carolina basketball team this season, and Capel has been all but anointed the chosen one to plug the gap.

A quick check of his résumé does little to allay any potential fears that he is unprepared for the challenge. In his three seasons as a starter for the Tar Heels, the forward has never averaged more than 12.3 points.

Rebounding, diving for loose balls, finding the open man, maybe nailing a

key 3-pointer — these are the facets of Capel's game that have been on display while others have handled the scoring.

And, tucked away as he was in the shadows, many people have come to believe that these parts alone constitute the whole of his game.

"Part of it is he's made a lot of sacrifices his first few years for the program and maybe let, for the good of the team, other players come to the forefront in terms of the scoring," UNC coach Matt Doherty said.

He can't make those sacrifices this season, though.

Not if the Tar Heels want their 32nd consecutive 20-win year and a shot at the ACC Championship. Not if they want to erase the cloud of doubt hanging over the team.

They need Capel to step out of that



Senior forward Jason Capel has started each year and averaged 11.4 points per game last season.

shadow now more than ever. And he plans on doing just that.

"I really don't care what people say, honestly," said Capel, addressing a crowd of assembled media recently. "I think I've shown throughout my career here that I can compete and I can play and do anything that anybody else in this league can do.

"It's just that I'm the type of player, I'm going to fill the void. If you need me to do any particular thing, I can do it. I'm not a one particular duty guy on the team. I can do it all.

"This year, I'm going to be asked to score more — something I've waited for, something I know I'm ready for. And if it's proving it to y'all, great. But I know I can do it, so it won't be that big of a surprise to me."

He certainly showed flashes of go-to guy potential last season when he averaged 11.4 points and 7.4 rebounds (tied for the team lead with 7-foot center Brendan Haywood).

There was the win against Buffalo when he recorded the second triple-double in North Carolina history with 16 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists. There was the win at Duke when he scored 20 points, grabbed six boards and dished

out five assists.

And there was the win against Maryland on the day he was referred to as a "role player" in a local newspaper when he poured in a career-high 27 points.

"Some people would view it as a positive article," Doherty said. "He viewed it as, 'Don't label me. I'm a player. I'm not a role player. I'm a basketball player.'"

If Capel can use the doubts he has encountered heading into this season for similar motivation, he could be dangerous.

He'll be playing primarily at power forward, as opposed to small forward, his usual position. With Kris Lang shifting to center, Doherty hopes that Capel can draw his man away from the basket and open up the inside.

But what everyone is waiting to see is the ball in his hands. He has been selected the chosen one. The question now is, will he deliver?

"I think a go-to guy is a guy with confidence, a guy who believes in himself and a guy who can put the ball in the basket," Tar Heel point guard Adam Boone said. "And he definitely fits that criteria."

Melendez Out to Prove He's More Than Dunks

By RANDY WELLINGTON
Staff Writer

For Orlando Melendez, his last year at North Carolina has already been memorable.

"When we won the Florida State (football) game it was great," Melendez said. "Me, Kris and Capel were going crazy in the stands and we ran out on the field to celebrate."

Cheering and celebrating have been Melendez's forte since he came to North Carolina.

A senior from Puerto Rico, he has not seen much playing time for the Tar Heels. He scored eight points in 10 games played last year.

But this summer, he played for his country in an international tournament.

"The best thing I did was win a gold medal in Central America. I was able to play some games with the senior national team in Puerto Rico," Melendez said.

"International games are a lot more physical. The players are more athletic and faster. I like playing both (college and international basketball). I appreciate the differences."

Athleticism is a major part of Melendez's game. His pregame dunks at Midnight With the Tar Heels drew cheers from the crowd.

When he enters games, those in attendance become excited at the prospect of a soaring Melendez jam.

Considering that his playing time has been sparse over the course of his career, Melendez knows that his contributions can come in different ways.

"I want to play, but I'll contribute any way I can," Melendez said.

Melendez saw his most playing time in his sophomore season, playing in 24 games. That year, he averaged 1.5

points and 1.2 rebounds a game.

His season-high in points and rebounds came against Tennessee Tech, with seven and four, respectively.

Last year, in addition to the eight points, Melendez had eight rebounds. Twice, he achieved his season-high of two against Miami and later against Duke in the ACC Tournament final.

More important to Melendez, though, are the relationships he has built with his teammates through the years.

One of those teammates, Brian Bersticker, another fifth-year senior, tickles Melendez's funny bone.

"There are many funny things about Bersticker," Melendez said. "He has a John Deere hat that he wore for the entire ride from Virginia when he first got his truck. He still wears it sometimes."

Regardless of his role, Melendez is optimistic about the Tar Heels' chances.

"We look really good. We're an athletic team. We're definitely faster and more up-tempo this season."

"Cheering the guys on on the bench helps the team, and practicing hard does, too."

Lang Looks to Be Big Inside Presence

Laid-back Kris Lang will be UNC's lone post threat this year, but he has worked on expanding his game.

By RACHEL CARTER
Sports Editor

Never let it be said Kris Lang is lacking in personality.

The 6-foot-10 senior forward/center is the genial, fun-loving face of North Carolina's basketball squad, and Lang clearly relishes his role as clown prince of the Tar Heels.

"Am I the class clown of this team?" Lang said when asked. "I think the whole team is a bunch of goofballs, actually. ... Not just me."

Maybe Lang's not the only one, but he's the one holding court with the media, cracking jokes at reporters' and his teammates' expense. He's the guy who turned to a ref and said, "Oh yeah, this year I can jump."

The jokes don't end there. Said Lang, on entering his fourth year, "I feel like I'm getting old, like I'm getting gray hairs or something."

Or, after thoughtfully talking about

the pride involved in the North Carolina basketball program: "You like that, didn't you? I dropped a little knowledge on you."

Lang's joking doesn't hide that he's got some big shoes to fill this season. After Brendan Haywood graduated, the role of Big Man suddenly became empty, and Lang is the best-equipped Tar Heel to fill the role in the post.

A four-year starter for the Tar Heels, Lang has battled injury but remained a constant presence for UNC. In his career, he's averaging 10.1 points and 5.1 rebounds a game.

In 33 games last year, the forward chipped in 11.3 points per game, many coming on his trademark hook shots.

"My game really hasn't changed," Lang said. "I've actually lost weight instead of gained weight or try to get bigger. I've worked on my leg strength so I can jump better. Big thing is, every-



Senior forward Kris Lang shot .550 from the field last year and averaged 11.3 points per game.

one knows I have the lefthand and righthand jump hook.

"I really never worked on that this summer. I worked on the free-throw line and the 17- to 18-foot jumper from anywhere. That's something that I'm not just feel confident in, but comfortable in, as well."

Adding the jumper will help Lang tally points for the Tar Heels. When Haywood was on the court, defenses focused on Haywood down low and sometimes ignored Lang. But without Haywood, all the attention in the post will be focused on Lang, and he's going to face his share of double teams.

"One of the things he was known for is his inside presence," said UNC center Brian Bersticker. "Maybe he's not a 7-footer, but Kris has shown he can score on the block."

Lang is going to have to score inside for UNC to be successful. While Bersticker and redshirt freshman Neil Fingleton have the height, Bersticker's light frame and Fingleton's conditioning raise big questions about their abilities to be effective inside.

And if Julius Peppers doesn't come back, there is even more burden on Lang's shoulders to hold up the Tar Heels' inside game.

"He's fought through illness, through injuries, his whole career here," Capel said. "But he's healthy, he's confident, he's worked really hard over the summer, really improved every facet of his game from conditioning to hitting 15-, 17-foot jump shots. So he'll have a good year. We need him to have a good year."

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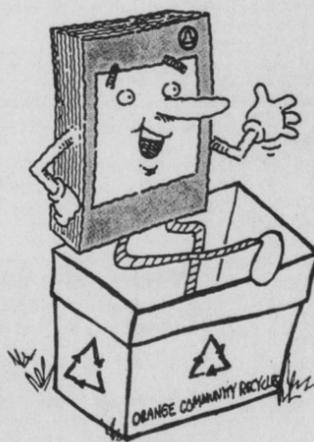
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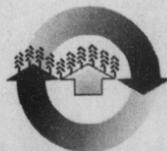
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