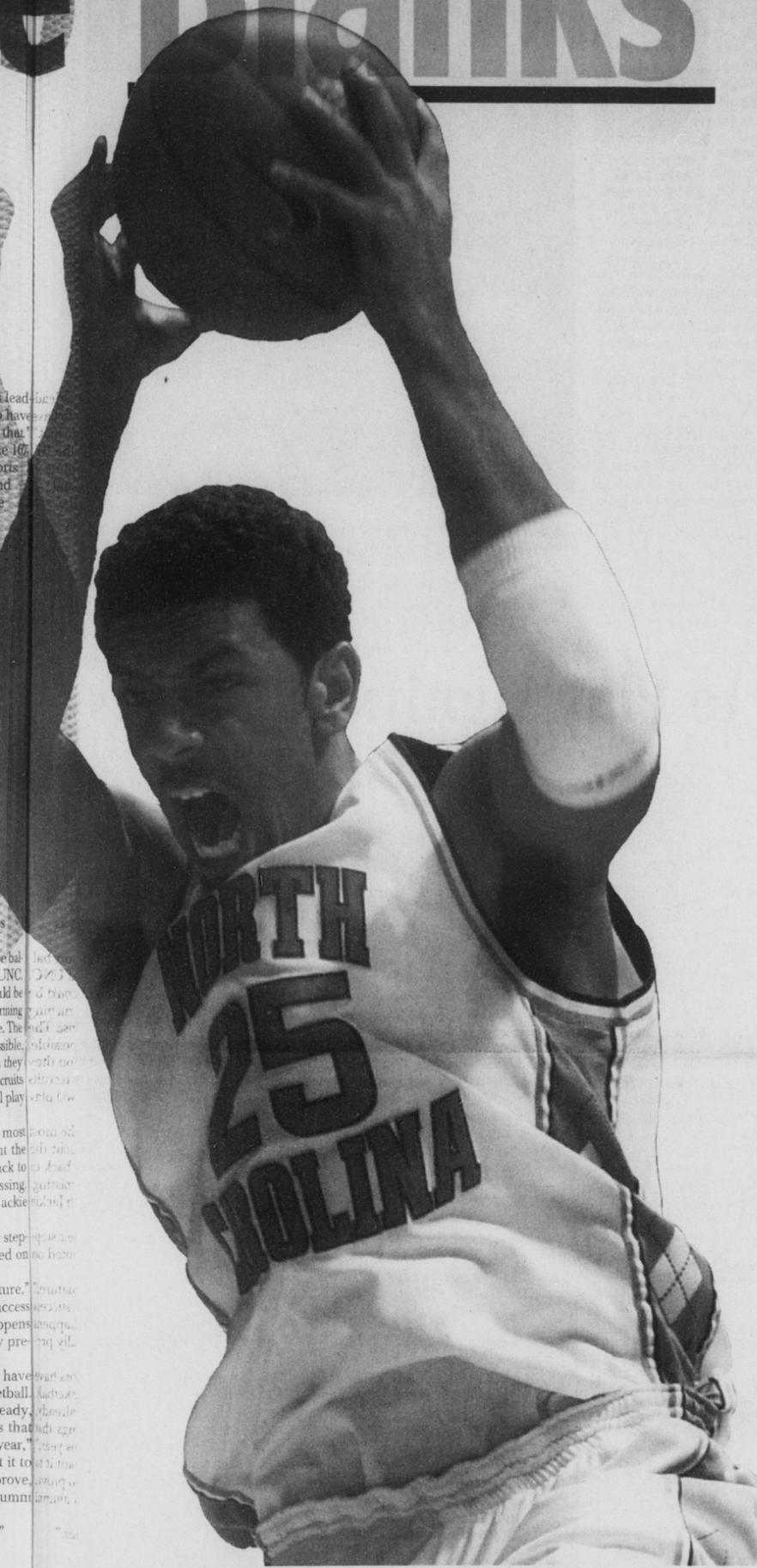


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DTH PHOTOS BY CARA BRICKMAN

North Carolina senior guard Nikki Teasley averaged 14.6 points in 26 games during the 1999-2000 season. Teasley returned home to Maryland for the 2000-01 school year to take a break from school and basketball.

After Finding Inner Peace, Teasley Returns to Boost UNC

By Kelly Lusk
Assistant Sports Editor

Finally, the answer. She didn't hesitate in the least. It was almost as if a sense of relief permeated the dimly lit room as senior guard Nikki Teasley answered the question that people had been asking since early in the spring of 2000.

What happened that year? Why didn't she play last season? Rumors flew around the North Carolina women's basketball team when Teasley left. *Is she pregnant? Does she not get along with her coach?*

The press releases did nothing to quell the whispers that slowly soiled Teasley's reputation. UNC Athletic Communications stated that Teasley was not returning to the team because of "personal reasons." The ambiguity of it all just added fuel to the fire.

Does she have a drug problem? Has she lost her love for the game, for UNC?

Actually, it was none of the above. And now Teasley is back, and it is time to set the story straight. "Everything is all good now," Teasley said, shaking her head at the stories people came up with to explain her departure. "I just want people to know the truth about what happened."

The truth is something to which most college athletes can relate. Any one of them could tell you that balancing school, practice and competition is a difficult task. For Teasley, it all just became too much.

And suddenly, what plagues most athletes as their biggest fear became a simple solution for Teasley, an easy out.

She wanted to hurt herself.

It was the perfect beginning to a long, successful basketball career. Teasley tore up the court in high school and entered North Carolina as the No. 1 recruit in the nation. She quickly made a name for herself on the collegiate circuit, earning ACC Rookie of the Year honors in 1998 after becoming only the second freshman to lead the conference in assists.

Things only got better from there. She led the ACC in steals and assists in her sophomore season and earned first-team All-ACC Tournament accolades. As a junior she lit up the scoreboard in the 2000 ACC championship game with 31 points, including seven 3-pointers, and was named MVP.

"Nikki is a package player," UNC coach Sylvia Hatchell said. "She brings so much to the court. Everyone loves playing with her."

Although the awards kept piling up, Teasley was struggling. Per Hatchell's advice, she took a seven-game leave of absence from the team in January of her junior year.

"It was to the point where I was hurting the team," Teasley said. "I was showing up to practices late, or I wasn't working out. When I left the first time I thought I was better, so I came back, and the same thing happened again."

In her first game back on Jan. 30, 2000, Teasley scored 11 points in the second half to lead her team to a win against Maryland. But off the court, her world was starting to devolve.

"It was to a point where I wanted to hurt myself, put myself out of commission for six to eight weeks," Teasley said. "Something to get away from everything. It was that difficult. I was failing all my classes; I wasn't going to class at all. In basketball, I was playing

awful. Everything was going bad at once, and I just couldn't take it. I just said, 'I'm gonna do this, and then I'm not gonna have to worry about anything.' I could just stay in my room."

"Then God just said to take a second and chill out for a minute. So that's exactly what I did. That's exactly how it happened. If it got to the point where I wanted to hurt myself, then it's not worth it. To take my life, or to hurt myself - that is just not worth it."

So Teasley sat down with her coaches, and after a supportive discussion decided she would not return for the 2000-01 season.

Instead, she would go home and try to finding the happiness she had lost.

Teasley relished her first few weeks at home in Maryland. She rested and loved the fact that if she wanted to, she could spend the entire day around her house with nothing to worry about. No school, no basketball, no worries.

Those vacation days didn't last too long. Before she knew it, Teasley was juggling two jobs and wondering how she ever took what she had for granted.

"You don't realize what you have until it's gone," Teasley said. "They do so much for you here at school. You just don't even know."

Teasley spent her days in construction gear, helping pave driveways and alleys, and worked nights in the children's department at a local J.C. Penney. Nikki Teasley the basketball star didn't exist for her co-workers and friends from home. To them she was simply Michelle, her given name.

She began to see a therapist, whom she still sees at least twice a week. Although her sessions were tough, Teasley said she needed them desperately.

"Without my therapist, I don't know if I would be back here today," Teasley said.

Self-reflection, combined with therapy, helped Teasley regain the focus and composure that were missing from her life during her junior year. And although she knew it would be a difficult journey, Teasley said she knew in her heart it was time to go back. She wanted to tie up loose ends on the basketball court and earn a degree - something no one else in her family has done.

She had spent a year searching herself, looking for an answer. With a smile stretching from ear to ear, she admitted the answer existed right where she started.

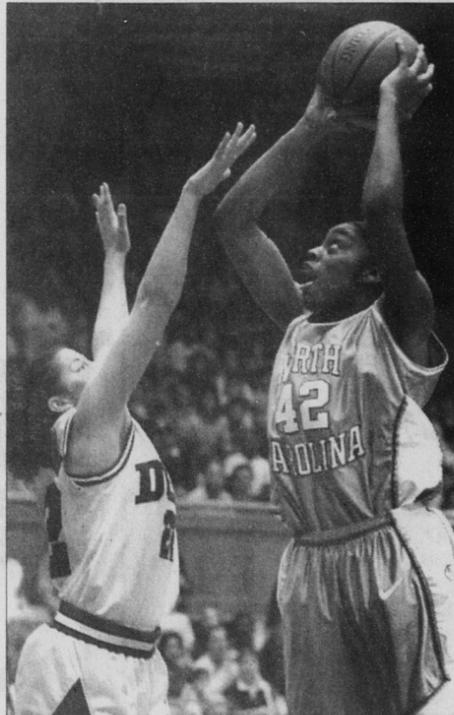
This summer, as Teasley walked back into Carmichael Auditorium as a player for the first time in a year, she wasn't sure what kind of emotions she would feel.

She slowly sauntered out to center court, where she had stared intimidatingly into opponents' eyes so many times before. Teasley closed her eyes and let it all soak in.

As she opened them, she visualized the night of Jan. 22, 1999, when North Carolina hosted Duke. Although the Tar Heels lost that game, they packed the stands with a school-record sellout crowd of 10,000. Emotions ran high during the game, and the intensity was not lost on the 6-foot sophomore.

It was easy to hear the screaming crowd. She could see a fan in every seat. And as she recalled how good it felt to see such a response to an often-overlooked women's basketball team, Teasley knew everything was going to be all right.

She was truly back. And, more importantly, she was ready.



Can They Keep Their Streaks Alive?

Part of the North Carolina mystique is its continued success in the ACC and NCAA. This year's team already has the dubious honor of being the first UNC squad not picked by the media to finish in the top three in the ACC. What other records could fall?

- 27 consecutive trips to the NCAA Tournament, dating back to 1975 and including two national championships, four title games, nine Final Fours and 13 Elite Eights
- 31 consecutive 21-win seasons with a combined 820-218 (.790) record and only five with double-digit losses
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