

# All in the Family

BY AARON FITT  
SENIOR WRITER

Jason Brown was at home with his wife, Tayeashai, getting ready to go to football practice. The phone rang. It was his mother.

She asked him for North Carolina coach John Bunting's phone number.

When Brown arrived at practice that day – Sunday, Sept. 21 – Bunting took his junior center aside.

Deborah Brown had asked Bunting to give her son some news because she didn't want to tell him over the phone.

Jason's brother, Lunsford B. Brown Jr., had been killed in Iraq at the age of 27.

A member of the 25th Military Intelligence Brigade, Lunsford Brown was killed the previous day when two mortar shells struck a U.S. base outside a prison on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Bunting and Corey Holliday, an assistant athletics director for football student-athlete development, drove Jason home to Henderson after giving him the news.

"My mom also wanted Coach Bunting to bring me home because she didn't feel that it would be safe for me to drive after that, and it really wasn't," Brown said. "I know for a fact I wouldn't have been able to drive, as blind as I was from all my tears. I'm glad that Coach Bunting was there to give his support to me and my family."

Much is made of the UNC football program being like a second family to players, and Brown found that in his time of need, his second family was there for him.

His teammates have given him cards, smiles and "heart-warming embraces." Running back Jacque Lewis, whose grandfather was buried the day Lunsford Brown died, has given Jason some particularly poignant consolation.

"Me and Jason, we're going to go on," Lewis said. "We're going to be strong about this. God has a plan for everyone, and he took Jason's brother and my grandfather for a reason."

Quarterback Darian Durant lost his stepmother during the 2001 season. He said the best thing teammates can do is to try to keep Brown's mind off his grief.

And he said the best thing Brown can do is exactly what he has done.

"Seems like he's handling it well," Durant said. "He's handling it better than I would, I'll tell you that. He's big on faith. When you're big on faith, you realize that death is just a part of life, and that person is in a better place. Him and his family are real strong about that."

Never was the Browns' strength more evident than at Lunsford's funeral on Sept. 28. Bunting, several coaches and a number of players attended, including the entire offensive line.

"It was unbelievable," said UNC right tackle Skip Seagraves. "Real uplifting – it wasn't what I expected. I've been to a few funerals before, and they seemed to be sad and down, but this funeral was trying to celebrate his brother's life. There was singing, clapping.

"They're going to be fine just because they have a real tight family. Real good people."

But Lunsford was a vital part of that family. Jason and Lunsford's father worked in Washington, D.C. and didn't spend a lot of time at the family's home in Henderson.

"When my father was away, my brother stepped in and kind of played the domineering role, you know stereotypical of all older brothers," Jason said. "He beat the mess out of me all the time, but he always let me know how much he loved me. He was just the most loving person in the world.

"My family, we are a very close-knit group, a hugging family, a kissing family. Me and my brother, we've never been ashamed to kiss each other on the cheek in public, just embrace each other. There was just a very, very strong bond. Unbreakable."

Jason remembers when he found out his brother would be sent to Iraq. Lunsford had been stationed in Germany starting in March 2002, and he was deployed to Kuwait this March.

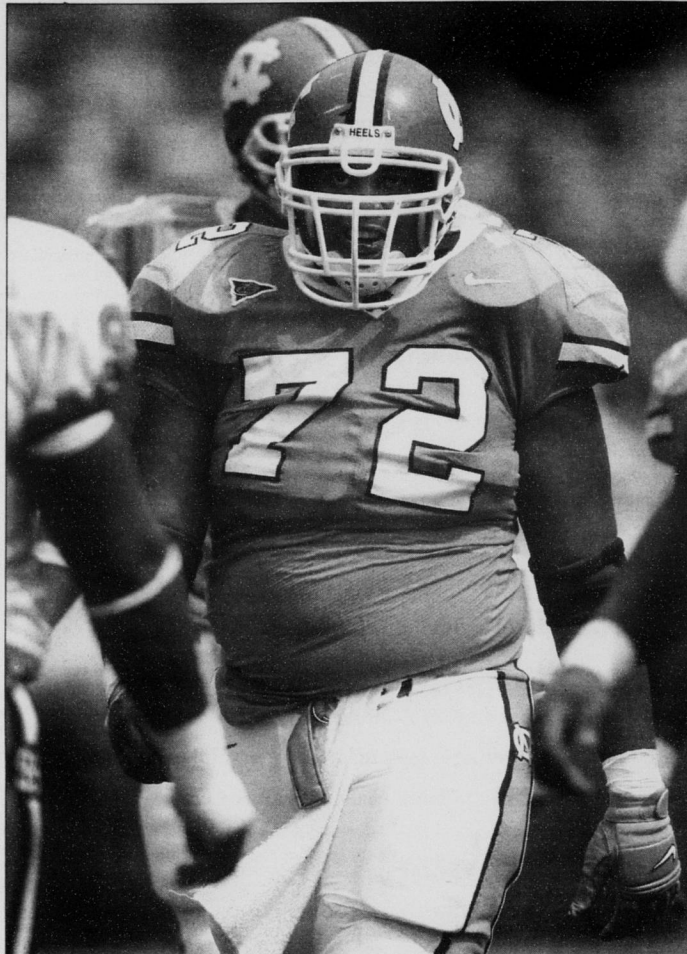
Jason was told not to worry about his brother. "They promised us it wasn't going to be one of those bad wars, as they say, where we lose a lot of people," he said. "My brother was in intelligence. He tried to ensure me and promise me he'd be out of harm's way, whenever he talked to me through e-mail. That calmed my nerves a lot, just believing that."

But Jason soon learned just how precious and fragile life is. Since his brother's death, Jason said he has made an effort to be more appreciative of everyone in his life – from his close friends and family to acquaintances. He said he's realized that everyone has an impact on his life.

Both Jason and Bunting also believe other UNC players have drawn important lessons from Lunsford Brown's death.

"I think a lot of kids learned an awful lot about something – about a family, about a support system, about the way people think in overcoming tragedies like that," Bunting said. "It was very touching. Very emotional."

It's still very emotional for Jason, even though he's handled it exceptionally well. Seagraves said he didn't expect to see Jason on Tuesday after Lunsford's death, but his cell phone rang five minutes before his first class of the day. It was Jason, saying he was going to class and then to practice that afternoon. He was in the lineup against N.C. State on Sept. 27.



DTH/BRIAN CASSELLA

UNC center Jason Brown will be on the field for the Tar Heels, even while coping with the loss of his brother.

But that doesn't mean Jason has blocked out his pain. He draws from a pool of memories about his brother and keeps pictures of Lunsford close at hand. He said he will never forget Lunsford's most defining characteristic: his heart.

"He's always had a giving heart," Jason said. "To some it might have been perceived as being naive or gullible because he was the type of person that would give you his last dollar, if he had

it, no matter the consequences. He was just that selfless. My mother used to get on him. She'd be like, 'You need to be careful, because people might take advantage of you.'

"But it was just in his heart, and he couldn't help it. And it was for the good, because that was his gift from God, the gift of giving. Nobody could take that away from him. Nobody."

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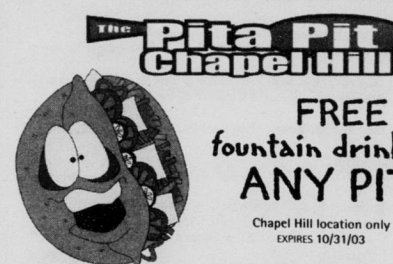
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