



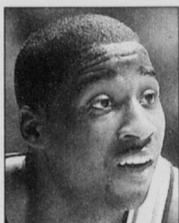
DTH/BRIAN CASSELLA

year's team, the junior class will assume the leadership role.



DTH FILE PHOTO

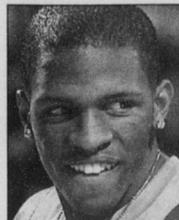
possession of the ball in a loss to Wake Forest on Feb. 7, 2002.



Point guard **Ray Felton**, coming off a season in which he averaged 12.9 points per game, was named the ACC Preseason Player of the Year.



Sophomore center **Sean May**, could emerge as one of the nation's best big men this season. He averaged 11.4 points and 8.1 rebounds in 11 games last year.



Talented shooter **Rashad McCants** set a North Carolina school freshman record with 17.0 points per game last season and was MVP of the Preseason NIT.

TAKING the LEAD

Junior class ready to step into spotlight

BY AARON FITT SENIOR WRITER

They're supposed to be glum. They've been through the two most tumultuous seasons in the history of North Carolina basketball.

They were here for 8-20. They watched as three teammates from that 2001-02 squad transferred. They gave serious thought to transferring themselves.

They were here as a hot start quickly became a disappointment last year, and speculation about their coach's future abounded. They saw that coach, Matt Doherty, shown the door. They survived the coaching search-turned-media blitzkrieg that followed.

After all that, Jawad Williams, Jackie Manuel and Melvin Scott should have emerged as surly veterans, their spirits battered from trying circumstances, their thoughts bitter from intense fan and media scrutiny.

They're supposed to be demoralized. And at 3 p.m. on Oct. 30, an hour before the start of practice, Williams and Manuel sat in two chairs on the Smith Center court, talking little, their shoulders slumped, looking every bit like the weary elder statesmen of their reputations.

Then some made-up song in Scott's raspy, high-pitched voice echoed from the tunnel, and a moment later Scott himself jogged onto the court to join the other two juniors, while singing his "little introduction music."

Manuel and Williams dropped their heads and laughed. The three were back together, and the mood had changed instantly.

"People look at us and think, 'Man, they're crazy,'" Scott said. "With all we've been through, they think we're supposed to be, like —"

"Sad as hell," Manuel interrupted.

"When we were 8-20, I walked with my head up high when I went home," Scott said.

"I still was at North Carolina," Williams said.

"Yeah," Scott added. "Nobody from Baltimore ever came here, that I knew of."

"Or from Cleveland," Williams said. "Regardless of how the year went, we had a lot to be happy about."

"I feel like I'm blessed," Manuel blurted.

So much for the public's perception.

The fact is, the three talented juniors from Doherty's first recruiting class are doing just fine. They're a little hardened, a little less trusting than they used to be, but fine. Rather than scarring them, their experiences prepared them to lead one of the nation's elite programs back to prominence.

The Tar Heels have no scholarship seniors, so all of a sudden Williams, Manuel and Scott have no choice but to lead. But responsibility is not something the trio shies away from. On the contrary, a sense of duty played a large part in the decision of each not to transfer.

"We were here when all this stuff started falling apart. We're going to be here to bring it back," Williams said. "I think this program depends on us to be here. We're the oldest on this team so we have to be the ones to lead them back. That's the reason why we're still here."

That's why they're here, even after 8-20. As difficult as last season was for the players, it didn't compare to the previous year. Just how much worse was the threesome's freshman campaign?

"The worst," Williams said.

"A lot of guys would have quit," Scott said. "Packed their bags. Transferred."

"We stayed here and stuck it out," Williams added. "Tried to help the program get back to where it was. We could have easily left and went our separate ways, but I don't think that would have been good to run away from our problems, instead of staying here and trying to solve them."

"That's teaching us everyday life things," Scott said. "Off the court, how to be tough. Because life is serious. Death's got to be easy, because life is hard. You can put that in the paper."

The juniors still have some resentment about things that have been printed in the papers the last two seasons. Before Raymond Felton, Sean May and Rashad McCants came

along, Williams, Scott and Manuel were billed as UNC's saviors. When the program struggled, those three absorbed the brunt of the criticism.

Williams is too soft. Scott is too small to play shooting guard but can't play point guard. Manuel is too awkward on offense.

"I really use it as motivation," Williams said. "I think about it another way, like, I wish I met the person who wrote this. I'd take them on the court and destroy their ass, that's the way I feel sometimes."

"It pisses you off," Manuel said.

"Because some of the people who write these damn articles haven't ever touched a basketball a day in their lives," Williams continued. "They don't even know anything, they just go off what another man said. I respect certain writers that have been around the game and probably even played the game. But a lot of these guys have never played the game, fat dudes sitting on the couch all day watching TV, thinking they know the game."

Williams stopped, as if finished, but he had more to say.

"I read articles, saying 'Jawad Williams is too soft at times.' I'd call Jawad Williams consistent. I was going to give you 15 points and six boards every night out. I could care less, but like I said, if one of them writers gets out on this court, I'll destroy their ass."

By the end of that rant, Scott and Manuel were snickering. When Williams finished, Manuel half-covered his mouth and said to Williams in a lilting, sing-song voice, "You're in trou-ble, you're in trou-ble."

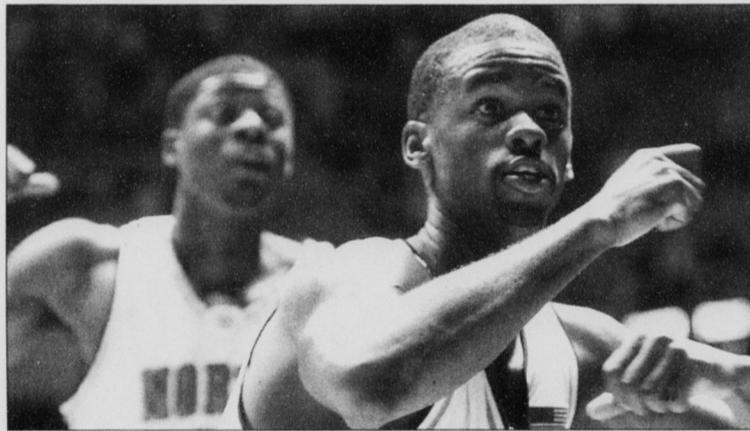
All three then lost it, leaning off their chairs and laughing at Williams' non-diplomatic comments. Sure, they've got some leftover bitterness, but these guys can still laugh at themselves.

The three players started laughing at each other — and bonding with each other — the first time they met before their freshman year.

"I was excited to meet different people, to be around these guys," Manuel said. "Even though I felt like they were clowns too. And I'm pretty sure they felt the same way about me."

They've always been able to laugh at themselves, even when times were hard. It's a big reason they've been able to endure the trials of the past two years.

"I knew they were clowns," Scott said. "For me, I haven't ever been close to anybody outside of Baltimore, country guys, or guys from the Midwest, or something like that. So when I heard Jackie talk, I was like, 'He sounds funny.' When he heard me talk, he was like 'Man, he sounds funny, too.' And with that, another laughing fit broke out."



DTH FILE PHOTO

Junior shooting guard Melvin Scott (right) reacts to a referee's call as classmate Jackie Manuel (left) looks on. The junior class has become a tight-knit group since the turmoil-filled season of 2001-02.

A TRIO OF RARE TALENTS

BY RANDY WELLINGTON STAFF WRITER

The only glimmer of hope for any North Carolina fan lost in the deepening doldrums of the 2001-02 season was the buzz about the incoming freshman class.

The best point guard recruit, the best shooting guard recruit and the second-best power forward recruit in the country were all going to be Tar Heels.

Now, in their second season together, Raymond Felton, Rashad McCants and Sean May should be as good as any trio in college basketball.

And the onus is on them to make the 8-20 season of two years ago a distant memory.

Felton was the most consistent of the three last year, earning third-team All-ACC honors and finishing second in the conference with 6.74 assists per game.

This year, the pressure has increased. The media named him ACC Preseason Player of the Year, and his new coach, Roy Williams, has put Felton in charge of Williams' breakneck offense.

"I do believe that Raymond Felton

has a motor that can really push it," Williams said. "That's the way I want to run."

Felton's motor may be running on empty at times this season because he's the only true point guard on the team. But Williams will compensate by changing the way he uses timeouts.

"The people in Kansas accused me of saving my timeouts because the other team had scored eight or 10 in a row, and I'd look down to see if my socks were on straight, because I am not calling a timeout," Williams said.

"But this year, if Raymond gives me the tired signal, I am going to call a timeout."

The most electric of the group last season was McCants, who led the ACC in scoring for the first two months of the season before losing his starting job against Wake Forest on Feb. 2.

After scoring 13 points against Wake, he scored two against Duke and zero versus Florida State the next two games, his only games all season without double figures in points.

Despite the frustration of the benching and the ensuing slump, he finished

the season strong and ended up as the team's leading scorer with 17 points per game, seventh in the ACC.

Classmate David Noel was the player who replaced McCants in the starting lineup. Noel, a former walk-on, is a perfect contrast to the flashy McCants but is effusive in his praise of his teammate's offensive skills.

The member of the trio who has gone through the most turmoil is Sean May, who missed most of last season with a broken foot and then faced accusations that his father had kept him from returning to the team.

This season, the foot is healthy, and his play this summer at Michael Jordan's summer camp, where McCants and May were counselors, has McCants excited.

"He destroyed every single big man (at the Jordan camp)," McCants said. "His 'D' is phenomenal."

The Tar Heels were 7-2 when May got injured but finished the season 19-16, showing how important May's health is to their success. To avoid another injury and increase his agility, May lost 10 pounds in the off-season, going from

270 to 260.

"His quality is that he can run the floor," Melvin Scott said. "And that's what separates him from other big guys."

There have been great UNC duos like Jamison and Carter and Stackhouse and Wallace.

But a trio with this much talent is unprecedented, and the expectations match the talent level.

Both of the aforementioned duos led their team to the Final Four in their sophomore seasons.

Felton, the best of this year's sophomores, could be a top-five pick in the 2004 NBA Draft, but this year, he's concentrating on his Tar Heel legacy.

"The NBA is not in my mind right now," Felton said. "I'm just focusing on this season and trying to lead my team to many victories and, possibly, to the Final Four."

It's a bold goal, especially for a team with so little postseason experience.

Said Williams, "There's nobody on our squad that's ever played in the freakin' NCAA Tournament."

But he has three players who have the talent to change that.

"There's nobody on our squad that's ever played in the NCAA Tournament."

ROY WILLIAMS, NORTH CAROLINA COACH

SOPHOMORES