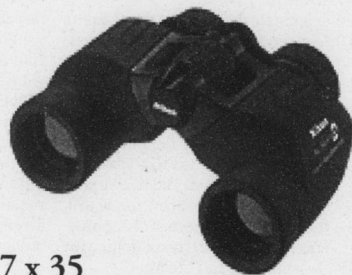


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Lack of star aids women's lacrosse team

BY MARY DUBY
ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

The chatter of indistinguishable voices rose from the practice turf at Finley Fields as the North Carolina women's lacrosse team held an intrasquad scrimmage.

Occasionally, a "Who's open" could be picked out from the noise, but it was impossible to single out the owner of the voice.

That scene characterizes a UNC team that won't pinpoint a single star player in a season in which depth could be the key factor in grabbing a bid to the NCAA Tournament, which has eluded the squad for two years.

UNC returns nine of its 2004 starters and seven of its top eight scorers. But the team won't field any All-Americans and graduated its two-year leading scorer, Beth Ames.

"The strength in our team is that we don't have one star," said senior Gina Allen. "Our team is a whole team, everyone's stepping up. Each game, we're going to have different people scoring; we're going to have different people playing defensively. I don't think it's going to be a one- or two-name team."

Despite ending last season with a record of 9-7 and a victory against then-No. 9 Dartmouth in its final game, UNC didn't get an at-large bid from the NCAA Tournament selection committee.

"(It felt like) a stab in the stomach," said senior Ilsa Leon. But she related the situation to a quote from the movie "Coach Carter": "You guys deserve it, but they're not going to give it to you — you have to earn it."

Looking back, Coach Jenny Levy said her team didn't get the job done during the regular season in 2004, especially in the one-goal games. The Tar Heels were 1-3 in matches decided by two goals or fewer, including two losses to Duke.

"We've focused on that a lot — learning how to win at all costs in practice — be that margin of victory, be that tipping point. Tip the team over into the win column," she said.

UNC's tipping point likely will be that the bench — and the starting lineup, for that matter — provides plenty of options.

The Tar Heels had to rebuild from scratch after losing 85 percent of the

scoring and its entire midfield after the 2002 season. The wealth of seasoned and talented upperclassmen this season has allowed the team to teach the freshman class, but not rely on them as in years past.

"We can hold kids more accountable for knowing what they need to know and executing what they need to execute," Levy said. "That's been a really big difference. No starting position is sacred. If you come out and coast, you're going to get outplayed."

On the attack, North Carolina fields a well-balanced corps with a lot of flexibility. Levy said the team has been scoring more goals in practice than in the last two years. The forerunners on the attack will be senior Allison Higgins — who ranked third on the team last year with 23 goals — senior Nicki Barnes-Wagner and sophomore Chrissy Rude, who led the team with eight assists in 2004.

The midfield fields deep experience in returning juniors Melissa McCarthy and Brooke Dieringer, who ranked second and fourth on the team in scoring with 24 and 16 goals, respectively. Allen should start on the defensive wing of the midfield next to her sophomore sister, Jess Allen, who also led the team in assists last year.

"I think I have one of the best midfields in the country," Levy said.

The defense will be anchored by sophomore goalie Kristen Hordy, who recorded 97 saves last season. The backfield also will benefit from the return of Lindsey Stover, who is coming off her third injury. Levy also has been moving players because of a variety of talents at the position.

UNC hopes to hit its stride early in the season, as the team faces seven teams that competed in last year's NCAA Tournament in its first eight games, including Northwestern in the Feb. 20 season opener and defending national champion, Virginia, in March.

"We just have to take care of the regular season and not bank on the last game to get into the tournament," Higgins said. "Playing tough players and really good teams, the best way to show that you're really good is by beating them."