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Left: North Carolina center Sean May (42) scored 26 points and 10 rebounds during the NCAA championship game, a 75-70 win for the Tar Heels against Illinois. May earned Final Four Most Outstanding Player honors for his efforts. Right: With the victory, the Tar Heels captured their first national title since 1993 and their fourth NCAA crown in school history, culminating a precipitous rise from the depths of an 8-20 season three years ago.

THE UNDISPUTED CHAMPIONS

BY MARY DUBY
ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

On Nov. 19, 2004, North Carolina didn't look like national champions.

It didn't look like a team that deserved to be ranked in the top 10, let alone one that warranted a No. 4 preseason ranking.

But almost five months later, the Tar Heels didn't resemble the team that had suffered an embarrassing season-opening loss to Santa Clara, as they dramatically defeated Illinois 75-70 in the national championship game.

"It's finally over," said senior guard Melvin Scott. "We finally did it. My dream has finally come true."

Scott, along with fellow seniors Jawad Williams and Jackie Manuel, suffered through the worst season in school history.

And while three of their teammates transferred after the 8-20 debacle, the trio pulled themselves out of the basement of college basketball and earned North Carolina its fourth NCAA title.

"We finally did it," said Jawad Williams, with a freshly cut net around his neck at the Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis. "I told people I didn't want a net until we won a national championship, and if we didn't win

it I just wasn't going to get a net. But I had faith in my team that we would get here and we would win."

And the Tar Heels finally gave Roy Williams the title that had eluded him in a quartet of Final Fours during his 15-year stint at Kansas.

"It's very gratifying to see Coach smile and to know that people aren't going to be able to criticize him anymore because he's finally got that one championship ring," said junior center Sean May. "It doesn't define anybody's career, but it will take a lot of pressure off him."

May led UNC throughout its title campaign and was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player after scoring 26 points and grabbing 10 rebounds against the Illini on April 4. He ended the season with a double-double average.

And while May was the standout, UNC still quieted the naysayers who claimed that the Tar Heels were a collection of highly talented athletes who didn't play together.

"I think we came out tonight and we proved that we are a team, we are together," said junior point guard Raymond Felton, who averaged 12.9 points and 6.9 assists

per game for the season.

"Who's going to win a national championship if they're not together? We also are talented, I believe in that part, but we also are together, too — as one."

That togetherness partly stemmed from Rashad McCants, who sacrificed his own scoring for a more team-oriented approach. He finished the season averaging 16.0 points after putting up 20.0 per game last year.

North Carolina also benefited from the emergence of freshman Marvin Williams, who filled a crucial third spot in the front-court rotation and enabled Roy Williams to run a deeper bench. The depth contributed the Tar Heels' quick transition offense, which averaged 88.0 points per game, outscoring their opponents by 17.8 points.

It's doubtful that North Carolina will put up such numbers next year, as the team is losing its top seven scorers. Scott, Jawad Williams and Manuel are graduating, and McCants, May, Felton and Marvin Williams have decided to depart early for the NBA.

But the remaining players have confidence in the program's future.

"Don't even worry, we're gonna make it," crooned David Noel while his teammates

sang backup at the team's post-title welcome back celebration April 5.

The "Tar Heel Travelin' National Champions" — as Noel dubbed them — finished 31-4 and went 14-2 in the ACC en route to a regular season conference title.

The only nontournament ACC losses came at the hands of Wake Forest and Duke. And while the elimination of round-robin league play denied UNC a chance for a rematch with the Demon Deacons, North Carolina avenged its Feb. 9 one-point loss to the Blue Devils with a 75-73 victory Mar. 6 that drew throngs of fans to a fiery Franklin Street celebration.

The bonfires and hysteria reignited less than a month later after the Tar Heels finally reclaimed the sport's ultimate crown.

"For me, it's very gratifying," May said. "For many years down the line, (Roy Williams will) always talk about this 2005 team, how special we were and the things we did. How through adversity we stuck together, even when the outside world didn't really give us a fair shot."

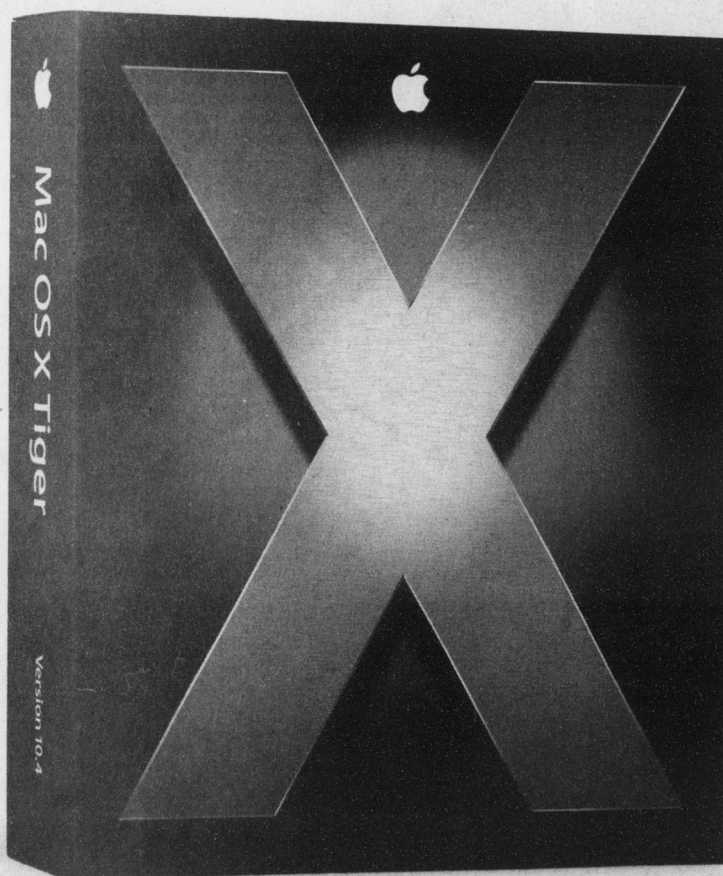
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