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ACC teams ought to play twice

The last time the ACC got it right was 1996.

That was the last time field hockey teams in the country's best conference played each other twice in a season.

Under the current system, the six ACC-member schools meet once in the regular season and only under the rarest circumstance do they face off that second time.

On Friday afternoon that exception to the rule produced a double-overtime thriller that highlighted the need to revert back to the way the conference scheduled its season nearly a decade ago.

North Carolina's 3-2 loss to Wake Forest marked the only occasion this season that two ACC teams played each other for a second time.

From 1994 to 1996 the ACC experimented with the double round-robin system that resulted in each team playing eight conference games per year (Boston College wasn't a member at the time).

During those three years ACC teams acquired increased skill and big-game experience from playing more games against top-notch competition — themselves.

No surprise then that in two of those three years the national champion came from the Atlantic Coast Conference.

And it should come as even less of a surprise that the conference's biggest proponent of a return to the double round-robin system is North Carolina head coach Karen Shelton. Her Tar Heels won the national championship in both 1995 and 1996.

"My feeling is, you play good teams you're going to be better," Shelton said. "I've always been a proponent of a strong schedule. No matter who they are, I want to play them."

In addition to better preparing teams and producing more classic contests such as Friday's epic, the system saves teams time and money by playing more games within the conference's geographic reach, provides more accurate seeding for the ACC tournament and lends increased credibility to the conference's regular season champion.

With teams only meeting once during the year the ACC regular season champion typically has a 4-0 or 3-1 record. Even though the conference is now six teams strong with the Eagles in tow, it's tough to justify awarding a title when only five games are played. Even ACC football teams play eight conference games.

"It makes the regular season champion more meaningful," Shelton said. "(Now) when you say you're regular season ACC champs, it doesn't mean that much."

When the Tar Heels and Demon Deacons met Friday it was not only a battle of two of the premier field hockey teams in the nation, it was a meeting of two like-minded coaches.

Shelton and her Wake Forest counterpart Jennifer Averill are the two supporters of the return to the double round-robin system — which explains why the rivals are the last remaining holdouts that elect to play each other twice in a season.

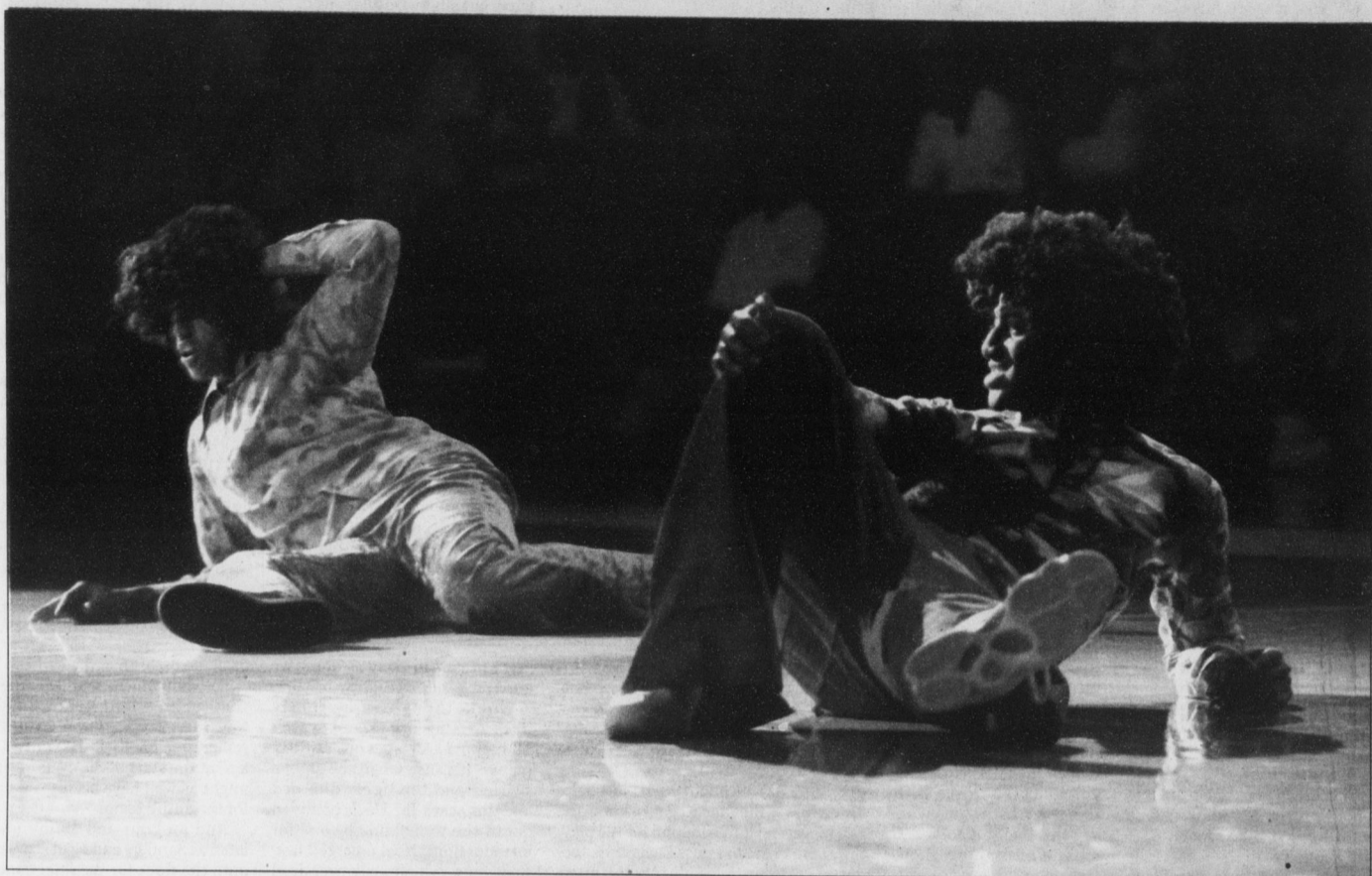
Each off-season the issue comes to a vote and is regularly turned down by the other ACC schools.

In their short-sighted reasoning they believe a double round-robin schedule will force ACC teams to beat up on each other and result in more teams having less impressive records.

But if a second slate of games proves to be as exhilarating as Friday's tilt, it's hard to imagine any school opposing the system.

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THE FIRST BIG DANCE



Freshmen Danny Green (left) and Mike Copeland get down to the Jackson 5's "ABC" during Late Night with Roy on Friday. The night included dance numbers, skits and a brief scrimmage. DTH/RICKY LEUNG

BY DEREK HOWLES ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

Surrounded by 18 million cubic feet of blueness, beneath 95 years of history and amid an estimated 13,000 vocal cords ready to burst at Late Night with Roy, one thing was readily apparent.

The Smithsonian's not the only place to see the Spirit of St. Louis.

So at 10:54 p.m. Friday, after a 2004-05 highlight video finished playing and as a crowd that filled the lower bowl and checkered the upper level of the Smith Center roared its approval, a spotlight swung its gaze toward the top of the west end.

And there, all by itself, tumbled down a rectangle

of white fabric that read, "University of North Carolina, 33-4, 2005 National Champions."

"Coach said he had a surprise for us, but we really didn't know," said David Noel. "He let the cat out of the bag earlier today, and when we saw it we were just like, 'Aww man.'"

But with a team that consists of five freshmen, including a kid appropriately named Green, and five others who, save for Noel, have played only the role of little-used understudy, no one's expecting to see any new banners in the rafters this season.

Unless, that is, they hang the

"David Noel might go down as the greatest Late Night with Roy performer ever."

ROY WILLIAMS, UNC COACH

honored jerseys for Felton, May and McCants. Or unless someone starts handing out awards for the theatrical side of sports — Tonys in high-tops, if you will. Because heavens to the '85 Bears if this "dadgum" bunch of backups and beginners wouldn't already deserve a "frickin'" banner of their own if they did.

As has become their custom for the three years Williams has been in

charge, the Tar Heels put on quite a show. They danced. They hammed it up. And they performed several gut-busting skits, including one in which Quentin Thomas went 1-on-1 with a cardboard cutout of Marvin Williams with the song "Lonely" playing in the background.

"We started Sunday night and

SEE LATE NIGHT, PAGE 11

UNC yields to Deacons, downs Cavs

BY SAM SHEPARD ASSISTANT SPORTS SATURDAY EDITOR

Though the North Carolina field hockey team was unable to will itself to victory in Friday's rematch against Wake Forest, it realized something nearly as important: that it can go stick-to-stick with the best team in the country for 70 minutes — and more.

The No. 4 Tar Heels fought a rigorous battle against the top-ranked Demon Deacons before losing, 3-2, in double overtime at Henry Stadium.

"If we keep improving, the next time we play them maybe the outcome is different — and that gives you hope," said Coach Karen Shelton. "And Wake, you know, doesn't want to see us again. They don't want to see us

in the NCAA Tournament."

And Virginia must not have wanted to see the Tar Heels on Sunday in Charlottesville, as UNC manhandled the Cavaliers, 3-1, to improve to 12-3 on the season.

Two weeks ago, UNC (12-3, 2-2 in the ACC) was shut out by Wake, 2-0. It was the Tar Heels' second consecutive ACC loss and marked

the first time in history they had started 0-2 in the conference.

But after three straight victories by a combined score of 14-1,

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The Tar Heels' Leslie Barrows (18) squares off against Wake Forest's Ariel Meyers (17) on Friday at Henry Stadium. UNC lost the game 3-2. DTH/RICKY LEUNG

UNC has the 'Wright' stuff

BY DEREK HOWLES ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

A lot of kids in blue polo shirts and braces must have walked into the Smith Center on Friday night.

But only one of those kids sat directly behind the North Carolina bench for Late Night with Roy.

And only one of those kids was a high school senior who had dozens of shrieking fans holding up a makeshift UNC jersey with his name on the back.

It seems he liked the idea so

much he decided to trade in that makeshift jersey for a real one.

Dave Telep, Scout.com's national recruiting director, reported Sunday afternoon that Brandon Wright, a 6-foot-9, 200-pound power forward from Brentwood, Tenn., has committed verbally to UNC.

Scout.com ranked Wright as the best power forward in the 2006 class — and the fifth-best prep senior in the entire country.

The commitment gives Coach Roy Williams arguably the top incoming freshman class in

America for next season, as Wright joins point guard Tywon Lawson, shooting guard Wayne Ellington, centers Deon Thompson and Alex Stepheson and small forward William Graves.

Lawson and Ellington also are rated by Scout.com as the best high school players at their respective positions, and both centers fall in the top 60 overall.

Ohio State, with center Greg Oden and two more top-25 recruits, previously had the best

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Tar Heels spike 2 foes

Volleyball now shares No. 1 spot

BY KRISTIN PRATT STAFF WRITER

When the North Carolina volleyball team took and left the court this weekend, they were accompanied by the thundering roll of momentum.

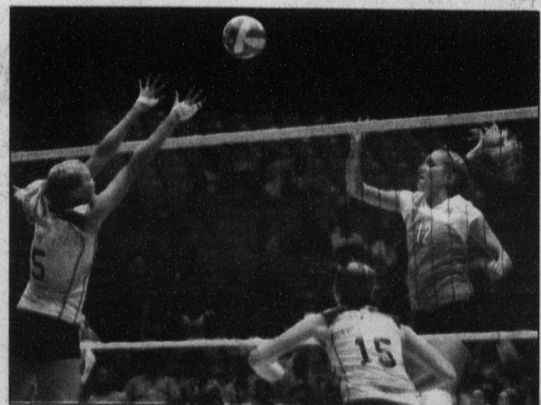
That thunder can be heard all the way to College Park, Md. now.

The Tar Heels, tied with

VOLLEYBALL Maryland atop the ACC, have gained some major footing in the standings with two

weekend. North Carolina (13-6, 8-1 in the ACC) earned that momentum by dominating Georgia Tech (9-7, 5-2) and Clemson (9-7, 4-4), and now are on a six-game winning streak.

And those kinds of dominating performances don't come



North Carolina's Amy Beaver (12) spikes the ball as Georgia Tech's Nikki Kaminskis (5) goes for the block Friday night at the Smith Center. DTH/RICKY LEUNG

easy for the Tar Heels. Heading into the weekend they were coming off three five-game battles and two four-game matches.

"It gives us victory confidence, to win 3-0 against two really good opponents," said Coach Joe Sagula.

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ONLINE

- Jenna Long advances to semis of Regional Championships
- Freshman comes through at outside hitter for Tar Heels
- Friday is a day of many firsts for UNC field hockey