

Wide receivers taking reins as gridiron gods

Not too long ago, football was a game that banked its star power on quarterbacks and running backs — they were the ones featured on highlight reels and post-game interviews.

The NFL's legendary class of 1983 ushered in the likes of John Elway, Dan Marino and Jim Kelly. Eric Dickerson was selected in that '83 draft pool and was later followed by running back greats Emmitt Smith and Barry Sanders. But take a look around the football landscape today and you'll notice a seismic shift when it comes to media attention and general fan interest.

Wide receivers have very recently become the loud, aggressive, self-promoting face of the sport.



MATT ESTREICH
STREICH ZONE

Peruse today's headlines and you'll need worse eyesight than a World Series umpire to miss the Terrell Owens saga in Philadelphia.

Joe Horn made a call on a cell phone hidden in the back of the end zone at Giants Stadium after scoring a touchdown last season.

In case you're wondering, he had a phone stashed away at each end of the field because he wasn't sure which end zone he'd be in when he scored.

The Bengals' Chad Johnson has a checklist hanging in his locker that keeps track of all the defensive backs unable to cover him. A shot of Johnson marking off his latest victim is consistently the most sought after photo op in Cincinnati after games.

And of course there's Oakland's Randy Moss. In addition to trying to run over a police officer with his Lexus, Randy's greatest hits include squirting a ref with a water bottle and telling reporters that he only plays hard when he feels like it.

There are bigger stars in the game, but guys like Tom Brady, LaDainian Tomlinson and Peyton Manning prefer to blend in with their teammates rather than clamor for attention.

But when teams are sputtering and need a lift, they reward their brash receivers with an opportunity to make the game-defining play — often landing them on SportsCenter and further fueling their attention lust.

The trend is even reaching the college game — minus the big-league attitudes, thankfully. Look no further than Kenan Stadium.

The Tar Heels are stacked at running back but lean heavily on their wide receivers when they need a big play.

Jesse Holley pulled in eight catches for 125 yards in Saturday's win over Boston College. On a day when the offense couldn't register a touchdown, Holley was one of the unit's few bright spots.

Turn on any local sportscast and Holley is much more likely to be the sound bite you hear instead of quarterback Matt Baker or running back Ronnie McGill.

When UNC lost to Miami two weeks ago, wide receiver Jarwarski Pollock's dropped touchdown in the second quarter was widely regarded as the play that cost the Tar Heels the game.

College receiving corps, including North Carolina's, generally have avoided the me-first mindset pervading the professional ranks, but the emergence of the wide receiver as the game's glitziest position is established.

Atlanta's Mike Vick and USC's Reggie Bush are notable exceptions to this trend, but for the most part, receivers are stealing the spotlight from their offensive counterparts.

Football's biggest playmakers no longer come from under center or in the backfield.

Here's hoping the modesty and sportsmanship receivers exhibit in college carries over to their pro careers.

But then again, in his second year in the NFL, Keyshawn Johnson wrote a book called "Just Give Me The Damn Ball!"

Contact Matt Estreich at estreich@email.unc.edu.

Heels fast break to victory

BY DANIEL MALLOY
SPORTS EDITOR

From the opening tip the North Carolina women's basketball team trapped and pressed, hustled and dove.

The Tar Heels, dubbed "the fastest team in America" last year by ESPN, showed that the new year would bring the same philosophy in their 80-57 exhibition victory against Athletes In Action on Tuesday night in Carmichael Auditorium.

It was the final tune-up for North Carolina before its season opener against Davidson on Nov. 18, and when Coach Sylvia Hatchell was asked if the frenetic pace would be seen during the regular season, she responded: "And more."

UNC's pressing and trapping created plenty of opportunities, but the Tar Heels — who Hatchell called perhaps the best shooting team she ever has had at the team's media day — weren't able to convert most of their first half opportunities.

The Tar Heels shot a woeful 38 percent in the opening period, even though they were shooting mostly from short range. As a result, UNC had only a 35-28 lead at halftime, even though it had forced 18 Athletes turnovers.

"We had a lot of 3-on-2s and 2-on-1s that we did not convert," Hatchell said. "I just don't think we were making the extra pass — and we've got to get better, because we probably had 18 situations where we could have had layups and we didn't."

But the Tar Heels started off the second half with two fast-break layups and a Jessica Sell 3-pointer in the first 79 seconds, extending the lead to 14 and forcing an Athletes In Action timeout.

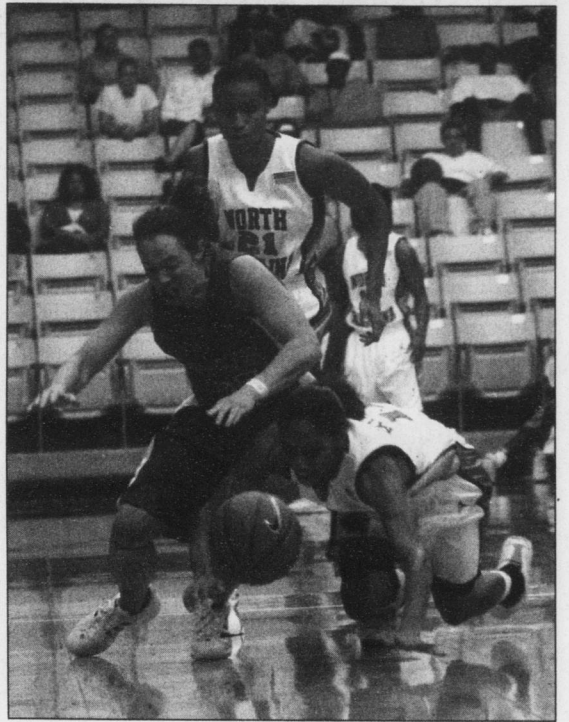
The visitors never got closer than 12 the rest of the way.

"In the second half we had a lot more rhythm and flow to our game," Hatchell said.

Point guard Ivory Latta finished with 18 points and 10 assists, directing the Tar Heel fast break and spreading the ball around, too, as five Tar Heels scored in double figures.

One of those five was sophomore LaToya Pringle, who finished with 10 points and five rebounds, while displaying an impressive array of post moves.

"Her intensity, she just tries to go out there and get it every single play," Latta said. "That's been her biggest improvement from last year."



DTH/STEVE ANDRAWES
North Carolina point guard Alex Miller (center) dives for the ball during UNC's 80-57 win Tuesday, during which the Tar Heels forced 35 turnovers.

With the 6-foot-3 Pringle in the game at center, sophomore Erlana Larkins can move to power forward and give UNC a more devastating inside presence.

Latta called Pringle the best shot-blocker in the ACC, though she claimed she never has been rejected by Pringle in practice.

But it appears Latta has a selective memory.

"I got her last year in practice," Pringle said. "I ran all around the court like 'I finally got her!'"

Contact the Sports Editor at sports@unc.edu.

SPORTS CALENDAR TUESDAY'S RESULTS

■ **SWIMMING & DIVING**
Men: UNC 208, Duke 86
Women: UNC 190, Duke 106

TODAY

■ **MEN'S SOCCER**
vs. N.C. State, 5:30 p.m.
ACC Quarterfinals
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FRIDAY

■ **WOMEN'S SOCCER**
vs. Western Carolina, 5 p.m.
NCAA First Round
Fetzer Field

■ **MEN'S SOCCER**
TBA, ACC Semifinals
Cary

UNC must find path to end zone

BY BRIAN MACPHERSON
SENIOR WRITER

Despite its offensive struggles both on the ground and in the air this season, the North Carolina football team has won the time-of-possession battle with its opponent in five of its eight games.

But if the Tar Heels are to win two of their final three games to qualify for a bowl, they will need to find a way to put the ball in the end zone.

Third-down conversions are nice, but a football team must score touchdowns to win consistently — and the Tar Heels have scored zero offensive touchdowns in their last seven quarters at Kenan Stadium.

Against Boston College, one second-quarter drive drained nearly eight minutes off the clock and culminated in a 22-yard field goal.

"This week, a touchdown and three field goals got the job done," said wide receiver Jesse Holley. "It's not necessarily going to get it done this week. We need to get down there and get seven."

Two of Connor Barth's field goals came from inside Boston College's 20-yard line, an area of the field where the Tar Heels need to increase their efficiency if they want to get six.

"Yeah, we want to score when we're down there," said Coach John Bunting. "There were some things that didn't go our way. ... You've got to convert when you're in that red zone."

One particular thing that didn't go the Tar Heels' way came when Matt Baker ran an option deep in Boston College territory — the play went nowhere.

"I bet you won't see us running that this week," Bunting said.

Baker threw for 211 yards, his highest single-game total since an Oct. 8 loss to Louisville, but he still has thrown only one touchdown pass in his last four games.

No wideout has caught a touchdown pass for the Tar Heels since Holley's fourth-quarter score against Utah more than a month ago.

"If it's a route maybe not run deep enough or a block not held long enough, a quarterback looks a route off too fast, those things come back to bite you in the butt — especially when you're in the red zone," Holley said. "You have to be precise down there."

UNC protects its house

Ralph Friedgen's Maryland team garnered national notoriety for protecting its house in Under Armour commercials, but when the Terrapins visit Kenan Stadium on Saturday, they'll face a team that suddenly does exactly that.

Three seasons after losing each of their six home games, the Tar Heels have won three straight home games and seven of their last 10.

And for a team that so enjoys playing under the lights, UNC has found plenty of success in the early afternoon this season. Of their four noon starts this season, the Tar Heels have won three — and their lone loss came against Miami in a game originally scheduled for 3:30 p.m.

Contact the Sports Editor at sports@unc.edu.

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