

# BUILDING a winner

After two mediocre seasons, the UNC football program is focused on breaking into the ACC's upper echelon

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As he rolled across the Lane Stadium grass on a cart Saturday, his left leg in an air cast, Kyndraus Guy clapped his hands together and shouted encouragement to his North Carolina teammates, imploring them to continue to compete against a Virginia Tech team rolling to an easy victory.

The Tar Heels never quit, swarming to the ball and fighting until the final whistle, but they ultimately had no hope of prevailing in the face of overwhelmingly superior talent on the other side of the ball.

The result reflected the problem that has plagued North Carolina for the past four seasons — plenty of desire, but not enough talented players.

Sure, the rout in Blacksburg in part could be attributed to the mistakes that have afflicted the Tar Heels this season — imprecise throws, dropped passes, poor tackling and missed assignments along the offensive and defensive lines.

But a comparison of the North Carolina and Virginia Tech teams, both on paper and on the field, reveals a vast disparity in talent. The Tar Heels are only beginning to close the gap.

"It's about continuing to try to build, year in and year out," says Coach John Bunting. "What I see in our program is that we're getting better. We're getting more and more competitive."

The Tar Heels, in fact, were competitive — defined for these purposes as ahead or within a touchdown at the half — in 10 of their 11 games this season.

But if they are to complete their transformation from bad to mediocre to good, actual victories will have to replace moral victories on a regular basis. No longer can the Tar Heels play two solid quarters and collapse, even against foes as formidable as Miami and Virginia Tech.

"You have to be able to grind it out, to get tough here and there," said senior quarterback Matt Baker after the loss in Blacksburg. "You just have to be able to hold onto the ball ... and just punch, punch, punch, punch at them. That's what we weren't able to do."

Baker and his North Carolina teammates repeatedly have proven they have the toughness to compete in the ACC. The next step is for the coaching staff to assemble the talent necessary to win eight or nine games consistently.

"It's headed in the right direction," says Brad

Lawing, the North Carolina recruiting coordinator. "We've got good, young talent. Are we where we need to be? Nope. But we're getting there."

Recruiting quality players starts with evaluation. Recognizing talent naturally is subjective — one scout's surefire superstar is another's depth-chart fodder. Veteran coaches must trust their instincts and ignore both scouting magazines and the level of interest shown by other schools.

"We don't recruit off magazines and ratings," Lawing says. "I don't care about all that. It's the evaluation — finding the guy that has the ability to compete here and help us win, to compete in the academic environment and be successful and the ability to stay here in school."

That's the other trick for North Carolina coaches — finding players who can handle the off-field responsibilities of a school that prides itself on its balance between athletics and academics. And even players who seem to have the maturity and discipline to qualify and to maintain their eligibility often fall by the wayside.

Academic obstacles and off-field discretions derail many careers before they even begin. Of the seven four-star recruits (according to rivals.com) in the Tar Heels' 2003 recruiting class, in fact, only wide receiver Mike Mason still sees playing time.

"Any recruit that comes here has to know that this is business," Guy says. "In order to have pleasure, you have to do all your business — then there's pleasure at the end. Everybody wants to be that eight-, nine-, 10-win team, but nobody wants to work hard to get there."

Hard work also must extend to the classroom. If a player cannot maintain academic eligibility, he will render himself useless to the football team.

North Carolina coaches occasionally do recognize a recruit's indifference to schoolwork and halt their pursuit of that player. But the reputation of the school can work in UNC's favor. If a talented player places a high value on his education, the Tar Heels might have an edge against schools such as N.C. State or Florida State.

"When we find that the guy's the right fit, it doesn't matter who we're competing with in recruiting," Lawing says. "We're going to be in the ballpark simply because the things that we look for in a prospect, we're going to have the things that are important to him."

For some recruits, the academic strength of a school makes no difference whatsoever. For others,

the quality of the education can be the determining factor.

"Some kids coming out of high school are confident that they know what they want to study," says Danny Wilkins, the football coach at Asheville High School. "I can't say that would supersede anything else for the football opportunity, but certainly it should."

"Football is temporary. Education is for life."

Wilkins coaches running back Johnny White, a three-star recruit ranked among the top all-purpose backs in the nation. White announced his decision to come to Chapel Hill in July and proceeded to dominate the high-school ranks during his senior season — he rushed for 348 yards and six touchdowns in one October game for the undefeated Cougars.

But White is only one member of a recruiting class that North Carolina coaches already are touting as the best class in the Bunting era.

According to rivals.com, the Tar Heels have secured commitments from 26 recruits for next season, including 16 three-star players. Many of those players announced their intentions during the summer, the result of an aggressive strategy on the part of the UNC coaches.

"We're going to keep getting the good players, and we're going to start getting some great players," Bunting says. "That's how you win."

Bruce Carter, a three-star defensive back from Havelock High School, committed to North Carolina in May despite fielding interest from schools such as Louisville and Virginia Tech.

"They really wanted him," says Charlie Smith, the football coach at Havelock. "That, more than anything, can light a recruit up, when they know they're wanted and they know they're in the plans to make a program better."

And if this recruiting class lives up to its billing — an uncertain proposition, given that a percentage of players in every recruiting class never pans out — the Tar Heels have a chance to build the foundation of a program competitive not only in the ACC but at the national level.

"They really feel that because they've had success the last couple of years and they've turned it around, they're getting some quality recruits," Smith says. "Next year should be very exciting for them."

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## Bunting faces uphill battle for bowl berths

The North Carolina football team managed to make a five-win season disappointing.

Coming into the 2005 campaign, prognosticators tended to predict few victories with the team facing one of the nation's most difficult schedules.

Yet the Tar Heels achieved unexpected success by Nov. 5 with a win against Boston College. The possibility of a second straight bowl season had supplanted expectations of four wins with six.

Unfortunately for UNC fans, a heart-wrenching loss to Maryland essentially ended hopes for a bowl, and a 24-21 win against hapless Duke brought back memories of the horrendous campaigns in 2002 and 2003.

The outcome of the season finale against Virginia Tech revealed little, save for a reminder of the talent gap between the country's upper-echelon teams and UNC.

The Tar Heels had just one player — offensive guard Kyle Ralph — voted onto either of the top two All-ACC teams.

Every school in the conference had more except the Blue Devils.

John Bunting and the rest of the coaching staff are looking to minimize that talent disparity, but few of



JACOB KARABELL  
FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

the underclassmen have emerged as potential cornerstones thus far.

This team faces major hurdles next season to qualify for the post-season — an accomplishment that Bunting needs in order to demonstrate continued improvement.

The Tar Heels' out-of-conference schedule includes an almost-certain loss at Notre Dame and a toss-up game against South Florida. The ACC slate features trips to Clemson, Miami and Virginia, along with a home game against Virginia Tech.

To find seven wins — which would qualify UNC for a bowl with the new 12-game schedule — the offense will need to improve on its performance this season, a difficult task given the number of contributors it stands to lose.

Just as it did this season, UNC will enter next year with a new QB.

Bunting

has said transfer Joe Dailey and redshirt freshman Cam Sexton will battle for the quarterback job in the spring. Dailey has more experience — he started all 11 games for Nebraska in 2004 — but Sexton appears to have more potential to emerge as one of the league's best passers in the future.

But whoever wins the job will have to overcome a near depletion of the offensive line, a senior-laden unit that endured an up-and-down season. And the chance of losing receiver Jesse Holley to the NFL Draft likely gives the coaching staff nightmares. Holley, despite his inexplicable drop against Virginia Tech, would give either quarterback a reliable target. Without him, receivers Brandon Tate, Brooks Foster and Del Roberts would be pressed into even bigger roles right away.

Though the defense should be the team's strength, close losses would do little for the program. Bunting's job remains secure for now, but another non-bowl season would bring the doubters to the forefront again.

"People looking at our program — recruits and parents — see where we're going, where we've been," Bunting said. "We've been competitive in every single game we've played this year."

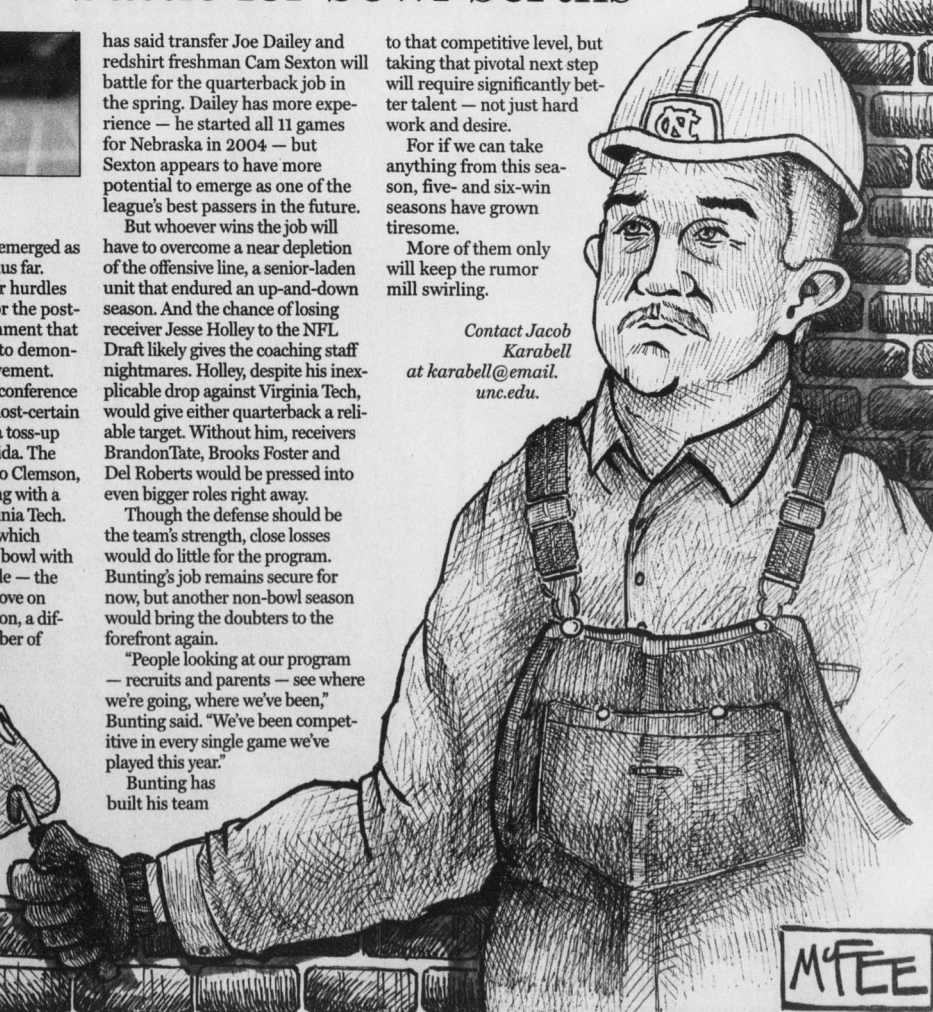
Bunting has built his team

to that competitive level, but taking that pivotal next step will require significantly better talent — not just hard work and desire.

For if we can take anything from this season, five- and six-win seasons have grown tiresome.

More of them only will keep the rumor mill swirling.

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