

SPREADING THE FLOOR

BY JESSE BAUMGARTNER
SENIOR WRITER

DURHAM — It seems unnatural, as if the basketball court is somehow off-balance.

The open space in the middle of No. 2 Duke's offense begs for something to occupy it, remaining almost untouched as the Blue Devils camp on the 3-point arc.

But, in a nutshell, that space is what defines the lethal Duke scoring machine this year.

After they struggled to find the hoop last year without a true post player down low, coach Mike Krzyzewski has let his team loose on the fast break and built his half-court offense around versatile ball-handlers, shooters and the ever-important perimeter spacing — leading to the nation's third-best scoring average at 85.7 points per game heading into today's showdown with No. 3 North Carolina.

The observant basketball fan will notice a touch of NBA style in the scheme, not surprising given that Krzyzewski has taken some of the Phoenix Suns' elements from his good friend — and offensive mastermind — Mike D'Antoni, who coached the USA Basketball team with Coach K this summer.

"I think our offense is growing," Krzyzewski said. "It's

not exactly like the Phoenix Suns', but there are elements of it, especially the fact that we don't post as much. That's probably the biggest similarity, is they don't post Amare (Stoudemire) and we don't have Amare."

But while Duke lacks a Stoudemire, the team does spread the floor in a similar manner using guard-heavy lineups.

Off turnovers and rebounds, the smaller Blue Devils race down the court and often run players toward the corners rather than the basket to space out the floor.

And when Duke starts its half-court game, the team often puts four, and sometimes all five, players around the perimeter.

"I think the biggest thing was getting comfortable with it," said point guard Greg Paulus, who mentioned Jason Kidd as someone he watched to understand the concepts better.

"But we watched a lot of film on ourselves and on coach's USA team and the Suns. I think that has really helped us with our spacing and creating the type of shots early in the offense that we've gotten all year."

By spreading out the defense so much, Duke gives itself lots of room to maneuver, screen and create openings — particularly from the 3-point line.

For instance, Paulus can get a high-ball pick for his own long bomb or look to kick it back to the screener, who pops to the perimeter. Most dribble drives cause defenders to leave their men and help, but Duke players

often maintain their spacing and wait for the open 3-pointer from the kick-out (see diagrams).

This is all made possible by Duke's shooting ability. Not surprisingly, the Blue Devils rank No. 20 in the country in 3-pointers made per game, with nine on 23.1 attempts. Paulus, Jon Scheyer, Taylor King and Demarcus Nelson all shoot .397 or better from the outside.

Both King and Paulus take more than 70 percent of their shots from 3-point land, and even 6-foot-8-inch freshman big man Kyle Singler steps out on the perimeter for more than 40 percent of his field goal attempts.

"I don't really consider myself a post player," Singler said. "I play a lot of outside, too, but I just happen to guard the post on the opposing team."

With the nation's No. 19 best field goal percentage, the Blue Devils also have seen plenty of success from inside the arc, thanks to Nelson and sophomore pogo stick Gerald Henderson, two slashers who take a minimal amount of 3's.

While the spacing helps the shooters, it also gives Nelson and Henderson — the team's best one-on-one players and leading scorers — lots of room to get to the basket themselves, allowing Duke to supplement its outside shooting.

And when the Blue Devils do miss, the paint often is free for offensive rebound chances because the defenders are leached to their perimeter-hugging coun-

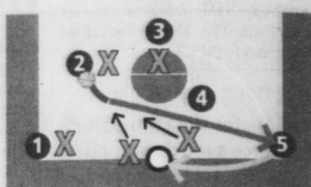
A look at Duke's plays

Duke has changed its strategy when getting the ball to the hoop. Here's a look at a few of the plays the Tar Heels might face tonight.

1 Duke X UNC-CH O Basket Dribbling Shooting Passing

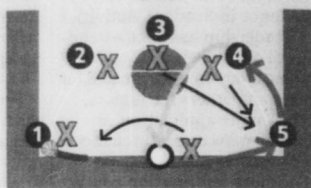
PLAY ONE

- 1) No. 2 gets the ball on the right wing and drives toward the hoop, drawing the two defenders under the hoop toward him.
- 2) No. 2 passes the ball across the floor to No. 5, waiting in the corner for an open 3-pointer.



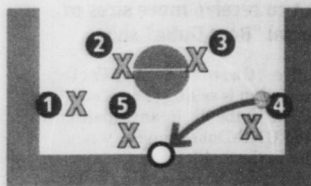
PLAY TWO

- 1) No. 1 drives past his man on the baseline toward the hoop, drawing the defender of No. 5.
- 2) No. 1 passes the ball to No. 5, drawing two more defenders into the left corner to guard against a 3-pointer.
- 3) No. 5 passes the ball to the now-open No. 4 on the left wing, who has a wide-open 3-pointer.



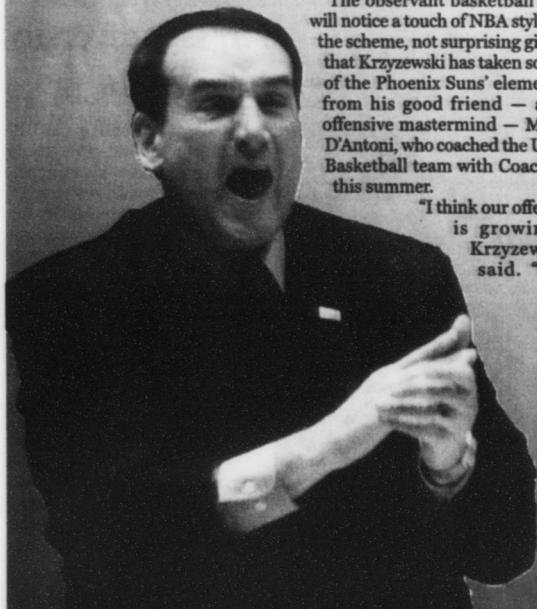
PLAY THREE

- 1) No. 4 utilizes the open space in the lane created by perimeter spacing to drive into the lane for two points.



RESEARCH: JESSE BAUMGARTNER

DTH/REBECCA ROLFE AND ALLIE WASSUM



COURTESY OF MICHAEL CHANG/THE CHRONICLE

READY TO RUMBLE

unc vs. duke

THE LOWDOWN ON TONIGHT'S GAME



No. 2 Duke vs.
No. 3 North Carolina
Smith Center, 9 p.m.
Broadcast: Raycom/ESPN
Radio: 1360 WCHL



(21-1, 6-1 ACC)

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Point guard

Even if UNC's Ty Lawson is able to play in spite of his ankle sprain, he won't be at 100 percent. Although he played well at Florida State, Quentin Thomas hasn't proven he can handle the kind of pressure he'll face from Duke's Greg Paulus.

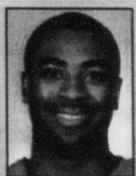
Edge: Greg Paulus



Shooting guard

Ellington has come into his own as a scorer this season and continues to impress with his jumpers off the dribble. Henderson can leap with the best and possesses a fine pull-up jumper, but if Ellington gets hot early he'll own the bragging rights this time around.

Edge: Wayne Ellington



Small forward

The transformation of DeMarcus Nelson has been one of the biggest reasons for Duke's 19-1 start. Marcus Ginyard can match Nelson's defensive prowess but falls short of the Blue Devil's 15.3 points per game.

Edge: DeMarcus Nelson



Power forward

This matchup figures to be one of the most interesting of the game. On one side is Deon Thompson, who lives in the paint; on the other is perimeter-oriented Kyle Singler. It will take a man's effort to slow down Singler on the wing.

Edge: Kyle Singler



Center

The Blue Devils' biggest weakness is defending the low post because of how many perimeter players they use. And in Hansbrough, UNC features possibly the best post player in the country. Sophomore forward Lance Thomas should be in for a long day.

Edge: Tyler Hansbrough



Coaching

Learning from a subpar offensive season last year, Krzyzewski has utilized a guard-heavy, fast-paced system to turn things around. Duke hasn't hit many road blocks and seems to be buying into the system more each game. A spotty UNC defense could struggle.

Edge: Coach K



Bench

Danny Green and Jon Scheyer are two of the best sixth men in the country, and Green appeared to get back on track Sunday. Although Frasier's injury hurts UNC, Stephenson is a luxury few coaches enjoy. Edge: DRAW

DRAW

Intangibles

Without Lawson, the Tar Heels' odds at winning won't look good. But strange things tend to happen in this rivalry. And no one has forgotten what happened last time Duke came to town. Edge: UNC



The Bottom Line — Duke 86, North Carolina 81

COMPILED BY JESSE BAUMGARTNER AND DAVID ELY

TROUBLE AT THE POINT

SENIOR THOMAS MIGHT HAVE TO FILL IN FOR AILING LAWSON

BY DAVID ELY
SPORTS EDITOR

When North Carolina point guard Ty Lawson crashed to the floor Sunday at Florida State and clutched his left ankle in agony, the Tar Heels' team complexion took a 180-degree turn.

And the lingering uncertainty surrounding the sophomore's status for tonight's prime-time battle against Duke doesn't help the situation.

"I saw (Lawson) this morning," North Carolina coach Roy Williams said at his weekly news conference Tuesday. "He walked into the trainer's room on crutches, and I think it's awfully difficult to go from crutches one day to playing against Duke the next day."

The entire hullabaloo surrounding Lawson and his now infamous left appendage shows just how important he is to the Tar Heels' success. Whether UNC has the depth and balance at the point required for a deep run come March — with or without a healthy Lawson — is now a key issue.

Currently North Carolina is No. 16 in the nation in assists, dishing out 17.5 assists per game. Heading that effort is Lawson at 5.7 dimes a game — good for No. 30 in the nation — but after that things get murky.

Quentin Thomas, Danny Green, Wayne Ellington and Marcus Ginyard all average about two assists an outing, but the Tar Heels have yet to establish a go-to creator after Lawson.

Tonight, with Lawson's ankle still a question mark, Thomas and the rest of the Tar Heels will get the opportunity to prove on a national stage that UNC's game is more than a one-man passing show.

A disastrous outing at Clemson saw Thomas turn the ball over three times in eight minutes and created doubts about his ability to back up Lawson in the wake of Bobby Frasier's season-ending ACL tear.

But three-and-a-half years at UNC have taught the senior not to fret about the past and just to relax and enjoy the future.

"I took my learning experiences and just put 'em basically all in a jar and said, 'You know what, there's nothing that I haven't seen or gone through in the past — so I've gone through everything,'" Thomas said. "So just enjoy your last year and have fun."

With a renewed focus, Thomas has transformed his game from helter-skelter to solid and steady, putting up 19 assists to three TOs in his last 94 minutes. Thomas has even flashed a new wrinkle in his game — a jumper.

"Overall I just wanted to be more aggressive and more assertive, because my whole game has always been to get my teammates involved," Thomas said Friday. "I feel that if I'm more aggressive, then the defense has to

respect me to be able to score or just taking a shot in general, and that will leave my teammates open."

And UNC will need Thomas to emerge as a guy capable of handling the rock in key moments as the season progresses. History has shown teams that feature two or more guards capable of making plays for their teammates are more prone to win a title.

Of the past 10 national champions, eight had two players who logged more than 100 assists on the year. North Carolina's team in 2005 and the 2003 Syracuse squad did not follow the trend.

As UNC learned against the Seminoles, you never can be sure if your starting floor general is going to be knocked out of the game due to fouls — or in Lawson's case, injury. And his absence immediately threw a gigantic monkey wrench into the North Carolina offense.

But that doesn't mean Williams will make any drastic changes in the Tar Heels' game plan against the Blue Devils.

"We're gonna play the way that we've always played," Williams said. "Quentin has gotten a great deal of practice in the way we play. Repetitions every practice, every week with everybody else that starts. The problem is after that, because Marcus hasn't had those."

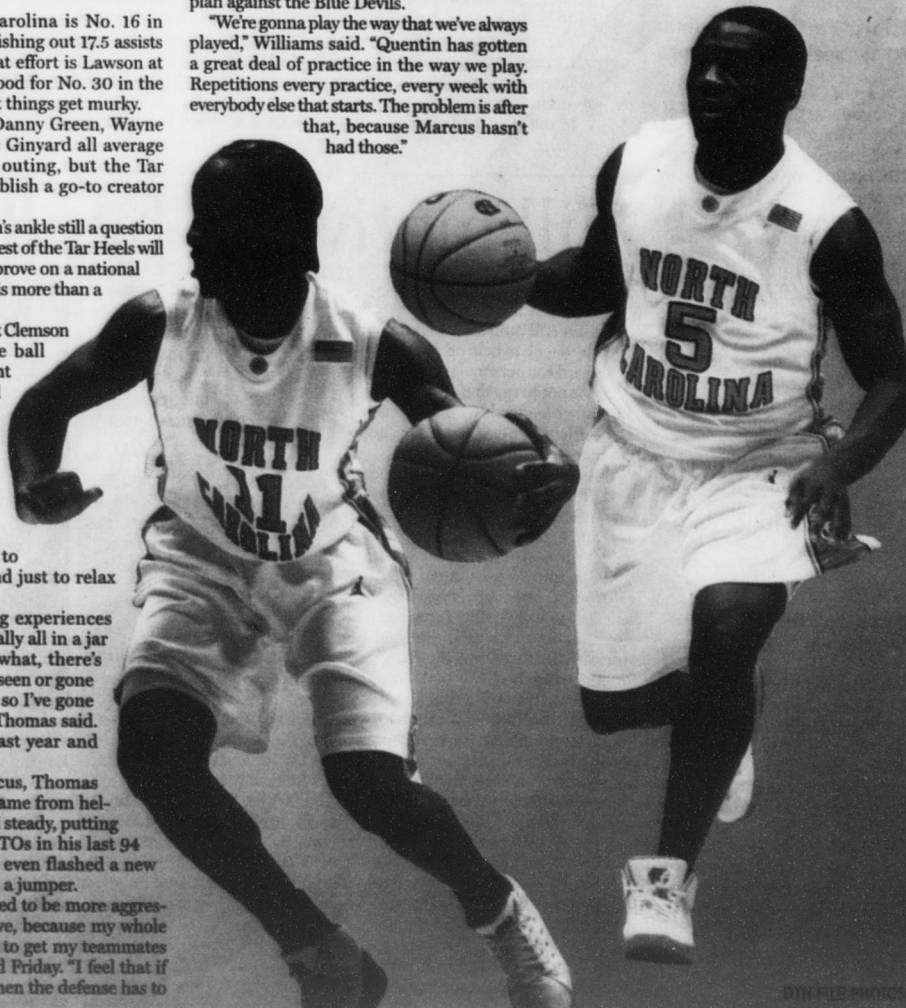
Williams said Tuesday he planned to have Ginyard run through drills during practice to prep the junior for a possible point guard stint.

But Duke's pressure D isn't the best environment to test out a new lead guard, and UNC's nine assists to 21 turnovers against the Seminoles showed what can happen to the Tar Heels when Lawson doesn't play.

According to Ellington, the suddenness of Lawson's injury contributed to the offensive woes. He believes with proper preparation, UNC can succeed even sans the stud sophomore.

"I think we can do it," Ellington said. "I think that it was just something that sprung upon us, you know, Ty getting hurt — it was unexpected. And I think that now that Ty may not play ... I think we're more prepared now."

"I think we'll definitely be way better than that (tonight)."

Contact the Sports Editor
at sports@unc.edu.

DTH FILE PHOTOS