

Softball looks to make it to next step

Experienced squad eyes Regionals

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SENIOR WRITER

Anderson Stadium, home of North Carolina softball, sits isolated along N.C. 54, separated from campus and surrounded by trees. While not conducive for massive student support, the solitary setting fits the path the program has taken since head coach Donna J. Papa came in 1986.

It took 15 years for Papa's team even to reach the historically West Coast-dominated NCAA Tournament, an unusual occurrence in an athletic department known for its tradition of excellence and national recognition in almost all sports.

But Papa, like the facility's location, has been left alone to build the program at her own pace. And despite the decade-plus of mediocrity, UNC has turned into a consistent NCAA Tournament team with six appearances in the last seven years.

Now, after reaching the national stage with consistency, Papa is faced with making that crucial next step of getting past the NCAA Regionals.

On paper, the 2008 squad has some key elements that could help come playoff time.

Few teams go deep in the post-season without sustained success on the mound, and the Tar Heels have an ace in junior Lisa Norris, alongside an experienced No. 2 in classmate Amber Johnson.

"I don't know another team in the conference that has a staff as talented as we are," said assistant coach Beverly Smith, who also highlighted underclassmen depth with Danielle Spaulding and Faith Sutton.

Norris, a second-team All-ACC selection last year, looks to build on a 1.97 ERA and a 236 strikeout sophomore season in which she was forced to throw 237.2 innings. While the Tar Heels hope that Johnson can ease the load with her newly-acquired drop ball, the real question is whether the weak Tar Heel offense can produce some runs in order to take a little pressure off the bullpen.

Seniors Jennifer Jacobs and Cassie Palmer, along with junior Breanna Brown, figure to lead the offensive charge that the team say will come this season. Palmer and Brown provide the Tar Heels with speed, while Jacobs represents some real power, returning as the squad's leader in RBIs, home runs (tied with Palmer) and slugging percentage.

Jacobs and Palmer were two of the only powerful bats last year in a lineup that managed a mere 34 homers and 71 doubles in a 67-

game season. Papa said 80 percent of fall practice focused on offense, and Smith named freshmen Bree Ensminger, Brittany Robinson and Brittany McKinney as key power additions.

But of course, the freshmen still are, well, freshmen.

"It's really just different in college though, because there's a lot more movement on the ball," Brown said. "And it just takes a little bit of get-

ting used to. I hope they'll be able to help us out — I'm sure they will."

Above all, the postseason tournaments will define this season's Tar Heels as they try to finish strong. Last year's team reeled off a school-record 28 straight wins midseason but faltered in the ACC and NCAA tournaments.

"I think because it was the first time any of us had experienced that much winning, and so when we finally lost it kind of broke our hearts," Palmer said.

Papa has to hope that experience

will help her team avoid such a fate this season. She pointed to mentality as key to getting the program past that next hurdle, and the changes she listed from the past few years — more days off for rest, no early summer school and no June family trip plans — reflect an urgency to get past NCAA Regionals and stick around for those early summer postseason games.

"If you want to play in the World Series," Papa said, "you've got to think June is the end of our season."

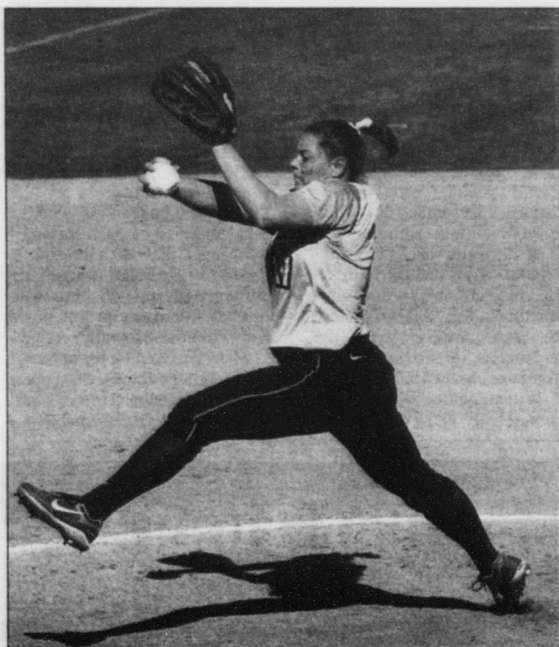
Softball

Key players:

- ▶ Junior Lisa Norris
- ▶ Senior Jennifer Jacobs
- ▶ Senior Cassie Palmer

Key games:

- ▶ Feb. 23 at Florida State
- ▶ March 15 at Hawai'i
- ▶ April 26 at Virginia Tech



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North Carolina pitcher Lisa Norris will look to lead the Tar Heels to postseason success and get past the NCAA regionals this season.

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