

# GETTIN' IT DONE WHEN IT COUNTS

This year's Heels excel in close games

BY NICOLE LUKOSIUS  
SENIOR WRITER

Almost a year has passed since the Tar Heels were left holding their heads after dropping a nail-biter to Georgetown in the Elite Eight.

Not only did North Carolina allow the Hoyas to make a comeback in the closing minutes of the second half while the team struggled on both ends, but they also failed to capitalize in the overtime period.

The squad, though, hasn't had to experience much end-of-game disappointment this year. Although victories certainly have not been easy to come by due to a vast array of injuries that have plagued the team, North Carolina has taken advantage of the last minutes of games by tightening up on the defensive end and executing on offense to come out on top again and again.

"This year we're not perfect, but in comparison to last year, the team isn't so quick to take the first shot or force the issue with a bad pass early on in the possession when we get in those late game situations," junior guard Marcus Ginyard said.

"We're being sharper with our focus and concentration and executing down the stretch and making big plays."

These big plays are what have propelled North Carolina to a tie for first place atop the ACC with 12 wins and only two losses.

Last year the Tar Heels were 0-2 in overtime, and of their other five losses, only none was by more than eight points. Of the 29 games UNC has played this year, five have been decided by five points or less with only one resulting in a loss — an 82-80 loss to Maryland.

One of these games was an overtime win at Clemson on Jan. 6 to open conference play. Sophomore Wayne Ellington hit a 3-pointer just as time was winding down to seal the deal on a 90-88 victory. It

was UNC's first dabble in an overtime scenario this season, but there would be more to come.

Feb. 3 marked guard Ty Lawson's ankle injury — and North Carolina's next showing in overtime — and the Tar Heels were able to pull away in the extra period to win by 11 points on the road.

The Clemson Tigers came to the Smith Center a week later on Feb. 10 looking to avenge their overtime loss a month before and break that pesky 53-game losing streak in Chapel Hill.

Neither would be done, but they did put up a good fight.

Not willing to get shown up at home, the Tar Heels battled back from an 11-point deficit in the final three minutes to send the game into the first overtime on a driving layup by point guard Quentin Thomas, who was still running the floor due to Lawson's injury.

Thomas said that he can really tell a difference in the team's chemistry at the end of regulation compared to last year's team, and that this is going to help North Carolina once tournament time rolls around.

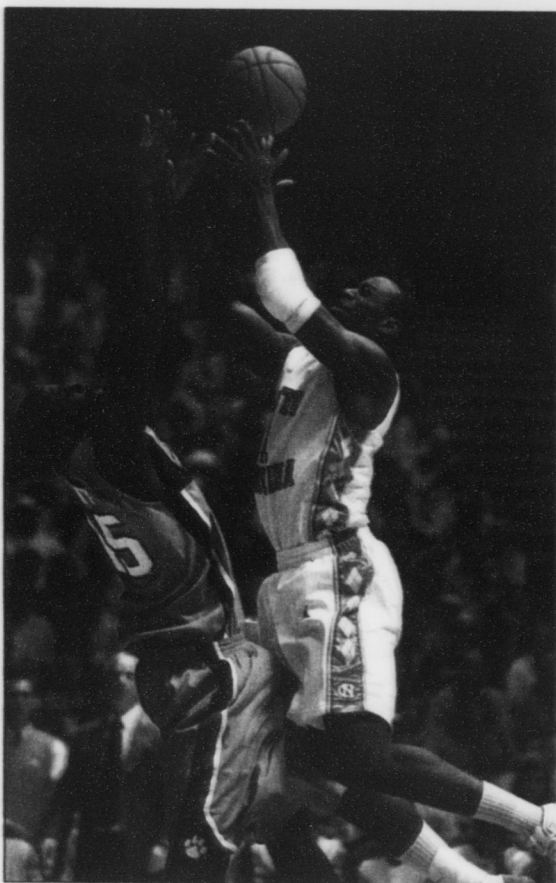
"We're just a lot more comfortable and poised — being a lot more confident in running our offense and half court offense, I think we're a lot more patient at that," he said.

"And on the defensive end we're getting a lot better, and we're more consistent in the areas we need to be."

One way that North Carolina has looked to improve its late-game performance is by working day in and day out on its half-court offense in order to prepare for tight situations.

Due to Lawson's absence, the Tar Heels have lost a little speed and play-making ability at the point position, so the effectiveness of the half-court offense has been crucial.

"Today is practice No. 76, and we've worked on the half-court



North Carolina's Marcus Ginyard attacks the basket during UNC's comeback win against Clemson on Feb. 10. UNC is 3-0 in overtime this season.

offense on practice No. 1 and every practice since," Williams said Thursday at his weekly news conference.

"We have not one day failed to work on the half-court offense; there is not one day we have failed to work on the defense."

Not having any freshman on the team also has played a big role in UNC's team chemistry and ability to successfully close out games. Now that the Tar Heels have played almost two seasons with one another

without any personnel changes, they have honed their ability to break down their opponents with time ticking off the clock.

"It was a lack of experience; there were guys that hadn't been in certain situations before at this level," Ellington said.

"And I think now that we've been there and we've been in almost every situation you can think of, we just have the confidence in each other, and we know what it takes to win."

## A path toward bracket glory

In the coming weeks you're going to be bombarded by countless opinions and strategies for how to fill out your NCAA Tournament bracket and win the all-important, totally legal pool.

You'll get advice from the likes of ESPN's Jay Bilas and Andy Katz, or Luke Winn and Grant Wahl from Sports Illustrated. Those guys will dissect every region and pod down to its core and come up with a logical sequence for solving the chaos that is March Madness.

Well, I'm here to tell you to ignore the guys who watch film and "cover" games — and listen to a guy who's opinion really matters. That's right, me.

See, it just so happens I'm an expert prognosticator with a track record for success — I believe I correctly called a certain men's basketball game. Rick Neuheisel once took my advice, and I think everything turned out OK for him.

Best of all, unlike the other guys, I don't let facts cloud my thought process. Much like Stephen Colbert, I shoot from the gut. And lemme tell you somethin' — my gut has yet to lose an NCAA pool.

And just think about that guy who picked George Mason to go to the Final Four. Not many would have been so bold. But not many won ESPN's \$10,000 pool. He went with GM — George Washington, who? — because his gut told him to. So did his dyslexia.

So throw out those objective stats, turn off ESPN and please don't watch another basketball game because I'm about to lay down the perfect plan of attack for taking your friends' "bragging rights" April 7.

■ No one likes a guy who plays it safe when it comes to picks, so don't be afraid to pick the mid-major against the big-time power. But don't do it because the team plays unconventionally or scored a big nonconference win. Pick a team based on name, mascot or colors. This year I like Boise State.

Why? Its football team plays on a blue field — obviously that means they can play ball, too.

■ Every year there's a conference



DAVID ELY  
THAT'S WHY THEY'RE CALLED BUSINESS SOCKS

you should stay away from picking. Last year it was anyone from the SEC not named Florida. This year don't pick anyone from the Big 10.

You're probably thinking, "I already knew that, Dave. The Big 10 sucks this year. Just look at that terrible RPI."

Well that's not the right reason to avoid the Big 10. Don't choose a Big 10 squad because one of Wisconsin's best players goes by the nickname "Polar Bear." I might not be a zoologist, but I know bears can't play basketball.

Any conference that allows a bear to lace 'em up endangers the safety of everyone in the gym and shouldn't be expected to boast teams that can get to the Sweet 16.

■ Don't have more than two No. 1 seeds in your Final Four. I don't care what the statistics say, picking a No. 1 seed is a cop-out move and never should be applauded.

Picking a No. 1 seed says you have no imagination. No vision. Would John McClane choose the AP's top two teams to face off for the title? No way. He'd be bold and brash. He'd have No. 1s gone in the first round, at the same time delivering justice to the world and winning back his wife for the 18th time.

■ Finally — and most importantly — don't tell people about your picks. March Madness is a war, dammit! You must pick a side.

Don't tell them your upset special. Definitely don't let them know Justin Timberlake was born in Memphis, and that's why the Tigers will win it all.

People are vultures, and now that you have the right formula for March, they'll do anything to uncover our secret.

Contact David Ely  
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# #1

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