

Davis' hype boiling for second season

UNC picked No. 2 in Coastal Division

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Virginia Tech was by far the media favorite to win the Coastal Division at the 2008 ACC Football Kickoff, and with good reason.

But among the safe ballots, there were four ACC media members who had the audacity to pick North Carolina.

A surprising move? Maybe for any other year in the past decade of UNC football.

But a year after Butch Davis' inaugural season, an unspectacular 4-8 opening statement, the doors of optimism have been flung wide open.

It started with a \$291,000 raise and one-year contract extension for Davis on Nov. 21, when the Tar Heels were just another three-win team locked out of a bowl bid. Since then, the young squad has seen expectations blossom.

More than 36,000 fans bought 2008 season tickets, which sold out one week into July. That's more than were sold in 1998, a year after the Tar Heels finished 11-1.

Plans to renovate and expand Kenan Stadium — one of Davis'

long-term goals for the program — are on the table with a proposed base construction price of \$22 million.

And even if you disregard those four exceptional media members, there were still plenty of votes to secure UNC as the No. 2 team in the preseason Coastal poll, ahead of Miami, Georgia Tech, Virginia and Duke.

"Last year ... you had no idea what to expect," Davis said. "It was new schemes for us. The players, we didn't know how they were going to react."

"We've got some players that are back that we know pretty much how they're going to prepare, how they're going to handle a packed-house crowd, so I think there's a little less from that standpoint. But there's also higher expectations. We expect these players to play at a higher level and to perform and execute at a better level."

North Carolina has even become a popular pick nationally — five of 12 analysts from ESPN went with the Tar Heels instead of the Hokies.

Several signs exist to indicate that this year the program is ripe.

It's Davis' first season with a full coaching year in Chapel Hill under his belt. Sophomore position players T.J. Yates and Greg Little are now starters without a doubt, and they have a stable offensive line in front of them.

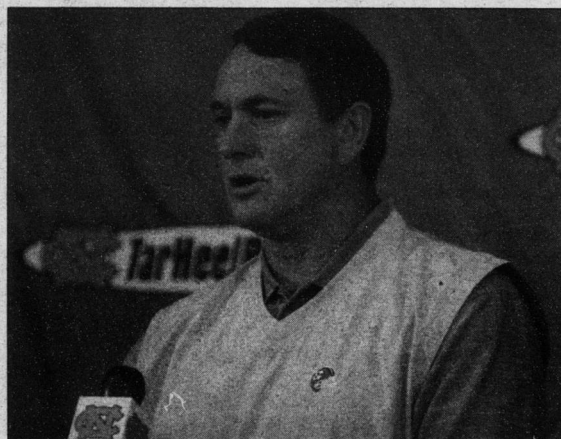
Ready to hit the season in stride, sophomores litter the defensive roster as well, including cornerbacks Charles Brown and Kendrick Burney and two Freshman All-Americans, defensive tackle Marvin Austin and safety Deunta Williams.

Those returning players have plenty of motivation to go with their in-game experience as six losses were decided by fewer than 8 points.

Other than 37-10 losses at USF and Wake Forest, it's easy to interpret the season as only a sprinkling of points away from success.

If you chalk up a few touch-downs to depth chart experiments and minor miscues that are typical of a transition in coaching staff, then at the very least it's difficult to pin the season as a failure.

More importantly, Davis' first season was the only one in the past nine years that avoided an



DTH FILE/ANIKA ANAND

Just one year removed from a 4-8 campaign that put UNC fourth in the Coastal Division, some are picking the Tar Heels to contend for the title.

absolute blowout. He broke a UNC streak of eight consecutive seasons with a loss by 30 points or more.

That stretch of one blowout every year included John Bunting's entire tenure at UNC.

Still, it's unusual for an unproven team without a winning record in the past six years to get to enjoy

a bit of preseason hype.

So while some are packing their bags for a bowl game road trip in Davis' sophomore season, the Tar Heels are taking it with a pinch of humility.

"It's going to be a one-game process," linebacker Mark Paschal said.

Then he added: "I think that we can be as good as we want to be."

Yates retakes the reins — at 100 percent

BY DANIEL PRICE

ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

Since obtaining the title of starting quarterback Aug. 16 of last year, sophomore North Carolina signal caller T.J. Yates hasn't let it go.

A record-breaking first-year campaign in which Yates threw for 2,655 yards made sure of that.

But the Marietta, Ga.-native's first season was not without struggles.

After a hot start — Yates racked up nine touchdowns in the first three games with just three interceptions — he cooled considerably. The throws just didn't have the same zip. The deep balls weren't as deep.

By the end of the season, Yates had thrown four more interceptions than touchdowns, thanks in large part to a two-to-one interception-to-touchdown ratio in the last six games.

It wasn't that Yates just hit the proverbial "freshman wall." It was that he had a partial tear of a ligament in his shoulder. A freshman record for pass attempts can do

that to a relatively untested arm — Yates played just two years of high school football.

But after successful offseason surgery, Yates appears ready to take the reins again.

And coach Butch Davis has no doubt his Sporting News Freshman All-America signal-caller is ready to get rolling this season.

"I think we don't expect it to (pop up)," Davis said Monday. "As far as the rehab has been concerned, he went out and ... took his regular reps every single time, so I think that's encouraging for him and for us."

With Yates still recovering during spring ball, sporadic 2006 starter Cameron Sexton and red-shirt freshman Mike Paulus — Rivals.com's fourth-rated prep quarterback in 2007 — got every opportunity to show what they can do.

Paulus shined in the spring scrimmage while Sexton's performance wasn't quite as impressive. Sexton threw an interception and lost a fumble, but overall Davis was happy with the play from both

of his backups.

"I thought that both of the guys showed flashes," Davis said April 7. "Mike was 11-16, which is a very positive day. He had no turnovers, didn't throw any interceptions. And I think that clearly Cam's second spring practice is infinitely better than the spring practice that he had a year ago."

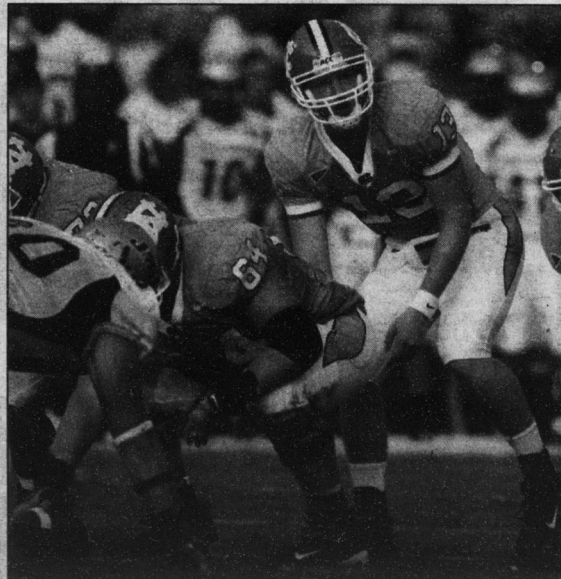
But since Yates' shoulder is at 100 percent, his 2007 backups will fill those roles again in 2008.

With a running game that is expected to make big strides from last season and several weapons to utilize at wide receiver, Yates — or Paulus or Sexton, for that matter — will have every opportunity to pile up the yards this season.

After throwing for more than four months, there is one thing Yates has yet to experience since the injury — taking a hit in a game.

"I'm anxious to feel that first hit and see what (my shoulder) feels like," Yates told the Winston-Salem Journal this month.

"But I definitely think I'm 100 percent."



DTH FILE PHOTO

Sophomore signal caller T.J. Yates will look to build on his first-year campaign this season with a surgically repaired throwing shoulder.