

ANATOMY OF THE BIG PLAY:

BY MIKE EHRLICH, SPORTSATURDAY EDITOR

The 2007 Tar Heels started the year off with a bang.

On just the third play from scrimmage, T.J. Yates dropped, set and bombed a 65-yard touchdown to Brooks Foster. Connor Barth nailed the PAT, and just like that, 7-0 North Carolina.

UNC ended the year with some fireworks, too. On the first play of overtime against Duke, Greg Little took a handoff, broke free and scampered 25 yards for a score. Game over.

Forty-nine other times during the year, the North Carolina offense generated "the big play" — a play that gains at least 20 yards. Nearly half of UNC's touchdowns fit the description — 14 of a total 29 came from outside the red zone.

For some perspective, UNC's opponents tallied 34 big plays — 17 fewer than the Tar Heels — and scored 76 percent of their touchdowns from within the red zone.

Sure, the North Carolina offense stalled at times, but as the numbers show, it had the capability at any moment to provide the explosiveness that results in a quick seven points.

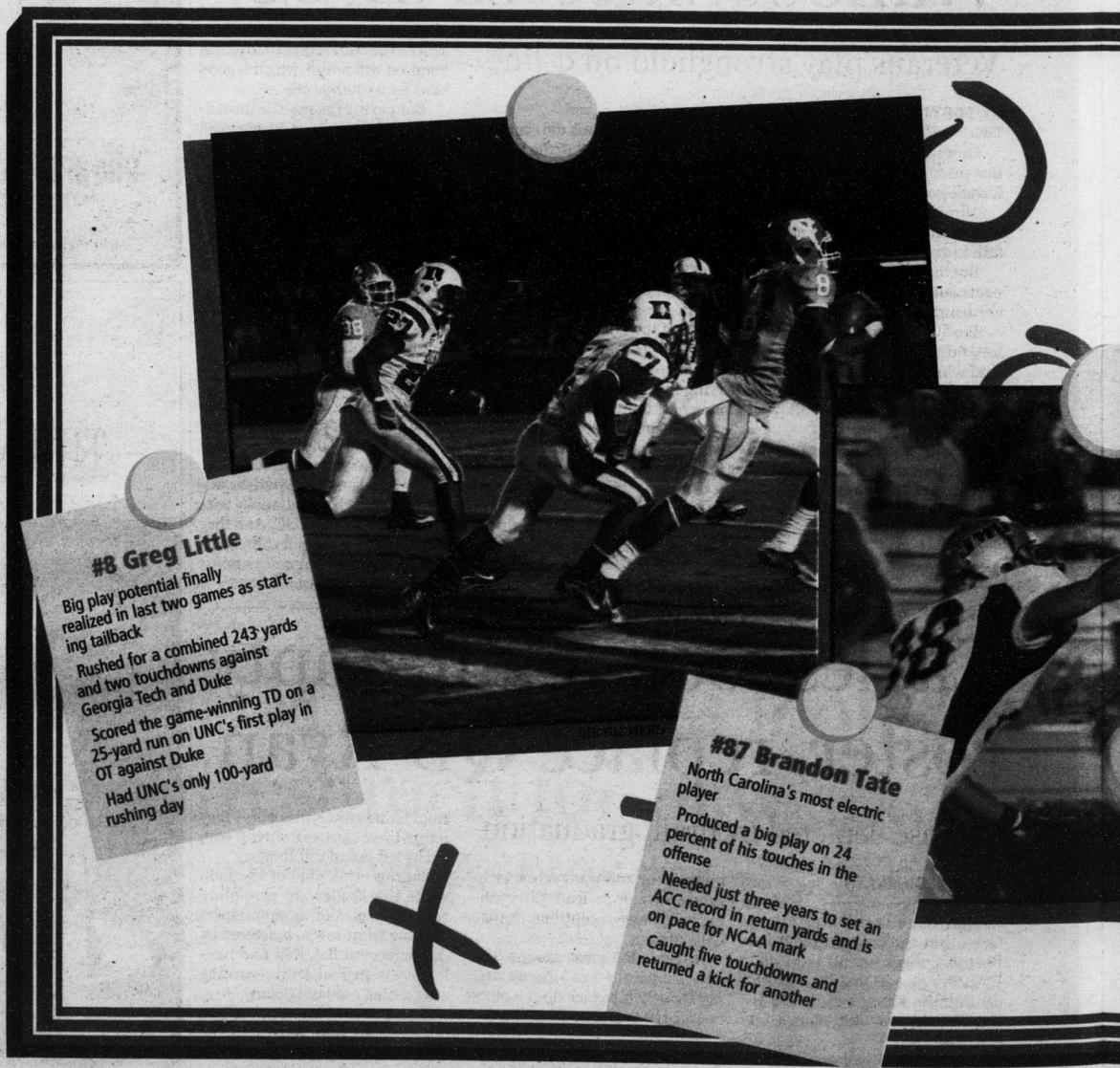
And the benefits of the big play go far beyond the scoreboard.

A truly electric play gets people talking — and not just people crossing Polk Place.

The big play gets on SportsCenter. The big play puts butts in the seats and recruits on campus tours. It silences opposing crowds and amplifies the home ones.

It's not just the chicks; everyone digs the long ball.

"We've got some home run-hitters on our offense," Little said. "And I feel like that adds excitement. That brings people to the stadium. That brings recruits to our program. I feel like if that happens,



#8 Greg Little

Big play potential finally realized in last two games as starting tailback

Rushed for a combined 243 yards and two touchdowns against Georgia Tech and Duke

Scored the game-winning TD on a 25-yard run on UNC's first play in OT against Duke

Had UNC's only 100-yard rushing day

#87 Brandon Tate

North Carolina's most electric player

Produced a big play on 24 percent of his touches in the offense

Needed just three years to set an ACC record in return yards and is on pace for NCAA mark

Caught five touchdowns and returned a kick for another

we'll build a tradition and build a program."

Little provided his share of big plays, especially in a brief stint at the end of the season as the starting tailback. After switching from wideout to running back for the year's final two games, he showed the natural instincts and spark to secure him as the clear-cut featured back this year.

Yates was in prime big play form early in the year, as his deep passes dropped in to find their targets, most frequently Hakeem Nicks.

These early bombs didn't go unnoticed. They changed the way opposing defenses

lined up and played the Tar Heels.

"It definitely is very important because if you start out your season with a 65-yard touchdown, that's definitely going to back them up a little bit," Yates said. "Towards the end of the season, we were seeing a lot of backed-up coverages, deep coverages, which allowed us to run the ball a little better."

The most dangerous weapon in North Carolina's repertoire, though, is receiver and return specialist Brandon Tate. Tate has all

the tools: blazing speed, good vision and the ability to make would-be tacklers look silly as they swipe at only air.

He can take a punt back for a score. He can return a kickoff all the way. He can catch a deep ball. He'll even line up in the backfield and run the ball off a draw.

Simply put, any time the ball is in the hands of No. 87, it has the ability to go to the house.

"Every time, no matter where it is, I'm trying to score regardless," Tate said. "The kicks and stuff, coach told me, 'You can't get a big play every time,' but I would tell him, 'Coach,