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UNC defensive line optimistic after losses

Tar Heels claim 10-deep D-line

BY JORDAN MASON
SENIOR WRITER

The North Carolina defensive front was presumably depleted by the NFL after two of its linemen were selected in the 2008 draft and its leading tackler, linebacker Durrell Mapp, was signed in free agency.

But the members of the unit do not see it that way.

"It's going to be a one-game process," linebacker Mark Paschal said of reproducing the productivity from last season. "This team has a lot of potential."

It's not quite addition by subtraction, but the Tar Heels are not exactly searching for answers up front.

UNC can feasibly go 10 deep on the line, and head coach Butch Davis already has named four players whom he expects to contribute heavily to the defensive line after going relatively unnoticed in the past.

Not to mention defensive end E.J. Wilson — last year's No. 2 man in the sacks column — who will return and line up beside sophomore Marvin Austin, a first-team Freshman All-American last year.

Both will be on the left side of the line, which Wilson said will be dangerous since teams will not want to double team both of them at the same time.

Whatever double teams they see will free one of them up — as well as sophomore Darrius Massenburg on the right end and junior Cam Thomas on the inside.

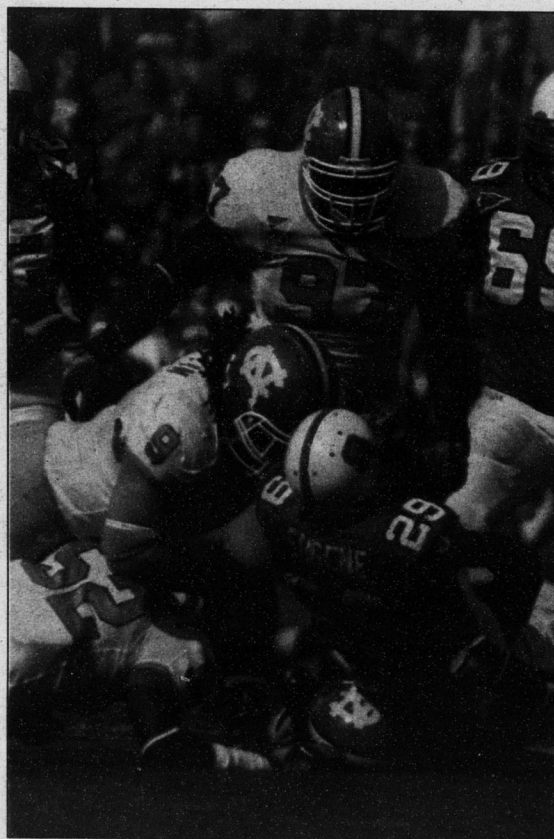
Thomas and Austin already have impressed Davis in their efforts to replace the production of first-round pick Kentwan Balmer.

"They do a great job penetrating," Davis said. "They'll try to cause you a lot of havoc."

Davis said Austin and Thomas have the look of NFL players.

Austin has been hearing that since his days as a top 10 recruit at Ballou High School in Washington, D.C.

But Thomas represents the rest of the defensive line, in that his talent might have gone under the radar last season.



DTH FILE PHOTO

UNC defensive tackle Aleric Mullins (97) is part of a defensive front that lost three starters to the NFL last year but still expects to do big things.

That was not the case for the linebacking corps after injuries forced many of them into action last season as true first-years.

Sophomores Bruce Carter and Quan Sturdivant started seven and five games respectively in their first seasons in Chapel Hill and now will man the outside for UNC this season. They will be joined by Paschal, who won the starting middle linebacker job in the spring.

The loss of Mapp is softened by Chase Rice's return. The senior was a starter last season before injuring his ankle in the opener and missing the rest of the year.

But the biggest redeeming quality of the defense is that it will have a year under its belt in Davis' scheme.

The head coach acknowledged

that the experience will help the unit as a whole.

"Defense is a collective effort," he said.

"We talk to the defense all the time about, you've got to run, chase, swarm the football, and we want to try to get 11 guys around the ball as often as possible."

Davis said the only way for the team to play that way is for everyone to know his assignment. Whether that happens remains to be seen; at least until the Tar Heels suit up for the season opener.

But the unit certainly has the aggressive part down already.

"I would be afraid if we weren't amped up," Paschal said. "We have to play with a fever — we have to play with reckless abandon."

The unit will hardly look depleted if it plays like that.