

Taking a look at UNC football redshirts: pros and cons of extra year of eligibility

by Lee Pace
Staff Writer

The existence of the college student is a unique one.

In few other walks of life are the worries as frivolous, the times as enjoyable, the restrictions as lenient.

Sure, it's no fun staring an exam in the eye or plowing through the *Readers' Guide*. But when bills seek reimbursement for the bands at the fraternity house, a lost room key and calls to folks back home, things can't get much easier. Especially when those slips of paper with Pop's signature on them arrive every so often.

If things weren't so lax people would scratch and claw to rid themselves of such a lifestyle in less than four years.

And a large portion of young men solicited to play football wouldn't submit to enduring a year of "red-shirting."

"I'm in no hurry to get out of here," said sophomore red-shirt Max McGee. "Some guys are. I can't understand why, though. This is a nice ride, and it's all free."

Others agree.

"I don't mind going to college," said P. J. Gay. "I like it. It's fun."

Gay, a sophomore who was ushered to Chapel Hill from nearby Sanford in order to fill Kenan Stadium with bombs from his powerful arm, is not a red-shirt.

Not yet, anyway.

He was injured in preseason practice serving as the Heels' second-team quarterback and, although he has dressed out for Carolina's last two games, he has yet to play. Speculation concerning whether Tar Heel Head Coach Bill Dooley will use him the final five games of this season or whether he'll hold him out, thereby giving Gay an extra year of eligibility, has been more common among football fans than talk surrounding the buffoonery of Ford and Carter.

"If I'm needed in the ECU game," Gay said this week, "I'll play. But if things go all right and they don't need me, I'll be red-shirted."

It's a tricky decision. Gay's talents could be enough to spark the Tar Heels to victories in their last five games. But if Maryland should beat Duke this afternoon, five season-ending wins still probably wouldn't secure a conference title for UNC. And if he does play, he could reinjure his knee and an entire year could be wasted, if not a career.

Most decisions concerning red shirts, however, aren't quite as complicated. Most players relegated to such status are usually so low on the depth chart that they would see little, if any, playing time, and a year spent

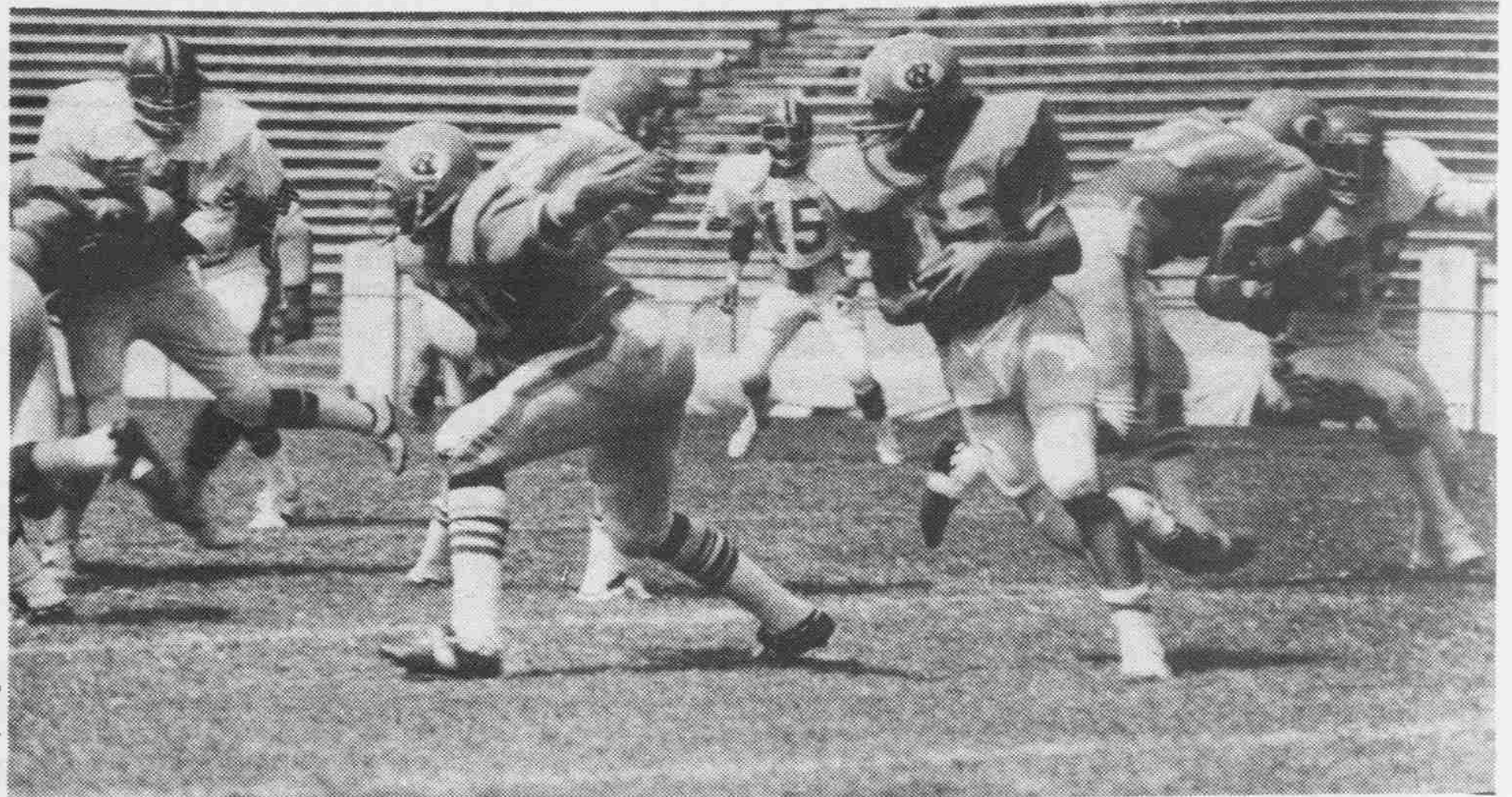


Photo by Margaret Kirk

Terrence Burrell (left) blocks for quarterback P. J. Gay (15) last year in a jayvee game. Both have been injured. Burrell has been redshirted and Gay faces the possibility of being redshirted.

Gay said, "If I'm needed in the ECU game, I'll play. But if things go all right and they don't need me, I'll be redshirted."

toning skills and lifting weights would be much more beneficial.

Junior tight end Brooks Williams, for example, found himself listed below Charles Waddell and Andy Chacos two years ago.

"I was glad to be red shirted," Williams said. "Waddell was first team, and Chacos was a real fine back-up. I knew I wouldn't get to play much, so I wanted to be red shirted."

Others, such as defensive tackles Rod Broadway and Steve Junkmann are red shirted because of injuries that would either sideline them for the entire season or a large portion of it.

Junkmann hyperextended his knee the week of the Miami of Ohio game, and after roaming the sidelines for three weeks, asked to be redshirted.

"Some people thought I was crazy," Junkmann said, "but I figured if I got to play at all this year it wouldn't be till the State game. And by that time the season's half over."

Still others sit out a year because their grades would leave them ineligible to play.

Regardless of the reason, however, most red shirts don't feel that their existence is as bad as the label "red shirt" leads most folks to believe.

Being red shirted lifts stifling academic and athletic pressure from a player's shoulders. He can spread his course load over nine or 10 semesters and doesn't have to worry about the next Saturday's opponent.

"All the red shirts sort of bonded together the year I was red shirted," junior offensive lineman Danny Hamrick said. "We had around 20 to 22 that year. We called ourselves the 'Bombers' and had a really good time out there. We had fun, while at the same time we worked to improve our skills and strength."

But even though the red shirts lead a relatively carefree life while improving their chances to play in later years, it's not all fun.

"The red shirts are on what's supposed to be called the 'scout squad,'" said Junkmann, "but everyone calls it the 'meat squad.' We're just dummies. We stand around in the right place and do what they tell us. Since I play defense, we're working with the varsity offense this week running ECU's defense."

But the worst part is simply not getting to play football on Saturday afternoons.

"When you have a game like the State game and you have to sit up in the stands, you sort of get a sick feeling inside," said

McGee, a defensive back. "Even if you couldn't play, you'd at least like to be dressed out and on the sidelines so you could feel like a part of the team."

Not all players, however, benefit from the process. Some, who haven't advanced to a starting role or don't see themselves making a significant contribution to the team forego their fifth year.

Hamrick is an example. Dental school, not football, is in his future.

"I hope to be accepted at dental school next fall," said Hamrick, who is a senior academically. "And I don't want to try to do that and play football at the same time."

In addition, Hamrick needs but four courses after this semester to graduate. If he graduated this May, he couldn't play football next fall. But if he took the courses next fall, he would miss this year's spring practice. "And that's when you make the team," he said.

Although red shirting isn't limited exclusively to football, rarely does it occur in other sports.

In football you're dealing with such large numbers," UNC Athletic Director Bill Cobey said. "In most other sports you're using about everyone on the team."

"It's also a little harder to judge how good a football player is. In other sports, like swimming or track, you have some absolute to go by. You can look at a guy's time and compare it with another."

"Experience in football is extremely valuable. The red-shirt year gives the player a chance to develop," Cobey said.

Williams used the 1974 season to develop, while Junkmann and McGee are developing now.

"I'm from Florida," McGee said, "and there's no place like Florida in the summertime. This way, I won't have to go to summer school. There's no pressure, you can take it easy, and it's free. What can I say?"

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