

Phil's fan mail

Letters pour in from potential lovers, superstars

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Staff Writer

When Phil Ford was a youngster, the only letters he ever wrote were to Santa Claus.

Little did he realize that someday he and the bearded man in the red suit would have something in common — the large amount of mail in their mailboxes.

Just about the time young children were beginning to compose letters to Santa in late November, the Carolina basketball season began and fan letters started to arrive in Ford's mailbox in increasing numbers.

"It's not that bad during the off season, during basketball season I get it (mail) every day," Ford said. "One day I might get two or three letters, the next day 10 or 11."

Coach Dean Smith likes for each player to answer all of his mail personally, but if the number of letters becomes too great, he told the players to go to UNC's Sports Information Office for help.

And though Ford hasn't the time to answer each letter, he reads each and every one.

"I read every letter and I understand what each individual says," Ford said. "The publicity office writes the letter then I read it and sign it."

Student assistant Mike Bozyski handles most of Ford's mail, spending about 30 minutes a day writing replies to the 50-75 letters Ford receives each week.

Ford is not the first basketball player to have used the office's services.

Sports Information Director Rick Brewer, when he was a student assistant, answered Dick Grubar's mail and secretary Linda Herbin answered about 30 letters a day written to George Karl.

Ford, Karl and Grubar are among the UNC leaders in fan mail received.

"They were all 'quarterbacks' for their teams and handled the ball a lot," Brewer said. "They got fouled a lot and the television cameras zoomed in when they shot free throws."

Ford's fans aren't limited to North Carolina. Bozyski said Ford received mail from all over the United States, including California, Vermont and Texas. And as a result of playing on the U.S. Olympic basketball team in 1976, Ford said he received requests for

autographs from collectors in countries such as Germany.

The fans themselves are as varied as the places where they live. Bozyski said that approximately 60 percent of the letters come from females and a majority of the writers are between the ages of 10 and 15 years.

Among the letters from female fans, Bozyski said there are about 10 young girls who write Ford regularly, telling him things like "they watch every basketball game he's played in." A number of female writers want to meet Ford, to receive a phone call from him or to date him. Bozyski said he sees about one request for a date per week.

This excerpt was taken from a letter from an 18-year-old female fan:

"I'm a very lovable person, easy going, easy to get along with... Phil I'm wondering do you have any pictures; if so please send me one. Well as for me I don't have any of myself but when I get a chance to go uptown to have some made you'll be the first to have one because as you should know from this letter I'm one of your favorite fans... Please write back sweetheart. P.S. When you write give me your number at Chapel Hill or you can call me. Dial..."

Most of the letters are requests for pictures and autographs. Some ask

questions such as "Are you really from Rocky Mountain, N.C.?"

Many offer praise. A recent example is a letter from a fifth grader in North Carolina:

"I play (basketball) most of the time at the community center near my home. Mainly I use your technic (sic) at the foul line (and) all the or/most of the time it works... Please keep in mind when you're out on the court that you have a fan that would someday like to be an All-American player like Phil Ford."

Not all the letters, however, praise Ford. Some are critical.

"Last year I got a napkin," Ford said. "It said 'you're just a big cry baby and this is your cry-napkin. When you're through, give it to Walter Davis and let him wipe his eyes.'"

Receiving critical mail doesn't bother him, Ford said, because "it's just like people yelling in the stands, that doesn't bother me either."

Ford said that he never received presents from fans in the mail and if he received money he would have to return it because of his amateur status. One time Ford found a letter in his mailbox which contained a check for \$100 and a message reading "Hope you're having a

nice time at school, here's something for you." Ford immediately called Smith, and they discovered the letter was addressed to another room.

Ford then delivered the letter to its intended receiver.

Bozyski keeps his replies fairly brief.

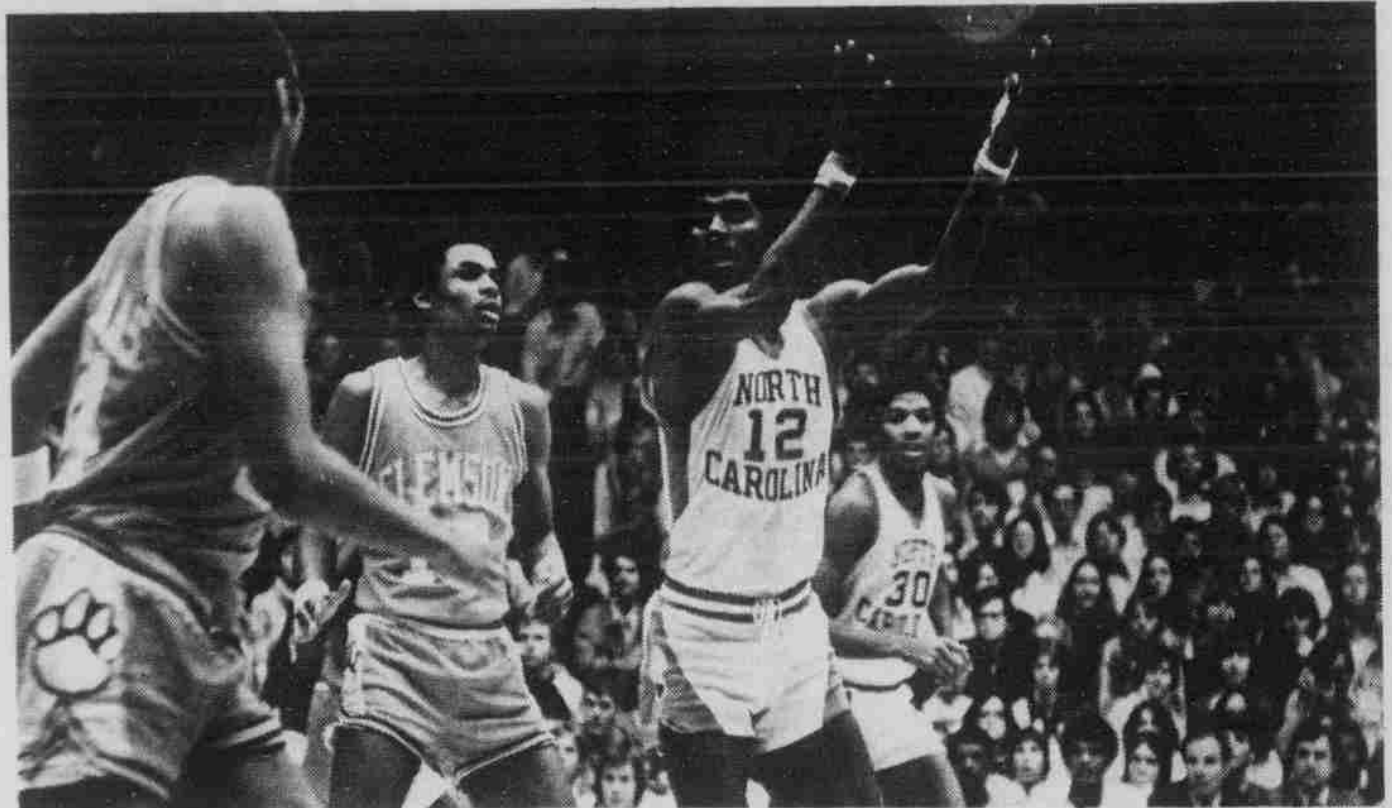
"The replies aren't voluminous, at the longest they're a page," Bozyski said. "If it's a question and I don't know the answer, something really personal or a special request, I'll ask Phil about it."

If a fan requests a picture or other materials such as a basketball Bluebook, Bozyski asks them to send their requests to the Sports Information office. (Sports Information ordered 500 pictures of Ford prior to this season).

In the beginning Bozyski answered female fans requests "to meet me somewhere" with an explanation that Ford was very busy. Lately, he thanks them for writing but does not acknowledge such requests.

Ford finds the 15 minutes or so he spends daily reading his mail a pleasant experience.

"I especially enjoy letters from smaller children six and seven years old with their great big print," Ford said.



Phil Ford's popularity and because he is on camera so much during televised basketball games are reasons that the volume of fan mail he receives is among the most any player at Carolina has received. Staff photo by Andy James.

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