

Senior cage stars barnstorm across state playing exhibitions, entertaining fans, making money

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The sun reflects off the silver chain. The windows in the car are open and the wind makes the speed of the car seem faster than 70 miles per hour.

Pittsboro, Siler City, Asheboro — the signs come faster and faster. Two cars in the front lead the way. Geff Crompton follows them. They are going to Ramseur to play basketball.

The silver chain around his neck keeps grabbing my attention. The neck, the tremendously broad shoulders and the cramped legs lead to the obvious — Crompton is a big man.

"A lot of people really don't know what barnstorming is all about," says Crompton's girlfriend. "It's a lot of fun." "Fix me a drink," says Crompton.

When the Carolina basketball season is over, coaches start looking for recruits to replace the graduating seniors. The graduating seniors travel around the state playing basketball. They are playing for money now.

The seniors this year are Phil Ford, Tom Zaliagiris and Crompton. They are the star attractions of these games, which began in 1972. Other players that make up the nucleus of the team are Dave Hanners, a former Carolina guard; Charles Waddell, Carolina's last three-letter man; and Fred Teague, a former JV player. Joe Jones, a friend of Ford's, also plays.

Rick Duckett, one of Carolina's managers, is in charge of setting up more than twenty of these games. They are played against local all-star teams and other ex-college players. The gate receipts are split between the people hosting the games and the Carolina team.

Ramseur is a small town, but the caravan of three cars still gets lost. Crompton watches the three cars as they stop and ask directions. He talks about the game the night before.

"Hanners messed up his ankle last night. These guys were serious. Sometimes you get guys like that."

Hanners is not playing this Sunday afternoon. The three senior players, Teague, Jones and Duckett are the Carolina "All-Star" team, as it is called by posters advertising the game.

After taking the scenic route of Ramseur, they arrive at the high school gym where the game will be played. The

fans start to run for the cars, seeking the autographs of the players.

Ford is calm. The players walk through the gym amid cheers and kids throwing crushed cups at the goals. The crowd is between 250 and 300 persons. Each ticket cost \$2 in advance and \$2.50 at the gate.

In the locker room Ford tries to find someone to tape his ankle. Jones finally has to do it. Each player wears a blue-and-white jersey. The gym pants do not match. Each player wears what he wants.

A table is set up in the lobby of the gym. It is covered with pictures of Ford, Zaliagiris and Crompton. There are also cups, sweatbands, pennants and a variety of other Carolina souvenirs.

"We usually sell about \$200 or \$300 worth a game," says Stanley Barrett. He is a friend of Ford's and takes care of the table every game.

The game is a run-and-gun affair, with Ford dominating the local all-stars. The fans holler at the players, and the players holler at the referees.

"Dunk it Crompt, dunk it!" "Hey Ford, you as good as Butch Lee? We want Butch Lee!"

Ford takes the ball downcourt six times in a row, and six times he scores.

"That's my man Phil," yells the same young fan.

By halftime the game is secondary as mobs of people gather around the players to get autographs. The concessions stand and the souvenir table are also crowded.

The local players sit alone and watch the spectacle around them. Calvin Cooper, Harvey Brown and Joe Coltrane are the Ramseur stars.

The second half starts. Ford hits the ground hard several times. One time he gets up slowly. He looks unbelievably at the player who knocked him down. Ford isn't smiling.

When the game is over the audience goes after the players again. The players head for the locker room.

"Hey, can we get some towels?" asks Ford.

There is one towel for the entire team to share. The fans outside are hollering for Ford. He slowly gets undressed.

"This game was rougher than most of them," says Ford. "It's usually just an exhibition."

"Some of these guys get their kicks trying to beat us," says Jones.

Zaliagiris gets up to leave. "Weekend games should be better," he says.



Seniors Tom Zaliagiris, Phil Ford and Geff Crompton (left to right) have departed from the amateur ranks now that they barnstorm across North Carolina.

Teague looks up at him. "Denton was good."

Zaliagiris takes the money just handed to him and puts it in his wallet. "Hell, a hundred bucks is a hundred bucks."

"I can dig it," says Jones.

The players begin to file out of the gym. They sign autographs as they leave.

A man with a taperecorder asks Crompton and Zaliagiris to read an announcement for a radio commercial advertising a game in Asheboro. They do so.

Ford tells everyone to walk straight for the cars.

Crompton gets in his car and starts to follow the cars in front of him. "Wild, isn't it? Gets tiring sometimes."

The ride home is silent save for the radio, which plays loudly. A song by Crosby and Nash comes on. The name of the song is "Take the Money and Run."

Several weeks later the team is going to Eden to play a game. They leave the Granville Towers parking lot in Chapel Hill at 1 o'clock. It is Sunday, and the ride to Eden is quiet. The car is air-conditioned.

Duckett, Barrett and Jones talk about the game the night before. Ford didn't play because he was sick. The fans raised hell about it.

Four cars are in the caravan. Ford is with two players from Princeton. They will play in the game today. Jones, Crompton, Zaliagiris and Alan Caldwell will make up the rest of the team. Caldwell is Carolina's senior defensive back — a football player.

The cars find their way to the gym only after following Crompton to his home by mistake and then stopping to ask directions. Ford's car is lost back in the traffic.

The team arrives at 3:15 to find that the game was supposed to start at 2 p.m.

"You guys messed us up this time," hollers one bystander.

"Where's Ford?" yells another fan.

There is no response as Jones, Zaliagiris and Caldwell walk to the locker room. When they enter the gym, the crowd begins to clap.

Barrett sets up his table in the lobby. In the locker room the players talk with a man from a radio station. The game is going to be broadcast. Everyone waits for Ford.

"Tom are you going to play pro ball?" "I'll have to wait and see how the draft comes out."

"Jones, where do you play ball?" "I'm just a friend who was invited to play. I go to school at Elon."

"You're sure Ford is coming? These people have been waiting for two hours."

"He was right behind us. He'll be here."

In the gym the other team warms up.

They have several big names in their line-up. Melvin Watkins, formerly of UNC-Charlotte, and Doug Eggleston, a former Carolina player, will both play.

A tall black man sits in the stands wearing a hat. He talks to some of the young kids around him. Since the Boston Celtics are out of the NBA playoffs, "Cornbread" Maxwell is in North Carolina visiting. He came to the game with his friend and ex-teammate Watkins.

The hosts are afraid that Ford will not show up.

"We've already had a couple of hundred people leave!"

Duckett gets on the microphone and tells the audience that Ford had to stop for gas and that he will be there shortly.

Suddenly a roar goes up in the gym. Ford has arrived.

The crowd surrounds him as he walks to the locker room. He is quiet. He coughs as he gets dressed.

"Boy, we were worried you weren't going to make it," says a man in the locker room.

"Jimmy, come here boy. This is Phil Ford. Your hero."

The boy stares at Ford.

"Well, get his autograph."

Ford signs the picture thrust at him. Crompton and Zaliagiris warm up with a basketball.

The man starts to talk to Crompton.

"Geff, I hope you'll dunk one for the kids. Everyone wants to see you dunk one. Look here boys, if you were this big you'd be a football player. You going to play football Geff?"

"I don't know." Crompton smiles and looks at the ceiling.

Finally at 3:30 the players from Carolina take the court. The game begins, and Carolina scores first. The fans scream. During each break in the game the fans try to get the players' autographs.

In the lobby Barrett sells out of almost everything he has on the table.

Maxwell shakes his head as the game continues. A technical foul is called on Zaliagiris. The players yell at the referee.

As Carolina builds up a lead the fans attention is drawn to the antics of Crompton. He is smiling, falling on the ground and dunking whenever he can.

At halftime the rush for autographs begins again. Even this 5-foot-9 writer signs some autographs, despite explaining that he just travels with the team occasionally. The people want autographs, anybody's.

The second half starts. The game develops into a playground for one-on-one. Ford's performance is poor. He looks tired. He takes himself out of the game and starts to clown with the fans.

Carolina manages to hold on for the win.

The locker room brings a few moments of peace for the players. Maxwell comes in to say hello to Ford. As the door opens, the screams of the autograph seekers can be heard.



"Where's Ford?" "Get out here!" "Hurry up!"

They are crowded around the dressing room door. Most of them are kids. The players ask them to wait a few minutes. Maxwell looks at Ford who is

sitting on a bench.

"Man, why are you doing this?" Ford reaches into his gym bag. He picks up a check and shows it to Maxwell. "That's one reason."

The mob outside will not be quieted. A young black boy starts to clown around with the players. When he realizes that the people outside are annoying the players, he tries to make them leave. It is useless.

"Get outa here. Can't you see they're trying to get dressed?"

"Come on Keith, you're in there."

"I'm the body guard. Now get outa here man, or you going to get these." He balls up his fist.

The autograph seekers laugh.

The players get up to leave. Ford tells everyone to head straight for the car. The door opens, and the crowd surrounds the players. Ford is engulfed by them.

Thirty minutes later, three cars stop at MacDonald's for food. Ford signs a couple of autographs and then sees the reporter who has shadowed him all day.

"Hey man, what are you doing?" "A story on barnstorming. It's a circus."

"Yeah, it really is."

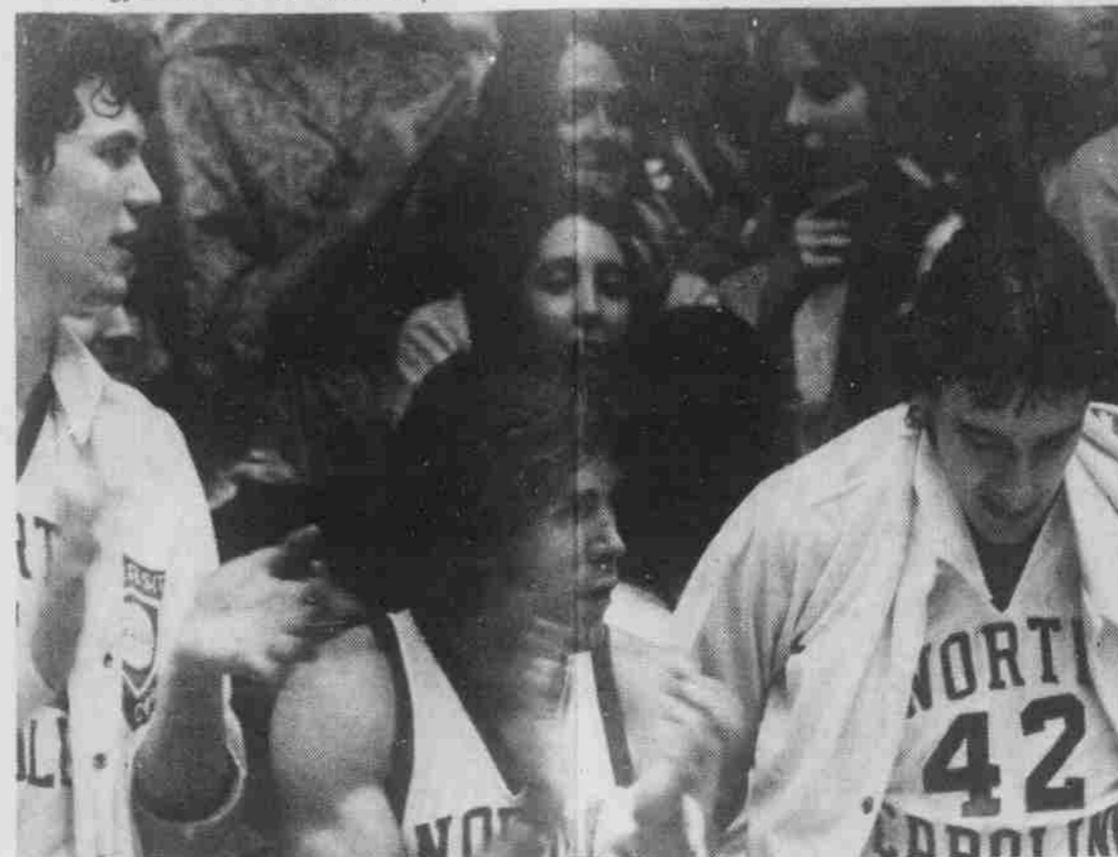
"Why do you do it?"

Ford reaches into his pocket and pulls out a tremendous wad of money. He starts to count it.

"But you're going to have all the money you want when you go pro."

"Yeah. Tradition, too, I guess. All the seniors do it."

The Crosby and Nash song comes back: "Take the money and run."



Former Carolina player Dave Hanners (right) stands next to Mitch Kupchak during a game a few years ago. Hanners is one of several Tar Heels who play in the exhibitions throughout the state.

