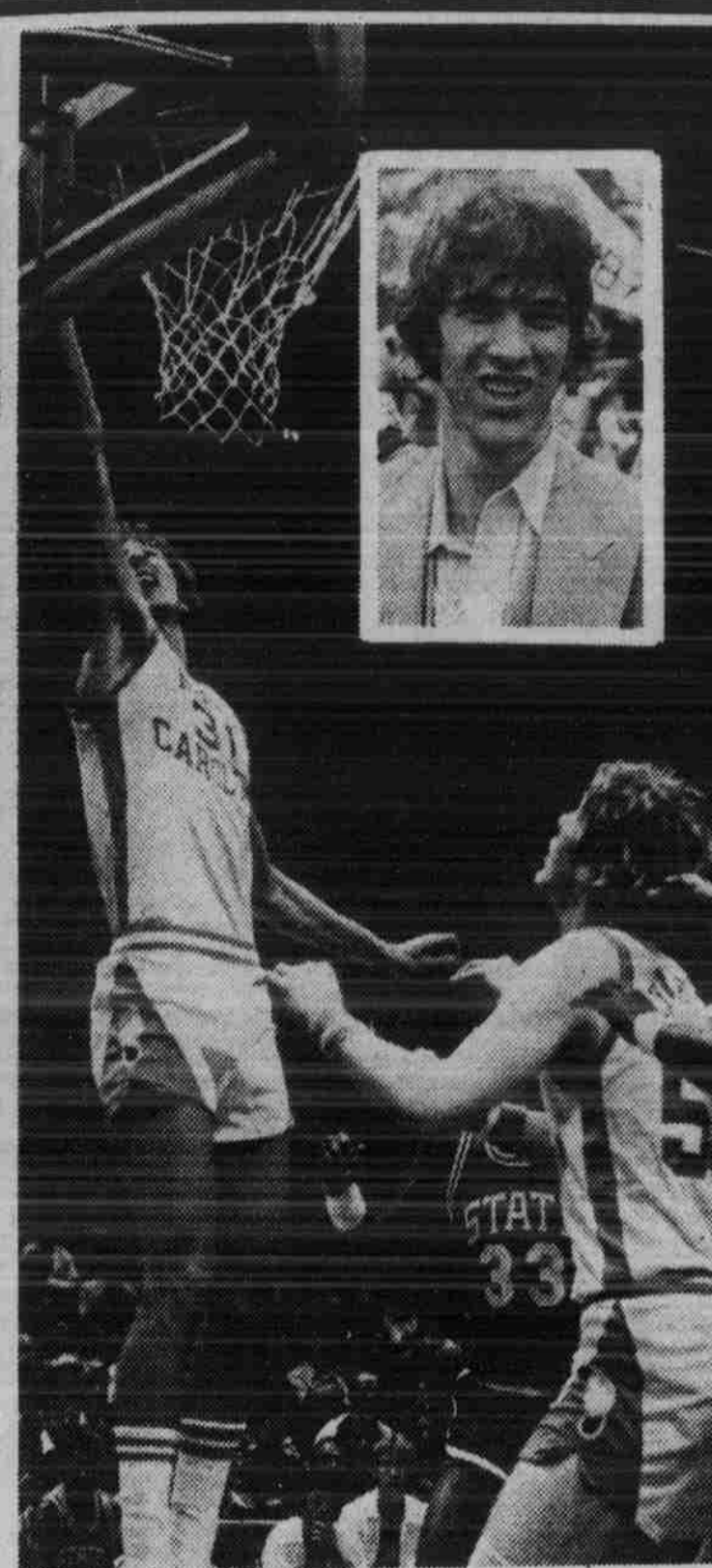
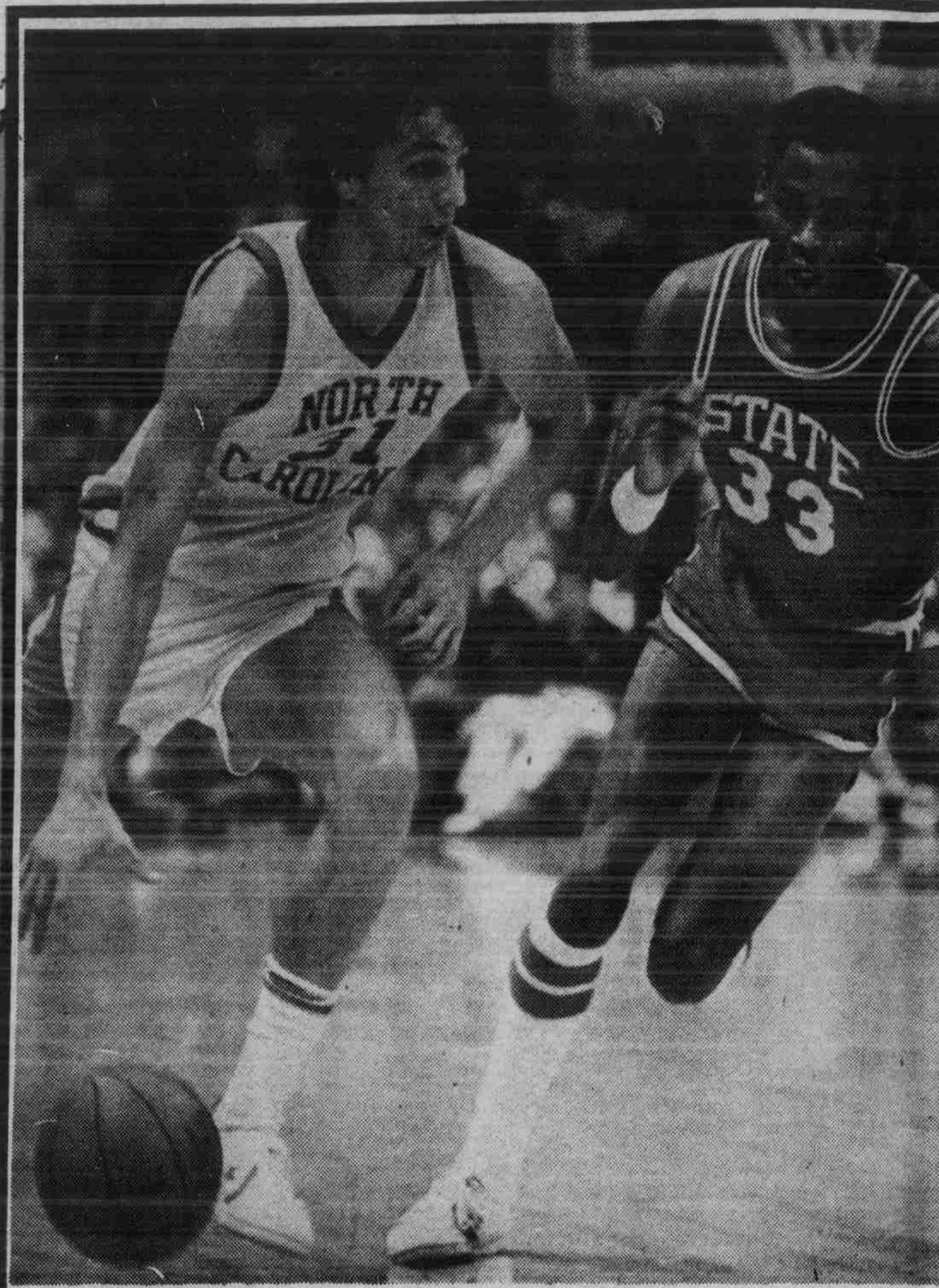


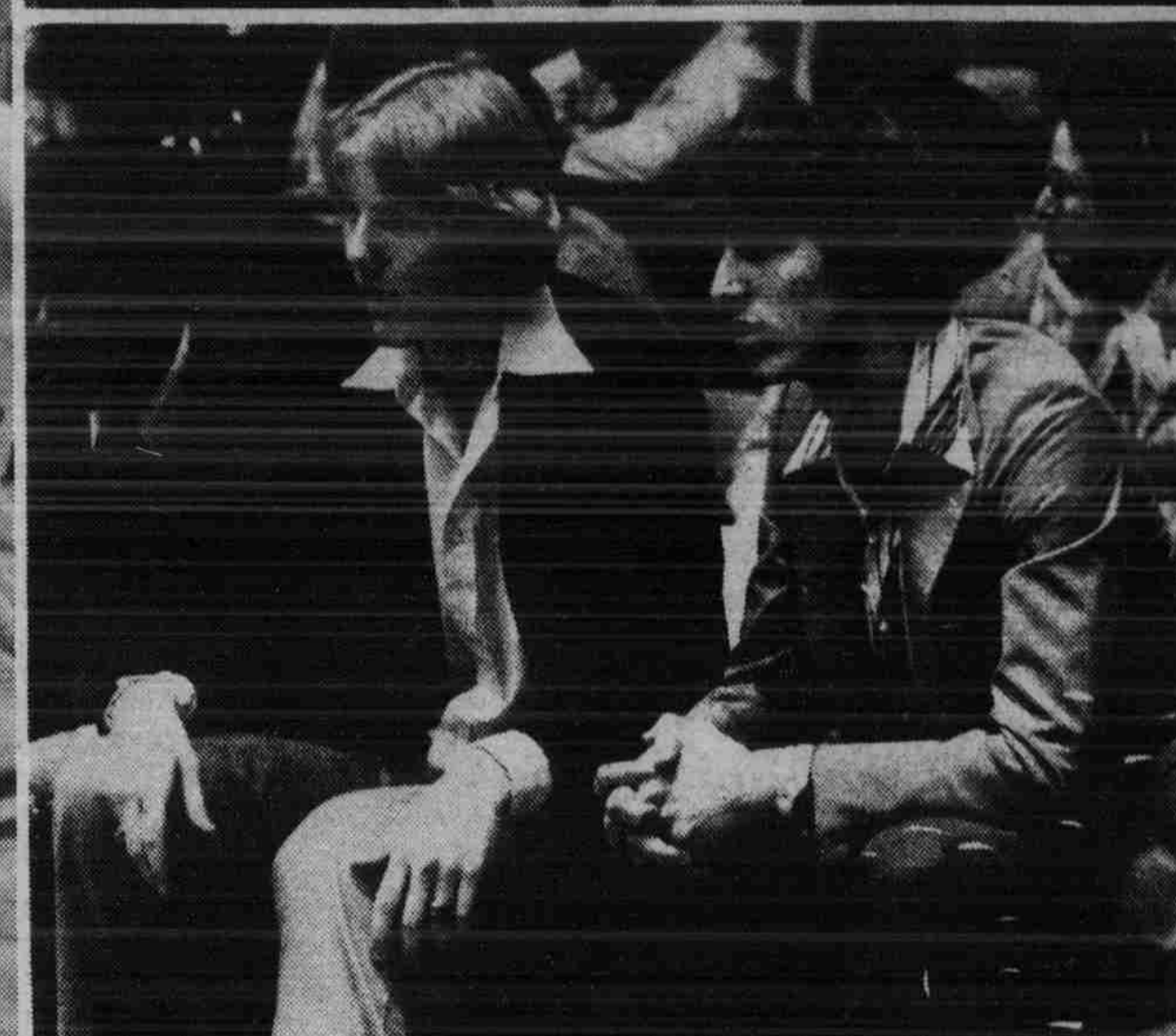
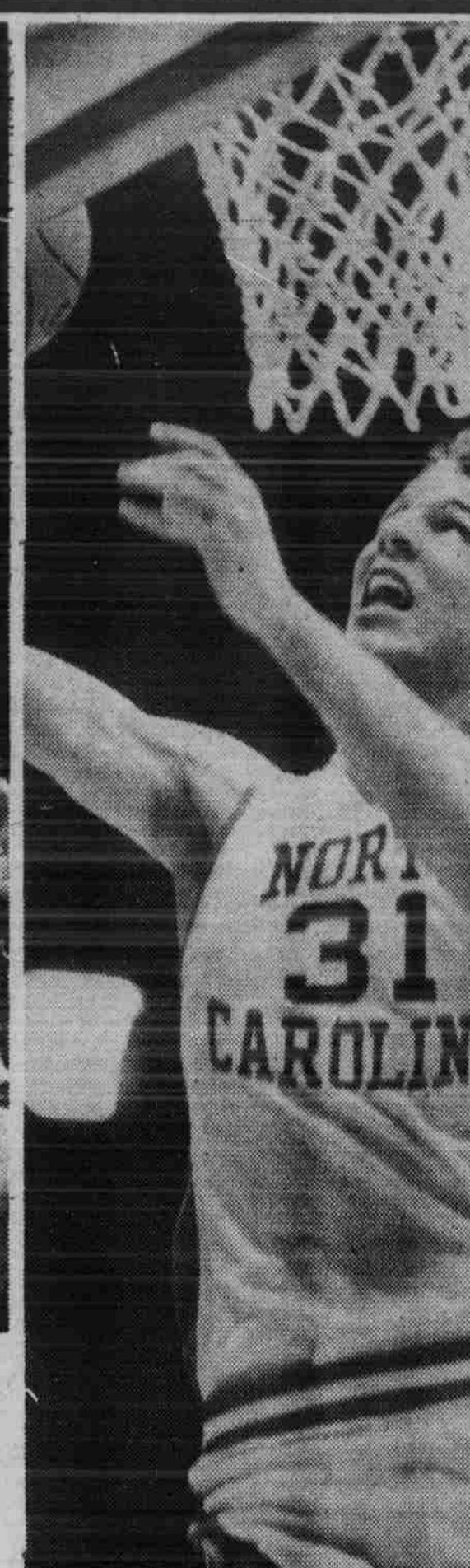
DR. O'K

Can a wild and crazy sort of guy from New Jersey find happiness in the South? Damn right.

by LEE PACE



Clockwise, from left—O'Koren driving against N.C. State's Art Jones in last year's Big Four; a layup the same night; reaching for the rim against Maryland; relaxing on campus with a friend; watching loss last year at State alongside fellow cripples Phil Ford and Rich Yonakor.



Mike O'Koren stands on a wooden platform in back of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house one warm afternoon in September 1978, his arms around two of his friends—Rich Yonakor and Jeff Wolf. Basketball practice, still over a month away, is tucked into the back of their minds; thoughts of give-and-gos, run-and-jumps and full-court presses surface only when there's nothing better to think about. The important matter at hand is a beer-chugging contest; O'Koren and his pals are the judges.

"Hey Mike," yells an observer, "when you gonna chug?"

O'Koren doesn't hear him, but takes a swallow from his cup anyway. He laughs and jokes with the people around him, chats with the beer chuggers and helps those already blown to oblivion on and off the platform, the whole time his face looking like that of a hyperactive 6-year-old. "I'm always hip for a good time," O'Koren says.

Mike O'Koren sits behind a table in a motel ballroom in Greensboro one day last month, wearing a nice three-piece suit but looking like he'd rather be sporting jeans and a T-shirt. He wiggles in his chair as he talks with sportswriters about the upcoming season and tells them stories about his two years playing basketball at Carolina and his 18 years growing up in Jersey City, N.J. O'Koren gives straight answers to all questions; this is a guy who'd tell the president, with all due respect, of course, that his fly is undone.

For that very reason, writers enjoy talking with O'Koren. He talks with people—not to them or at them like many people with equal or even less fame. He'd be an excellent interview even if he'd never touched a basketball in his life; the tragedy is that no one would want to interview him. Teammate Ged Doughton surveyed O'Koren and his

audience. "He's never without words. Ask him any question in the world and he'll talk and talk. What you see is Mike O'Koren the way he really is."

Mike O'Koren sits on a metal chair in Atlanta's Omni one night in March, 1977, trying to shut out the whoops and hollers of Marquette University fans celebrating their team's 67-59 win over Carolina in the NCAA finals. He accepts the comforting shoulder of teammate Walter Davis. There he weeps openly, unashamed, just like real people do. "Mike is a real person," says Duke sophomore Gene Banks, who toured Russia with O'Koren last summer. "He'll say what he thinks and act what he feels." Duke's Jim Spanarkel, a high school teammate of O'Koren's in Jersey City, says, "Mike's always emotional. That's just the way he is."

Dunking a basketball, partying, telling jokes, applauding his teammates, suffering after a loss, working with children, winning, having fun—all are a part of the way Mike O'Koren is.

Mike O'Koren came to Chapel Hill from Jersey City an 18-year-old aged beyond his years, a young man who had been tempted and tested by the evils and rigors of a cluttered, smoky, threatening city. If not for guidance from his mother and his friends, as well as from a reasonable head on his shoulders, O'Koren could be a shriveled old man now with more needle marks than a pin cushion or a bitter young man wasting his life away in a grimy penitentiary. "I had an interesting childhood, that's for sure," he says.

O'Koren's father died when Mike was 8 years old. His mother worked long hours to keep Mike and his older brother Ronnie and older sister Marianne fed, clothed and sheltered. O'Koren enjoyed spinning tops and playing a game with bottle caps as a small

child. In the sixth grade, he took up a new game—basketball. His friends called him Little—"I wasn't very big yet"—and led him day after day to St. Joseph's schoolyard where college kids and high school kids, black kids and white kids, good kids and bad kids met all year long to play basketball.

"I really didn't think I had much talent," O'Koren says. "I really didn't. I just kept playing because I enjoyed it. I looked at the guys who played somewhere, and it seemed they enjoyed college. I thought maybe I could go someday."

And even on days O'Koren didn't feel like playing, neighborhood cronies like Gibby, Space, Stymie and Marty—all older than O'Koren—would come by the housing development on Palisades Avenue where O'Koren and his mother lived and drag young O'Koren to the schoolyard. There he learned to sneak between three defenders hanging in mid-air, to use his arms and elbows and body strength to gain rebounding position, to hustle, to shoot, and perhaps most important of all, to be a little cocky. "You didn't want to lose those games. If you lost you had to sit out for a while. The games got really tough. Sometimes there were some pretty hard feelings."

Rich Yonakor has visited Jersey City, the place that comprises the essence of Mike O'Koren. "Mike learned that to survive he had to be tough, he couldn't back down from anybody. And I'm not just talking about on the basketball court. He knew he couldn't take anything off anyone; if he did, he'd be marked for life."

Away from the schoolyard O'Koren and his pals could be found wandering the streets of Jersey—sometimes running the streets for various and sundry reasons—or throwing a good party in a bar, on a street

corner or in an available apartment. "My friends like to have a good time," O'Koren says. "If that means going out and getting drunk and getting rowdy, they do it. They're free with themselves. Sometimes they'll get in trouble and then go right out and do the same thing over again."

One of O'Koren's buddies, upset after a bad afternoon on the basketball court, walked into a bar, picked up the television set and chucked it through the front window. "He's crazy," says O'Koren.

O'Koren's friends, although they raised hell as well as Jersey's rowdiest (they may have been Jersey's rowdiest), were also guardians and disciplinarians to their younger companion. When things got too wild, someone was always around to see that O'Koren didn't get into too much trouble, though O'Koren says he could manage himself. "I wasn't brave enough to do anything real bad," he says.

When O'Koren was 12 he and his accomplices rifled a freight yard. They got away—temporarily, at least—with a crate of orange juice. But after a cop chased them down, O'Koren came away with a black eye. "Steimy was my junior high coach. He didn't like me doing that. He lit into me at practice. I figured I better straighten up. I didn't like going to practice and getting punched out. Steimy knew I was easily led. He had to come down on me. Those guys are like night and day. They'd go out and do stuff that if they caught me doing, they'd smack the hell out of me."

"If they wanted to do something, I'd usually go along with it, unless it was completely outrageous. I'd act tough but just hope they didn't go crazy. And then after I started doing good in high school I settled down. If the little kids saw me standing on the street corner drinking they'd think 'Hey, if Mike does it we

can do it.' I didn't like the thought of setting a bad example."

O'Koren had another consideration for sticking to basketball and staying out of trouble: his mother, Rose. "Mike is a warm, warm human being," Dean Smith says. "When I visited he was more concerned about whether his mother was comfortable than anything else." Rose O'Koren works long hours for low wages at Christ Hospital in Jersey City. Someday her son hopes to parlay a professional basketball career into some ease and comfort for her, for luxuries she's never known. "Mike and his mother are very, very close," Jeff Wolf says.

"My mother sort of left it up to me what I did," O'Koren says. "She trusted me to do what was right. I returned that trust by never doing anything to hurt her. She was never really interested in basketball, but she could tell if I'd had a good day. She could just look at me and tell if I'd done alright. She could also tell if I'd done bad. That's why I could never lie to her about anything. She could always tell."

So Mike O'Koren headed south in August, 1976, tough, strong, determined, but in some respects innocent and unaffected. Having endured 18 years of hardship and toil, O'Koren was ready for a new environment. He found it in Chapel Hill.

Mike O'Koren slipped into his new life with relative ease, but then O'Koren could probably find his way to the hearts of a tribe of desert Indians or a clan of uppity lords and ladies. "Mike's always friendly, always easy-going," Jeff Wolf says. "He gets along well with any type of person. He can walk up to a complete stranger and start talking. He can relate to anyone." Dudley Bradley says, "Mike brought his happy-go-lucky attitude to Carolina. He saw

the nice, easy atmosphere here and decided to just relax and be Mike O'Koren."

O'Koren's closest friends came from among the other five freshmen signed that year by Dean Smith: Wolf, Yonakor, Dave Colescott, John Virgil and Steve Krafcsin. The closest of those was Yonakor, his roommate. That became apparent to millions as the joyous freshmen hugged each other during and after each close victory in that magic streak in 1977 that led to the NCAA finals.

"Mike and I had the same problems that year," Yonakor says. "We were both a long way from home, in a new environment. You had to have someone to talk your problems out with. The six of us knew we had to help each other out. We knew if we were going to have to live together for the next four years we'd have to be close."

O'Koren adjusted well on the court, too. He started his first game as a freshman and from there averaged 13.9 points, hit 57 percent from the floor and led the Tar Heels in rebounding. Last season he scored 17.3 points a game, hit 64.3 percent of his field goals and once again led the team in rebounding. As a junior he's been named to several preseason All-America teams, and, with Phil Ford and his jumpshots and bunny hops now in the NBA, O'Koren is the Tar Heels' leader, both in basketball talent and emotional firepower. "Since I've started for two years, with my experience I hope I can spread something to the younger guys," he says. "We'll see what we're made of this year."

And that will be simply another proving ground for Mike O'Koren. He welcomes the challenge.