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Have Tar Heels actually come of age?

At the time it struck me as being a bit forced, an unnecessary effort to conceptualize the unconceivable. Woody Durham, "the voice of the Tar Heels," was preparing to deliver the post-mortem by radio from Clemson, S.C., after North Carolina lost to the Tigers, 20-12, despite having played its best game of the season.

The Tar Heels, said Woody, had "come of age." I slept well Saturday night. Maybe it was the empty air time; the game was over and Woody needed something to say. Or maybe it was to keep listeners glued for the post-game show, a page out of the Batman and Robin tune-in-tomorrow textbook of mystification and suspense.

Probably, though, it was the truth. North Carolina had come of age. Whatever that meant.

Michael DeSisti

But I can't crack on Woody. Something happened on Saturday, and he was just trying to describe it. Something besides the Tar Heels' third loss of the season. Something good.

"It hurt because we felt like we played good enough to win and we (lost)," Ethan Horton said. "We played them tooth and nail to the end, but we didn't win. And that's frustrating."

The effort, however, may not have been in vain. "Now we expect more of ourselves," the senior tailback continued. "We know we can go out every Saturday and play like that."

Coming of age is getting easier to define; the ambiguity is fading. I think it means confidence.

I think it means North Carolina, a team that returned only four starters on defense this year and 11 in all, is one month more experienced. And one month, especially one featuring Napoleon McCallum (Navy tailback), Doug Flutie (Boston College quarterback) and William Perry (Clemson University with shoulder pads), makes a difference.

Woody, you're a genius. "While it's painful, the schedule has forced us to improve," said head coach Dick Crum.

Crum spent most of 1983 fielding (or dodging, as it were) questions about the potential and probable effects of North Carolina's pitiful non-conference schedule during weeks one

through four. The answer became obvious after consecutive losses to Maryland, Clemson and Virginia turned the No. 3 team in the nation, then an undefeated enigma because of its lack of competition, into a 7-3 ACC also-ran. The Tar Heels finished the season 8-4, losing to Florida State by 25 points in the Peach Bowl.

This year there's a chance that just the opposite might happen. The early-season schedule, "young team or not, has been challenging. Early-season losses may turn into late-season wins, the memories of which seem to weather the winter relatively well.

Comparing the progress of the 1983 and 1984 Tar Heels over their first four games, Crum said this year's team was an easy winner.

"(On a scale of one to 10) Last year's team went from zero to about negative two, negative three," he said. "This year's team went from zero to seven or eight."

The simple truth of the matter is that North Carolina, with a 1-3 record, can still play football for more than just pride. A 5-1 record in the ACC would give North Carolina a winning season, and it could earn the Tar Heels the conference title.

National rankings and bowl bids are nice — and extremely improbable. A winning season is respectable — and within reach.

But first, the defensive secondary has to file its fourth quarter presto-faldo act. Against Navy: the 60-yard desperation pass for the winning touchdown with 2:24 to play. Against Kansas: the pass interference call on fourth and eight that kept the Jayhawks' final touchdown drive alive and trimmed a 23-10 margin to six points with 0:09 remaining. Against Clemson: the 76-yard Mike Eppley-to-Terrance Roulhac pass that gave the Tigers a 13-10 lead less than five minutes into the fourth quarter and swung the game's momentum for good.

"We've just got to take that flaw out of the fourth quarter," Crum said.

Not only does North Carolina have to take that flaw out, but it has to make its offense more end zone efficient. Yardage looks good on paper, but it doesn't mean much on the scoreboard if the goal line isn't included. Potential, and there's lots, has to be realized.

The conference schedule begins Saturday against Wake Forest at 12:20 p.m. at Groves Stadium in Winston-Salem. Said Horton: "We want to get that (ACC championship) ring."

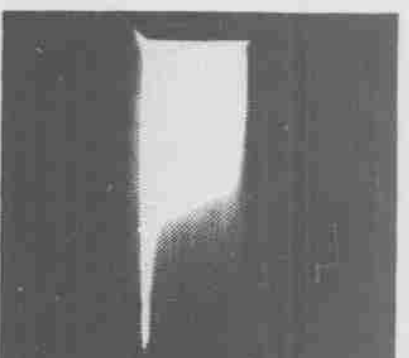
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