

The rough evolution of a player

Bucknall working hard to earn playing time, respect

By JAMES SUROWIECKI
Assistant Sports Editor

It isn't always easy being a freshman basketball player at a big-name school. To be sure, there are the J.R. Reids and Derrick Colemans, rookies who make immediate and substantial contributions.

But for many freshmen, that first year is a humbling period of adjustment and education, on and off the court. The transition from high school superstar to someone who intimately knows every grain of wood on the bench can be a destructive process, and how one handles that process thus defines the kind of player one becomes.

These are not abstract sentiments to UNC's Steve Bucknall, a 6-6 defensive demon who learned last year that a light-blue uniform isn't always easy to wear. The sophomore arrived in Chapel Hill from London, via Governor Dummer Academy — a Massachusetts boarding school. His path since then has not been easy, and he may be excused for wondering if the road less-traveled would have made all the difference.

Bucknall, of course, was one of three highly-touted freshmen, along with Kevin Madden and Jeff Lebo, whom Dean Smith corralled for the 1985-1986 season. Although Bucknall had averaged 30 points and 14 rebounds a game as a senior, he was in many circles regarded as the lesser light of the three.

Madden's travails have been well-documented, and the same is true of Lebo's success. Bucknall to some extent remains the unknown quantity. Down the stretch last year, there was talk that he was performing well in practice on the defensive end, but that he wasn't getting playing time because he was careless with the ball. No one was sure.

This year, there has been a gradual change. Bucknall has played in tough games in clutch times. And if he still looks a bit uncertain when UNC has the ball, almost self-consciously unselfish, his impact defensively and on the boards cannot be overlooked.

"The biggest difference between this year and last is that I have more confidence in my play," Bucknall

said. "I've got a lot more minutes being played, and that's made me more enthusiastic. I feel like my work in practice is paying off."

That work is what Bucknall's teammates mention first when they talk about him. In some sense, until Bucknall begins playing regularly, practice will be the forum where he can best parade his talents. And so he approaches it with a passion.

"Steve's a great defensive player and he's a great offensive and defensive rebounder," J.R. Reid said. "It's scary the way he grabs rebounds in practice. You know you have to really box him out."

Reid's freshman frontcourt compatriot, Scott Williams, echoed those sentiments. "Steve's incredible in practice," he said. "He's always diving after loose balls, grabbing rebounds, doing whatever it takes."

The increase in time spent away from the bench has dimmed the sense of frustration Bucknall felt last year. And talking about it now, he dismisses the notion that he resented his lack of a role. But the tone in his voice when he speaks of riding the pine suggests otherwise.

"It wasn't resentment, it was reality," he said. "You have to realize it's going to be tough to hit 30 just coming in, or at any time, for that matter. But I know I can do a good job, can hit the open shot and go to the boards hard."

No player's place on the Tar Heels is more uncertain than Bucknall's. His natural position is small forward, and UNC has no one who plays there either consistently or capably. But the lineup of three big men has restricted Bucknall to duty as a scrappy defensive sparkplug. The future may change that. For now, though, he waits for the call and uses practice to make sure the phone isn't off the hook.

"You go out every day and play hard," Bucknall said, "and Coach is going to see that you can play. Then you hope he'll give you a couple of minutes here and there."

From center stage to a couple of minutes in the wings. For Bucknall, that's where the road to Chapel Hill has taken him. So far.



Steve Bucknall drives the lane against UVa.

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IM hoops

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distinct personality.

The predominant colors of blue and white are apparent as most competitors wear the traditional reversible jerseys, but a smattering of all colors dot the gym as some dorm and fraternity teams create their own colorful versions.

Jerseys, however, are not the most creative aspect of IM basketball. Where else will you find team names like "We Lose," "Foreplay," and "The Home Boys," as well as a stunning array of others?

Most participants in intramural basketball agree that it is enjoyable because it allows for semi-competitive play without the intense pressure that takes the fun away.

Karlah Burton, a junior from High Point, plays in both the Co-Rec and the Women's competitive league. "I played in high school and considered playing in college, but intramurals is a fun basketball outlet without being really time consuming," she said.

Mike Berard and Clay Hodges both play for "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" of Old East Dorm. "Intramurals give you a chance to meet other ball players and to show your stuff," Berard said.

Hodges also enjoys most aspects of IM ball, but relates a problem that he has experienced before. "Whenever a time-out is called late in a game, everybody on the team decides he wants to be the coach and calls their own little play. It usually ends up that whoever gets the ball first is going to shoot anyway."

Carol Geer plays on a women's recreational team, Pi Beta Phi. "I like playing because it's good organized exercise and it's a fun activity for our sorority," she said.

Sam Gore misses the excitement of the high school sports he was

involved with, and is glad for the opportunity to get to play with some of his high school buddies. Gore says playing for the "Home Boys," is very competitive, "but not to the point where the fun is taken away."

Perhaps the biggest difference between IM ball and regular pick-up ball in Woollen is the addition of student referees. Roughly 60 refs take turns working three or four nights a week in three-game shifts.

Of the lack of respect accorded the officials, Hardin Watkins, a junior from Hendersonville, said, "The players are generally well behaved. Most of them know that we are students and that the idea behind the league is to have fun." When asked why he decided to take on the job, Watkins said, "I like basketball and I needed money."

Intramural basketball is a tradition at a school that loves the sport, where even the tragic hero of the opening scene can find redemption.

Time is running out. The game is tied. The mad bomber gets the long rebound from a missed shot and heads upcourt. Mr. Hog chips in his advice. "You missed earlier, make up for it by shooting now!"

As he crouches for the jumper, his teammates' eyes look murderous. "We'll simply kill him after the game," they think bitterly. As he reaches the peak of his jump, his defender retreats. "Good. Overtime," he thinks.

But to the surprise of everyone, the mad bomber has whipped an overhead pass to a cutting teammate for a layup. Buzzer. Basket's good.

A lesson has been learned, a game has been won. Not a national championship, but a win nonetheless, and another exciting contest is history in intramural basketball.

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