

Backfield rebuilds after losing Martin, Dorn

By DAVID J. KUPSTAS

Staff Writer

Talent-wise, the departure of tailback Kennard Martin should not leave the Tar Heel running game high and dry this fall.

The Tar Heels have a group of multi-talented tailbacks who could eventually make up for the loss of Martin as well as tailback-turned-cornerback Torin Dorn. But as soon as you check the stats for how much experience this year's runners have, Martin and Dorn become very desirable commodities.

Consider that Martin's 192 carries in 1988 are more than four times the combined total of all current UNC running backs. Fullback Michael Benefield (38 carries, 180 yards in 1988) and tailback Aaron Staples (6 carries, 25 yards) are the only two on this year's team to have ever taken a handoff in a Tar Heel uniform.

Martin's 1,194 yards will be missed, but the general attitude around the North Carolina camp is that the young tailbacks will fill the void just fine.

"We know Kennard was a good running back, but we're not going to worry about that right now because I think we've got a good running back corps, and we'll make up for Kennard's absence," said tailback Eric Blount.

UNC will depend mostly on three runners each at tailback and fullback. Using that many backs throughout a game allows the Tar Heels to play as many players as possible. The rotation also keeps runners fresh into the fourth quarter, a time when opposing defenses that don't substitute much have worn down.

"I don't mind playing as many people as I need to as long as they don't take anything away from us being able to execute anything we want on offense," said running backs coach Milo McCarthy.

Benefield, a 5-foot-8, 205-pound junior, is the elder statesman in the backfield. James Thompson started at fullback last year, but Benefield played almost every other down, bringing in plays from the sidelines.

He emerged in the final game of 1988 at Duke, both as a runner and a blocker. He ran for 68 yards on just

eight carries while blocking for Martin, who ran for a season-high 291 yards.

Benefield decided not to rest on his laurels after that performance. He jumped straight into a conditioning program after the season ended. The effort won him the Morris Mason award, which is given to a player who has made outstanding speed and strength improvements in the off-season program and who showed great dedication and leadership in the process.

"Coach (Mack) Brown's philosophy is that he wants us to be as strong at the beginning of the year as we are at the end of the year," Benefield said. "I just felt that the way the season had gone, I was at the point where I could really improve."

The conditioning program couldn't help Benefield in one area, however.

"I'd like to get taller," he said jokingly. "No, really, I need to concentrate on catching the ball more and getting the proper technique."

While he may kid about wanting more height, Benefield's present size seems to give him good body leverage, and he displays good balance as a runner with his low-to-the-ground style.

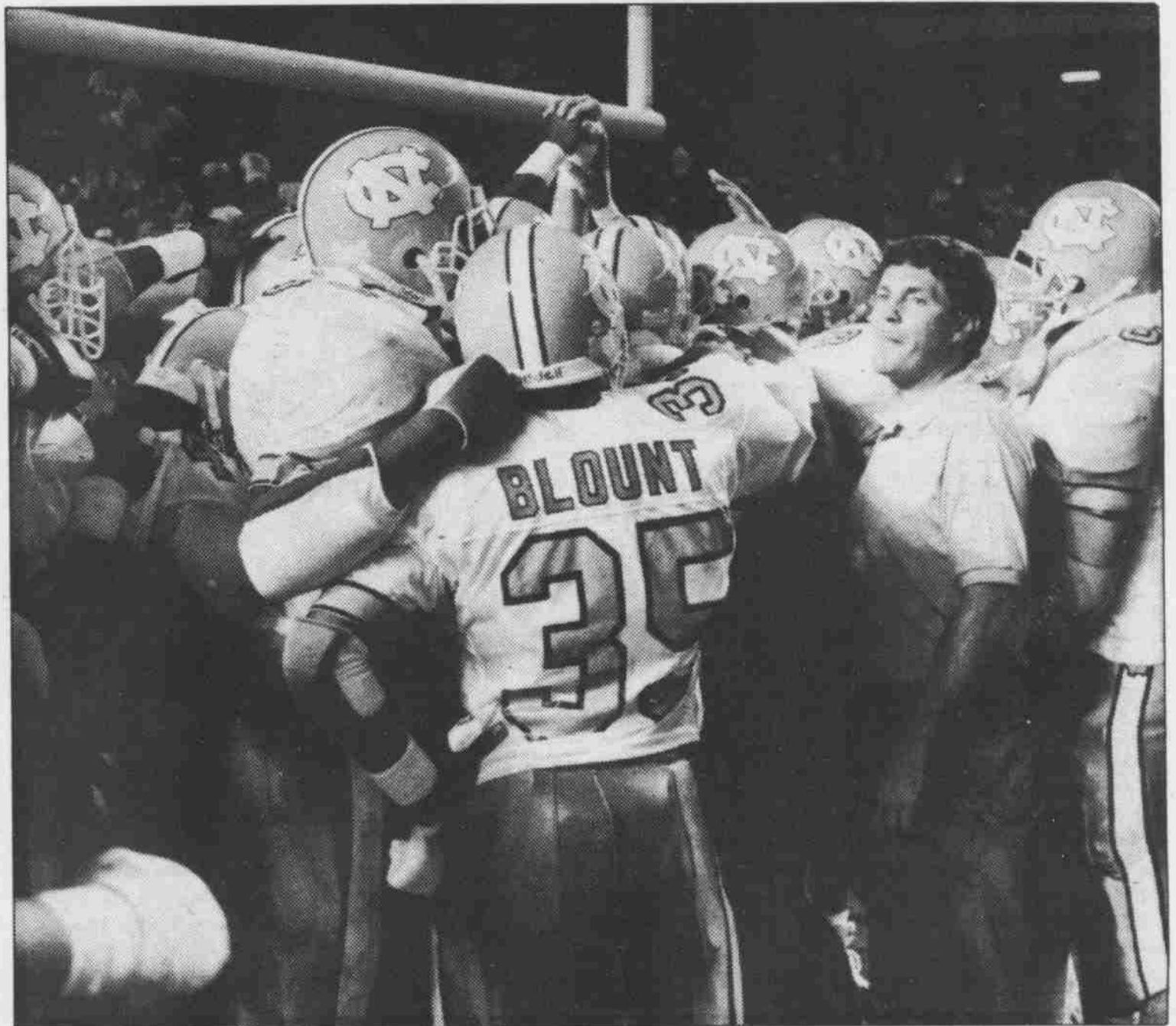
Red-shirt freshman Mike Faulkerson (6-1, 219) will alternate with Benefield at fullback. Faulkerson, a strong inside runner and good blocker, came out of spring practice as one of the most improved players on the team.

B.J. Runyon (6-4, 218) is another red-shirt freshman who will play fullback. He was an outside linebacker before being switched to fullback in the last week of spring practice.

Staples (5-9 1/2, 196), a senior, is getting his first chance as a starter at tailback. After sitting out the 1986 season, Staples was a reserve defensive back in 1987. He switched to tailback the following spring.

An ankle injury slowed Staples for much of 1988, a year in which he saw spot action at both tailback and fullback. His ankle is recovered now, and Staples is ready to show what he can do on a full-time basis.

"I feel like I've paid my dues," he said. "I've done everything I've been asked, and it's just time for me to



Mack Brown is hoping defenders end up chasing tailback Eric Blount's new number (12) all year long

play."

When UNC gets the ball near the goal line, Staples is likely to get the call. He is known for getting the tough yards and has a knack for falling forward when tackled.

"He's a tough, hard-nosed, solid runner," McCarthy said. "We feel comfortable with Aaron. He may not have the speed of Blount or (Randy) Jordan, but he's a good, solid football player who will give us a lot of leadership."

Blount (5-8, 183) and Jordan (5-10, 191), both sophomores, will see plenty of time at tailback also. Both give the Tar Heels speed and pass-catching ability out of the backfield.

Blount is switching back to his natural position after spending his freshman year at wide receiver. The move back to tailback was made at the beginning of summer practice when Martin's status on the football team became uncertain.

Jordan, who set a state record in the 100-meter dash as a junior in high school with a 10.44 effort, will provide additional speed out of the backfield. He did not practice or play in

1988 because of Proposition 48.

"The year off was a very trying time for me, and it made me learn a lot about myself," Jordan said. "I have a different drive and determination to play this year."

Staples, Blount and Jordan have a hold on the top three tailback spots, which means that incoming freshmen Derrick Henderson (6-1, 185) and Antuam Williams (5-10, 190) will likely be red-shirted.

UNC Football Schedule

1989 SCHEDULE			1988 RESULTS	
Sept.	9	VMI	10	South Carolina 31
	16	at Kentucky	0	Oklahoma 28
	23	at N.C. State	34	Louisville 38
	30	NAVY	21	Auburn 47
Oct.	7	WAKE FOREST	24	Wake Forest 42
	14	at Virginia	3	N.C. State 48
	21	at Georgia Tech	20	Georgia Tech 17
	28	at Maryland	38	Maryland 41
Nov.	4	CLEMSON	14	Clemson 37
	11	SOUTH CAROLINA	24	Virginia 27
	18	DUKE	29	Duke 35

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