

# No more words: Tar Heels turn to actions to fulfill bowl pursuit

By Warren Hynes  
Sports Editor

In 5th season at helm, Brown takes upstart team into even more upstart league

They tried "1-1-91." Then they tried "1-1-92." Both times, the North Carolina football team came close — but just missed — a postseason appearance.

So what's the slogan this time around? "Nothing needs to be said. You know what you need to do. So get it done."

The words are All-ACC linebacker Tommy Thigpen's, but they could have been uttered by any member of this gridiron squad. This is a football team that has no intentions of missing another bowl game, and fancy words are not required for inspiration.

In short, this team is fired up. "Now I believe there comes a time/When everything just falls in line/We live and learn from our mistakes/The deepest cuts are healed by faith."

The words to Pat Benatar's 1988 hit "All Fired Up" are probably not ringing in the ears of any UNC football team members. But the words do seem to describe the quest of these 1992 Tar Heels.

The Mack Brown Era is a well-documented one. In four years, the UNC head coach and his team have endured two 1-10 seasons followed by back-to-back winning campaigns. It has been a splendid turnaround, marred only by the fact that bowl games have eluded the blue and white.

In '90, the Independence Bowl did extend North Carolina an invitation after UNC's 6-4-1 season. But the game took place during finals week, and UNC had to decline. A more prestigious bowl probably would have invited the Tar Heels, though, had they not lost to N.C. State 12-9 early in the season on a last-second, 56-yard field goal.

Last Nov. 23, UNC's 47-14 defeat of Duke in its final regular-season game placed the 7-4 Tar Heels in position to make the Copper Bowl should Indiana lose that day. Well, of course Indiana



Mack Brown

won, defeating Purdue 24-22 — but not before Purdue place-kicker Joe O'Leary missed a 35-yard field goal in the game's closing seconds. It was O'Leary's fourth such miss that afternoon.

So as another year dawns, they stand here in Kenan Stadium. And they are tossing bowl talk around in a big way. Just listen to the seniors:

■ "It's something you can't explain, how hard you want to get to a bowl game. There's just so much hunger and desire to get there. We will be in a bowl game on January 1." — free safety Rondell Jones

■ "This is my fifth year and this is the most I've ever been pumped up. I expect no less than a bowl this year." — fullback Mike Faulkerson

■ "Inside of me, that's the biggest motivation I have. I would really, really like to go to a bowl game this year." — Thigpen

This desire has apparently spread to the younger players.

"Twelve and oh — I definitely think we'll go 12-0," said sophomore defensive back Jimmy Hitchcock. "The guys think this is our year."

Bold statements are common this time of year. However, upon talking to these players and watching them on the field, one senses that the team chemistry and camaraderie is such that, well, just about anything can happen.

"I feel the chemistry is the best we've had right now with this football team," Brown said.

Added senior defensive tackle Austin Robbins: "The team camaraderie is real tight. We're like a family unit — real tight."

A key point in the development of

## NORTH CAROLINA

1991: 7-4, 3-4 (5th).  
**Head Coach:** Mack Brown.  
**Brown at UNC:** 15-28-1 (4 years).  
**Brown overall:** 32-56-1 (8 years).  
**Key losses:** Brian Bollinger, C; Eric Gash, LB; Clint Gwaltney, PK; Dwight Hollier, LB; Scott McAlister, P; Andrew Oberg, OT.  
**Returning lettermen:** 19 offense (5 starters), 24 defense (8).  
**Key returnees (Off.):** Corey Holliday,

**Def.:** Natrone Means, TB; Randall Parsons, C; Jason Stanicek, QB.  
**Key returnees (Def.):** Rondell Jones, FS; Jonathan Perry, LB; Thomas Smith, CB; Tommy Thigpen, LB.  
**Newcomers to watch:** Marcus Jones, DT; Marcus Wall, WR.  
**Tar Heels will roll if:** They can establish a consistent passing game.  
**Tar Heels will fold if:** Thigpen, Parsons or Means get hurt.

this team took place in July, when the team held what senior cornerback Thomas Smith called an "open forum." Brown and the players discussed problems, both on- and off-the-field, that had been troubling players.

"We were coming out with some of the things we wanted to say," Smith said. "Things that needed to be said — communicating about how we felt this year, how we would have no distractions, just to let (Brown) know that we would not be distracted socially, with the BCC (black cultural center), and with everything that's happened on campus."

So "focus" became a buzzword and Brown began to hone that focus into a team that believed it could compete with anyone.

"I don't think anyone is downright better than us when we line up man-to-man," Thigpen said.

There are a lot of teams in the Atlantic Coast Conference believing they are better than UNC right now. Five of the league's nine teams played in bowl games last year. Those five teams — Florida State, Clemson, Georgia Tech, N.C. State and Virginia — combined for 45 wins in 1991. Two of those five teams — new member FSU and old member Clemson — have combined for 102 wins over the past five seasons.

The ACC is getting so good at football that basketball may become the diversion. So if you're North Carolina, seven wins just won't cut it.

"We've got to win eight," Thigpen said. "If we had won eight last year, we would have been in a bowl."

When ACC sportswriters gathered for a preseason media day in July, they chose UNC sixth in the conference.

UNC's head coach concurred. "For you guys to pick us sixth, I agree with you," Brown said. "I think you're right, because until we prove we're better than sixth, we should be sixth."

"If we're sixth."

Ah, the underdog role. A position

Thigpen, for one, cherishes.

"I love being underdogs," he said. "If people picked us last in the ACC, that'd be great. It seems like every time we get put up there, in our heads we think we're better than we are. I just want to keep us down low, a low profile, and it'll make us rise to the top."

This team is increasing in talent every year, as Brown's in-state recruiting success continues. This year's in-state

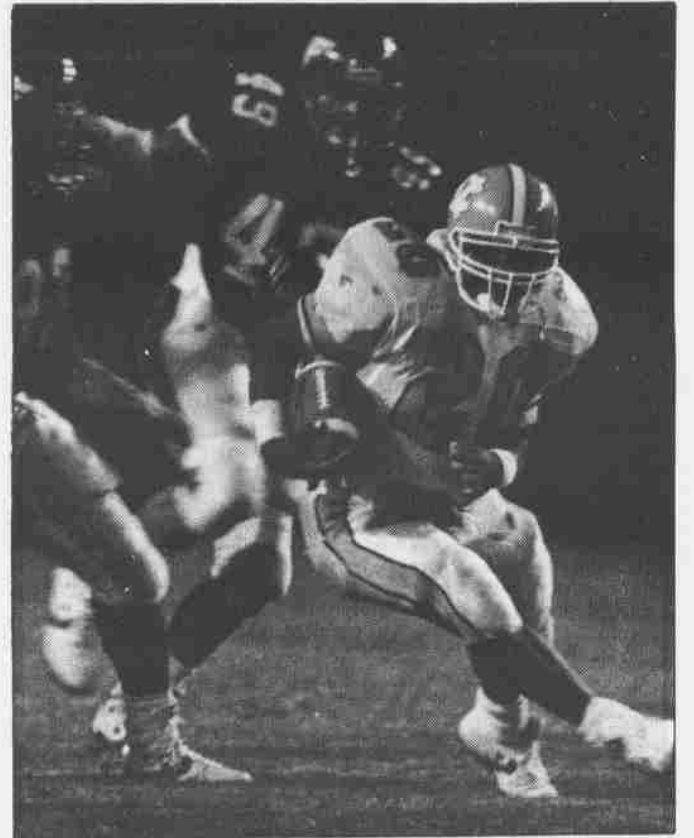
newcomers include defensive lineman Marcus Jones, the top high school prospect in the state last year; wide receiver Marcus Wall, who ran for 2,501 yards and 27 touchdowns last season; and quarterback Leon Johnson, who is now third-string on UNC's depth charts.

And the established veterans are there: Thigpen, who has made more than 100 tackles each of the last three years; tailback Natrone Means, already the 10th-leading rusher in school history; split end Corey Holliday, who is 10th in career receptions at UNC; and center Randall Parsons, regarded as one of the premier centers in college football.

But this team is not one that will be defined by talent. In terms of talent, UNC is nowhere near Florida State and Clemson; it is still a few rungs below Georgia Tech, N.C. State and Virginia.

If the Tar Heels are to crack that upper half of the league this season, and if they are to land in that sought-after bowl game, it will be because of the team's chemistry. It will be because of the kind of unity that rises above talent.

The kind of unity that rises above slogans.



DTH file photo

Natrone Means (20) gave North Carolina its record 20th 1,000-yard rusher in 1991

### UNC Schedule

Sept. 5	at Wake Forest
Sept. 12	Furman
Sept. 19	Army
Sept. 26	N.C. State
Oct. 3	Navy
Oct. 10	at Florida State
Oct. 17	Virginia
Oct. 24	Georgia Tech
Oct. 31	at Maryland
Nov. 7	at Clemson
Nov. 21	at Duke

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