

DERRICK PHELPS

Derrick gets defensive: Phelps keys point of attack

By John C. Manuel
Assistant Sports Editor

He came to UNC as part of the much-hyped class of 1994. He was one of those "can't-miss" prospects, the kind high school recruiting guru Bob Gibbons scouts.

In other words, he and the rest of his class were hyped.

But when he came to play basketball at North Carolina, Derrick Phelps was, well, a little lost.

"As a freshman, I was clueless," he said. "I didn't know what was going on."

"Then last year, I was just learning. I definitely feel comfortable now."

That should come as good news for Tar Heel fans, because the 6-foot-3, 184-pound junior will again be the main man for UNC at point guard.

Phelps had all of 1991-92 to get comfortable. After playing 30 games behind King Rice as a freshman, Phelps got the nod in all 33 UNC starts last winter, logging 1,027 minutes — second only to Hubert Davis, now of the New York Knicks.

In all those minutes, Phelps put up some respectable numbers. He led the team in assists (averaging 6.3 per game) and led the ACC in steals (2.4 per game) while scoring just more than nine points per contest.

While the many minutes could be seen as a reward for Phelps' solid, steady play at the point, they also illustrate the lack of experienced depth coach Dean Smith had available behind Phelps. Entering last season, Henrik Rödl had played some point for the German National Team, Scott Cherry was untested, Kenny Harris had transferred and Donald Williams was, well, a freshman.

The pressure and the physical pounding of being his team's sole ball-handler took its toll on the Pleasantville, N.Y., native.

"I was getting tired near the end of the year," Phelps said. "Taking the pounding and keeping me in there all the time, it was a little tiresome."

"I knew I had to be in there, but it'll

be a relief to get more rest (this year)."

Phelps' teammates, on the other hand, seem to think he handled it all right.

"Derrick has the ability to play consistently for 30 to 35 minutes every game," Rödl said. "I don't think condi-

tioning is a problem."

Cherry agreed. "Derrick's an amazing athlete. He never seems to get tired. At his height, he got some big-time rebounds for us a couple of times last year. He can really get up."

Senior forward George Lynch said that through persistence, Phelps had made himself a central figure on the Tar Heels' stage. "Derrick is one of the most valuable players on the team," Lynch said.

"For someone to come out as a sophomore and play 40 minutes (a game) in this league is incredible."

Phelps' value to Smith is seen most on the defensive end of the court. Aside from the steals, Phelps played the pressure D that Smith demands from the point guard spot.

"Derrick's amazing defensively," Smith said. "I was watching films over the summer and I appreciated him more and more."

But although Phelps has, in playground parlance, serious hops, he doesn't look to be the finisher on fast-break opportunities.

"I'm going to pass the ball," he said. "I mean, I'm the point guard. My job is to pass the ball."

This is despite the fact that Phelps has thrown down eyebrow-raising, left-handed dunks in his short UNC career. But Phelps seems right at home in Smith's System, er, philosophy of play, where point guards aren't supposed to bring attention to themselves.

"I felt more confidence last year after playing some my first year," he said. "I think of myself as an extension of Coach Smith on the floor."

And if he needs a mentor, Phelps need look no further than assistant coach Phil Ford, UNC's all-time scoring leader and second all-time assist man.

"Each and every day we work on certain drills," Phelps said. "He really helps me out a lot. If I don't understand what Coach Smith wants me to do, I ask him. He usually knows."

Smith displays enough confidence in Phelps to assume that Ford's help often isn't needed.

"Derrick's been impressive," Smith said. "He had some brilliant moments behind King two years ago. I've always had confidence in Derrick."

For Phelps to continue improving, he must gain the confidence of UNC fans and the respect of other teams by hitting the open jump shot. He shot just 40 percent from the floor last season, including 28 percent from 3-point range.

That lack of consistency has not been lost on UNC fans. Phelps didn't exactly warm their hearts after the end of last season, either. Following UNC's loss to Ohio State in the NCAA Regional Semifinals, he outlined his off-season plans.



Phelps (14) went head-to-head with Duke point guard Bobby Hurley (11) three times last season, averaging 8.0 points and 8.0 assists

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