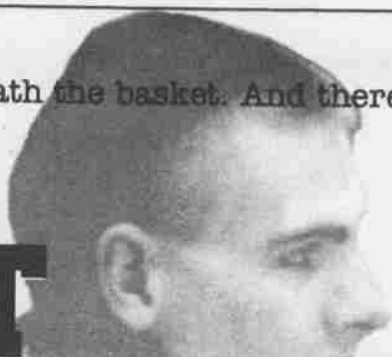


less the Tar Heels are strong underneath the basket. And there will

# & THE GIANT



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## Montross boxes out past, snatches future with flurry

By David J. Kupstas  
Senior Writer

Looking back, Eric Montross is amazed at some of the lines college basketball recruiters fed him.

"You find out real quick by the letters who you want to deal with and who you don't want to deal with and who's sincere and who's not sincere," the UNC junior said. "People said I was the ticket to a national championship and that I was going to start every game.

"At a small school, you can start every game, but I don't care where you are, one player is not going to make a difference in the national championship."

Even if that player is a 7-foot, 258-pound dominating center who led his team to an Indiana state high school title as a junior. In the early winter of 1990, Montross was a hot item, to say the least. Millions wondered where the No. 2-rated high school prospect would choose to take his talents.

Montross signed a letter of intent to play at North Carolina March 21. Now that that was over, all the pressure of the recruiting process was gone, right?

Nope.

People watched as Montross came to UNC as a freshman. Anytime anything went wrong for him — or even if nothing went wrong at all — they would wonder if Montross had made the right choice.

"There was some talk at home," the Indianapolis native said. "Mom and Dad would hear rumors about me not being satisfied and wanting to go home. I think all that (pressure) does follow you, and that's just the way it goes."

However intense the recruiting pressure is for the average recruit, it was probably multiplied exponentially for Montross. He is from the largest city in a state where high school basketball is king. The great players remain answers to trivia questions for years. Gymnasiums are packed for every game by the most rabid of fans.

Naturally, most of these fans would love to see their native sons stay and play for Bobby Knight at Indiana.

In fact, Montross believes his decision to attend UNC may have all but eliminated him from contention for the state's Mr. Basketball award, which is voted on yearly by the coaches and media. Mr. Basketball eventually went to Damon Bailey, who committed to Indiana in the fall of his junior year.

"Of course I wanted the Mr. Basketball honor," Montross said. "People in Indiana know all the Mr. Basketballs from years back. That was unfortunate, but I had my decision, and I felt perfectly comfortable with it.

"If people were going to base their decision on whether I went to Indiana or not, that's not the right reason to receive Mr. Basketball, so I went ahead and announced."

Montross noticed that just because Bailey had decided to go to Indiana, life was not rosy ever after. Bailey, too, fell under the scrutiny of the media and others when he did not perform as well as some thought he should.

"They were thinking he was going to try to transfer here, they said he was going to go other places, and they

thought he was going to quit playing or something," Montross said. "They said he has to be so good at the college level because he was so good in high school. People don't understand the different levels."

The pressure and the whispers back home have subsided considerably for Montross since his freshman year. Although he reads and hears criticism from time to time, he said that rarely, if ever, has it distracted him.

"I think when you're down, you're susceptible to more points of view, so you do tend to hear if someone writes a story that Eric Montross is not playing as well as he should," he said. "You're more susceptible, but it doesn't bother me. I'm very satisfied with my decision and very satisfied with myself."

As if the pressure of choosing between North Carolina, a school he liked, and Indiana, the school many thought he was "supposed to" attend, wasn't enough, Montross had a third major variable to consider. His father Scott had played basketball at Michigan in the late 1960s.

Fortunately for Montross, his parents let him make his own decision. He chose North Carolina because of the academics, the beautiful campus and the chance to play for Dean Smith, whom Montross considers the best college coach in America.

Besides, when Montross visited his sister, who attends Michigan, he decided he didn't really like the campus.

"I know it's too big for me," he said.

Montross came to UNC as the featured attraction in Smith's "Super-frosh" recruiting class, which also included Derrick Phelps, Brian Reese, Clifford Rozier and Pat Sullivan. Montross gradually slid into a sixth-man role, averaging six points a game for UNC's Final Four squad in 1991.

Last season, Montross took over as the starting center and averaged 11.2 points and 7.0 rebounds per game. When summer rolled around, Montross did the usual basketball-player summer regimen — running, lifting weights, working on free throws.

Oh yeah, he also played a few games against Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and Karl Malone. Montross joined seven other top college players for a week of scrimmages against the U.S. Olympic team, which ultimately won the gold medal in Barcelona.

Montross made an effort over the summer to improve some of the negative aspects of his game, especially free-throw shooting and fouling. A 62.4-percent shooter from the charity stripe last season, he had plenty of opportunities to practice free throws on his own, but working on staying out of foul trouble hasn't been as simple.

"It's kind of hard to work on when you're by yourself," joked Montross, who led UNC in fouls last season with 112. "But I think in the off-season, I've been conscious of that."

If a recent pattern holds, this should be a good season for the Tar Heels. The UNC teams of 1989 and 1991 both won the ACC Tournament, and the 1991 team made it to the Final Four.

See MONTROSS, page 16