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SPORTS

By Frank Heath Sports Columnist

Where does one start, with so much happening in this quickly dwindling UNC and ACC basketball season? Any other year, the spectacle of Carolina's relentless forward Tyler Hansbrough waving as he passes so many legendary names in the basketball record books would be the story of the season. A week ago Hansbrough was leaving Bobby Jones, Mike O'Koren and Walter Davis in his rear view; now he's 20 points behind Antawn Jamison's career scoring number. And the way Tyler's been scoring lately, he could pass Antawn in the first half this Saturday against Boston College! But Hansbrough will be the first to remind anyone that it's all about winning, above any of that, so we must move on.

In sports, one of the most important things a team can possess or learn is the capacity for endurance. Because, as Brad Daugherty puts it, above all else "you gotta sustain." Well, in clawing back from what, on February 8, following their lackluster loss to Duke, looked like potentially a dire and deteriorating situation, the Tar Heels have somehow found, or gained, just that quality.

Three weeks ago, UNC was down to third-string point guard Quentin Thomas, the little-used senior whose unpredictability has often caused Carolina fans to cov-

er their eyes in worry during his short substitute stints. In the ACC race, the Heels were two games behind Duke, where Coach K seemed to have concocted another of his black magic brews, coaxing the Devils along on an undefeated run through the first half of the league schedule.

And even before UNC's loss to Duke and Lawson's injury, things really had not seemed to be "clicking," at least not on a level corresponding to Carolina's potential and combined skill levels on offense and especially defense.

But a funny thing happened about midway through what was beginning to look like Carolina's first-ever loss at home to Clemson: The Tar Heels seemed to stop throwing their hands up about their situation, and, in essence, grew up. At least that's what it looked like.

The comeback against Clemson was most striking for the way in which Carolina went from being an at-times discombobulated group during the opening minutes — nearly collapsing beneath Clemson's defensive pressure to, by the overtimes, exerting their will offensively and getting just the shots they wanted.

Since that miraculous save against the Tigers, UNC has played and won four ACC games in classic "Carolina Basketball"

short of magnificent, with point

totals over the past nine games of 23, 32, 29, 35, 18, 22, 28, 39 and 23, and single-game rebound totals of 21, 18, 13 and 12, en route to averaging 13.7 boards. Tyler is shooting 57.8 percent from the floor and 80.5 percent from the foul line during that same stretch. Tack on his 14 steals over the past five games and you're talking about near-complete court domination.

But Carolina has had more than just the big guy's stats and leadership to lean on. Thomas, who had averaged barely a point for his career prior to Lawson's injury, has been one of the more pleasant surprises in recent memory, Over the past seven games, Thomas is averaging 6.6 assists and 7.4 points on 59 percent shooting from the field. Even more impressive has been the steadiness and leadership he shows on both ends of the court. If there were a "most improved" award, he would win it.

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Tar Heel team grows under pressure Wayne Ellington, after bottomstatistic: North Carolina's 26-2

ing out with eight points against Duke, has put up scoring totals of 28, 19, 19, 21 and 17, and made 17of-31 three-point attempts — with at least three made three-pointers in each of those games. His shot selection has become more focused — as has that of the entire team and he exhibits a much more open confidence and focus with the ball in the open court and on the drive.

As a team, this UNC squad sits atop the NCAA in rebounding margin, with a plus-12 per game edge; ranks second nationally in scoring; is tied for seventh in free throws attempted; and is 12th overall in free-throw percentage. (On average, Carolina makes 20.1 foul shots in 26.6 attempts every game, a 75.7 percent clip.)

These are all huge advantages for any team to have, and are stats that can decide the direction a season turns. In totality, they point to the validity of one

overall season record. And while Carolina has

reeled off these five straight victories, Duke reverted to some play more characteristic of its forgettable 2006-07 season, tanking in road losses against Wake Forest and Miami. Duke's lapses, combined with Carolina's developing resolve and focus on the tasks at hand, has UNC back to first place in the league, with the opportunity to determine its own path for the post season by winning its final three regular-season games.

Some may have concerns that the return of Tywon Lawson to the court could throw off these Heels' newly etched chemistry; but one has to remember that Lawson is one of the more unique and dangerous players ever to play college basketball. His North Carolina teammates have learned the

hard way that a team has to adjust and sacrifice some things in order to overcome obstacles. The fact remains, the players on this team all will be made better by Lawson's presence. A big part of UNC's improvement during the past three weeks can be seen as the culmination of a lot of hard work by all of the players, and they are now in position to capitalize even more fully with the return of a rested Lawson.

The Tar Heels cannot, obviously, rest at this point. But it appears this team has finally grown to understand that resting is not the point of basketball. Carolina travels to Boston College this Saturday, then tackles Florida State at home midweek before the finale at Duke on March 8th. The Heels need to win these games, but now at least they see how they can do just that.

The Eleventh Annual

Community Dinner

Sunday, March 2 . I PM

McDougle School Cafetorium \$\@900\$ Old Fayetteville Rd. in Carrboro

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Lots of great entertainment and plenty of scrumptious food!

(Food donated from several (lots!) of local restaurants)

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Tickets available at the Carrboro Branch Library at McDougle School, The Ink Spot in Carrboro, The Chapel Hill Museum Shop, The Chapel Hill News, Mama Dip's Kitchen, The Preservation Society of Chapel Hill, Market Street Books at Southern Village, Townsend, Bertram and Company at Carr Mill in Carrboro, Bon's Homecookin' & The Hillsborough Chamber of Commerce at 102 N.Churton

A large number of the tickets for the dinner are distributed to people who might not otherwise be able to afford to attend. You can feed a family of four with a \$22 donation!

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For more information visit www.communitydinner.org