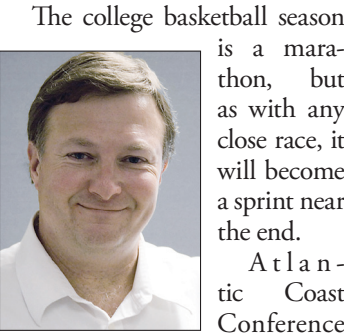


Defense wins the basketball race

BY EDDY LANDRETH
Staff Writer



The college basketball season is a marathon, but as with any close race, it will become a sprint near the end.

A t l a n t i c Coast Conference teams have not yet reached that point, but they are approaching it.

“We have to play with a lot of fire in our guts,” sophomore guard Reggie Bullock said after replacing the injured Dexter Strickland in the starting lineup.

UNC edged back to No. 5 in the Associated Press national poll this week after dropping to 8 following an embarrassing 90-57 loss at Florida State on Jan. 14.

The Tar Heels have played far better and with much more intensity since that day in Tallahassee, Fla. As the season nears the sprint, Carolina is utilizing its motivation in the right places, like defense.

Carolina began playing with a rejuvenated effort on defense in the second half of its 82-68 victory at Virginia Tech. UNC held the Hokies to 33-percent shooting in the second half.

Now a pattern has developed. This is not a new pattern necessarily, but it has been more consistent and coherent than earlier

in the season. John Henson and Tyler Zeller effectively cut off the lane to opponents, while UNC’s guards stick to their men and allow mostly poor shots from the perimeter.

N.C. State shot 25 percent in the first half of the Tar Heels’ 74-55 victory. Last Sunday, Carolina held Georgia Tech to 37-percent shooting and 32 points in the first half of UNC’s eventual 93-81 win.

Strickland had been recognized as the best perimeter defender on the team before he hurt his knee, but Bullock implemented a different kind of strategy. At 6 foot 7 inches and possessing a lengthy reach, Bullock makes it tough for opposing shooting guards to get off shots.

“I’ve said all year that Reggie’s gotten better and better

defensively,” coach Roy Williams said. “I think he has the length. He doesn’t have the quickness or speed that Dexter does, but he has the length. In the [N.C.] State game, he was the defensive player of the game.”

Carolina traveled to Winston-Salem for a 9 p.m. game against Wake Forest on Tuesday. Saturday’s game at Maryland will conclude the first half of UNC’s conference schedule.

From here on out, the sprint will be on. If Duke or Carolina finishes first in the final regular-season standings, that team will have an excellent chance to be a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

If the Tar Heels do it, their defense will most likely be the

reason. When Carolina excels defensively, it can demoralize opponents. This also fuels the Tar Heels’ running game.

“They’re playing at a high level,” Georgia Tech coach Brian Gregory said. “The pace they play at, it’s hard to simulate that in practice. And when you get a guy [like Kendall Marshall] with the ball that’s making a good decision, a quality decision on every play, it makes it tough.

“They’ve got a lot of different weapons, and they are getting better defensively,” Gregory said. “So they’re obviously a team that will challenge for this league championship and are a team that can move on to the Final Four.”

The Tar Heels’ description of their defensive approach echoes

former coach Dean Smith, who focused practice and preparation solely on his teams. He did not show film of the opposition, but rather taught his teams to stick with their principles in the belief this would produce more consistent and greater results.

“If they can’t swing the ball to the people they want, you can take any team out of their offense,” Bullock said.

This approach filters down to other parts of the game, such as offensive rebounding; call it trickle-down basketball.

“It’s an easy way to score,” Zeller said. “Sometimes it’s a little demoralizing on the defense. They play great defense and then you get a little tip-in layup. I think it does present problems.”

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