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FINAL FOUR PREVIEW

Friday, April 1, 2016

“THOSE GUYS, THEY WILL NEVER  
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NOT FOR GLORY.



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THEY'LL FIGHT



FOR EACH OTHER.”



# ACC CLASH IN FINAL FOUR

It's an all-ACC affair in this Final Four matchup, as No. 1 seed North Carolina faces off for the third time this season against 10th-seeded Syracuse — the first No. 10 seed to ever reach the Final Four.

The Tar Heels (32-6, 14-4 ACC) are looking to justify their preseason No. 1 ranking, but the upstart Orange (23-13, 9-9 ACC) is hoping the third time is the charm.

While UNC claimed both of the previous contests between these two teams, Syracuse held its own in each affair.

On Jan. 9, the Orange clung to a one-point lead with 6:46 remaining. But forwards

Brice Johnson and Isaiah Hicks exploited Syracuse's 2-3 zone to escape the Carrier Dome with an 84-73 win.

Two months later, the Orange traveled to the Smith Center with hopes of crashing UNC's senior night. But trailing by three in the final seconds, Syracuse guard Michael Gbinije missed a layup and sophomore Joel Berry sunk two free throws to secure the season sweep for North Carolina with a 75-70 win.



Here is how the Tar Heels and the Orange match up for their Final Four showdown at 8:49 p.m. on Saturday.

—Compiled by C Jackson Cowart and Jeremy Vernon

### POINT GUARD

Ask Coach Roy Williams, and he'll tell you Berry has been the Tar Heels' most consistent player. The sophomore finished second on the team in points per game, assists per game and free throw percentage. He's a rising star in a long line of great UNC point guards.

But Gbinije is simply better right now. At 6-foot-7, Gbinije has a size and length advantage over the smaller Berry, and the fifth-year senior scored in double digits in both games against UNC this season.



JOEL BERRY	MICHAEL GBINIJÉ
	
12.8 PPG 3.3 RPG 3.6 APG	17.6 PPG 4.1 RPG 4.4 APG
EDGE GOES TO: SYRACUSE	

### SHOOTING GUARD

Cooney has been a thorn in the side of UNC, scoring a season-high 27 points in Syracuse's Jan. 9 home loss to the Tar Heels and tying his season high with 28 points in the Smith Center a year ago.

But Paige is one of the most prolific point guards in North Carolina history, and the decorated senior is returning to form in this year's tournament.

Paige has struggled mightily with his shot for much of the season. But if he heats up, the UNC guard ranks among the top players in the country.

MARCUS PAIGE	TREVOR COONEY
	
12.3 PPG 2.5 RPG 3.7 APG	12.7 PPG 2.5 RPG 2.3 APG
EDGE GOES TO: NORTH CAROLINA	

### SMALL FORWARD

Much like he did a season ago, Jackson has upped his production during the latter half of the 2015-16 season.

Since UNC's 80-76 loss to Notre Dame on Feb. 6, the sophomore has scored in double figures in 14 of the Tar Heels' past 15 games.

Richardson hasn't been as consistent as Jackson, but he's shown he can take over games. Against Virginia on Sunday, the first-year posted 23 points to lead Syracuse in the upset.

Richardson has the hotter hand in a matchup of two sweet-shooting wings.

JUSTIN JACKSON	MALACHI RICHARDSON
	
12.2 PPG 3.9 RPG 2.9 APG	13.3 PPG 4.3 RPG 2.1 APG
EDGE GOES TO: SYRACUSE	

### POWER FORWARD

Johnson simply could not miss for the better part of North Carolina's East Regional final matchup against Notre Dame.

The first-team All-American went 10-of-15 from the field, nailing elbow jumpers and jump hooks en route to a 25-point, 12-rebound performance — good for his 23rd double-double on the year, a UNC single-season record.

While Roberson has had his share of success this season, it doesn't compare to the track record of Johnson — a finalist for the 2016 Wooden Award.



BRICE JOHNSON	TYLER ROBERSION
	
17.1 PPG 10.5 RPG 1.5 APG	9.0 PPG 8.4 RPG 1.4 APG
EDGE GOES TO: NORTH CAROLINA	

### CENTER

While Meeks was trending downward heading into the Sweet 16, he responded to criticism by scoring double digits in back-to-back games in UNC's tilts with Indiana and Notre Dame.

Coleman — who is listed as a starter but has logged the sixth-most minutes of any Syracuse player — is the tallest member of the starting lineup, but the senior has taken a back seat to first-year Tyler Lydon at the center position.

In a matchup of big men who have had up-and-down seasons, Meeks wins out.

KENNEDY MECKS	DAJUAN COLEMAN
	
9.2 PPG 5.8 RPG 1.1 APG	4.9 PPG 4.6 RPG 0.4 APG
EDGE GOES TO: NORTH CAROLINA	

### SIXTH MAN

Both Hicks and Lydon have played key roles during the 2015-16 season.

Hicks, who won the ACC Sixth Man of the Year award, averaged 9.2 points and 5.1 rebounds per game in conference play. But the junior has struggled during the NCAA Tournament — averaging five points in 12 minutes per game in UNC's past two contests.

Lydon, however, has thrived in the tournament, averaging 10.8 points, six rebounds and 4.5 blocks per game.

The first-year could be the Orange's most valuable player.



ISAIAH HICKS	TYLER LYDON
	
9.1 PPG 4.7 RPG 0.7 APG	10.2 PPG 6.3 RPG 1.1 APG
EDGE GOES TO: SYRACUSE	

### COACHING



The two longtime friends meet in the Final Four for the second time in their storied careers — the first coming in 2003, when Boeheim's Syracuse squad bested Williams' Kansas team by three points in the national championship game.



But Williams has achieved more success as of late, claiming two national titles at the helm of his alma mater.

Both coaches boast championship resumes and spearhead historic programs. But in a showdown between old rivals, Williams holds the edge.

ROY WILLIAMS	JIM BOEHEIM
	
8 Final Fours 2 NCAA titles (2005, 2009)	5 Final Fours 1 NCAA title (2003)
EDGE GOES TO: NORTH CAROLINA	

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# FINAL FOUR PREVIEW STAFF

<b>PAIGE LADISIC</b> EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EDITOR@DAILYTARHEEL.COM	<b>ALISON KRUG</b> COPY CHIEF COPY@DAILYTARHEEL.COM	<b>C JACKSON COWART</b> <b>LOGAN ULRICH</b> <b>JEREMY VERNON</b> ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITORS
<b>PAT JAMES</b> SPORTS EDITOR SPORTS@DAILYTARHEEL.COM	<b>COURTNEY JACOBS</b> ASSISTANT COPY CHIEF	<b>DAVID ALLEN JR.</b> <b>CARLOS COLLAZO</b> <b>BRENDAN MARKS</b> SENIOR SPORTS WRITERS
<b>JOSÉ VALLE</b> DESIGN EDITOR DESIGN@DAILYTARHEEL.COM	<b>KATIE WILLIAMS</b> PHOTO EDITOR PHOTO@DAILYTARHEEL.COM	<b>KELSEY WEEKMAN</b> ONLINE MANAGING EDITOR WEBMASTER@DAILYTARHEEL.COM
<b>LANGSTON TAYLOR</b> ASSISTANT DESIGN EDITOR	<b>VERONICA BURKHART</b> ASSISTANT PHOTO EDITOR	

**Business and Advertising:** Kelly Wolff, director/general manager; Rebecca Dickenson, advertising director; Lisa Reichle, business manager; Emma Gentry, student advertising manager  
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If North Carolina wins on Saturday, there will be a Championship Preview issue on Monday. If UNC wins the championship on Monday, papers will be exclusively distributed on campus and at The Daily Tar Heel office to prevent theft.  
Contact 919-962-1163 to reserve or order a copy, and email questions to [dth@dailytarheel.com](mailto:dth@dailytarheel.com).



DTH/KATIE WILLIAMS

Sophomore Joel Berry helps cut down the net after the 88-74 Elite Eight win against Notre Dame.

## Joel Berry's climb to the top continues

The sophomore point guard's growth has been crucial for UNC.

By Pat James  
Sports Editor

When Joel Berry arrived at North Carolina a little over a year ago, Marcus Paige gave him a warning.

This notice didn't relate to academic rigor, or the transition from high school basketball to the ACC. Instead, Paige informed Berry of one of the stiffer challenges of being a point guard at UNC — the criticism he'd receive from assistant coach Steve Robinson.

For 13 years, Robinson has coached the Tar Heels' perimeter players, mentoring point guards Raymond Felton, Ty Lawson and Kendall Marshall. And as Berry struggled through the trials he faced his first year in Chapel Hill, he often heard Robinson's stern words, much like the point guards who came before him.

"Every time I came to the sideline, (Robinson) was in my ear telling me I need to do this and do that. But it's all paid off."

The sophomore starting point guard has ascended from bench player to one of UNC's most crucial pieces, helping steer the Tar Heels to their first Final Four in seven years.

But Berry's journey to this point started a season ago.

Injury and illness plagued Berry in his first season, forcing him to miss eight games during ACC play. But his strong finish showed his potential.

The three-time winner of Florida's Mr. Basketball award made 10-of-20 3-pointers in the Tar Heels' final 10 games of the year, going 6-for-11 from behind the arc in postseason play.

"After he came back from his injury, he became a different player," Robinson said. "I don't know if him sitting on the sidelines and watching games helped slow down things for him, but it's like the light switch turned on."

Berry's also benefitted from Paige's leadership.

When Robinson wasn't coaching the young point guard, Paige — who held the starting point guard spot for the past three years — advised Berry on what's important at the position in UNC's system.

"When you have a guy of that caliber and that kind of player saying, 'We need you to

be aggressive, and we need you to have that confidence,' I think that means a lot," Berry said. "I've taken that and just tried to use that as motivation."

And it's shown this season. Entering Saturday's national semifinals against Syracuse, Berry ranks second on the team with 12.8 points per game and leads UNC with a 37.6 3-point shooting percentage.

His play has been even more pivotal in the postseason, where he's averaged 15 points, 2.6 rebounds and 3.4 assists per game.

"I would have to say he's been our most consistent player all year long," said Coach

Roy Williams prior to UNC's contest against Indiana.

The strides Berry's made this season have been similar to the ones Felton, Lawson, Marshall and Paige made as sophomores.

While Robinson notices other similarities between Berry and his predecessors, he believes they all share one trait.

"I don't know if there's a glaring difference in terms of what Joel has and what the other guys have," Robinson said. "At the end of the day, they've all led their teams and they've all been winners."

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## Theo Pinson can and will say it all for the Tar Heels

By Paige Ladisic  
Editor-in-Chief

Theo.

That's all you have to say, and people crack a smile — but not as big as his.

Since the North Carolina men's basketball team won the ACC Tournament, sophomore Theo Pinson has been living it up. He's crashed a press conference. He did an impression of Larry Fedora in a video viewed by thousands. When he finally got a chair at a press conference, he stopped to take a selfie with the media. He's played some good basketball, too.

And he hasn't stopped talking — although, to hear Coach Roy Williams say it, that isn't any different from usual.

"I could ask (Pinson) a question, go fix me a grilled cheese sandwich and come back, and he'd still be talking," he said.

But there's something in Williams' eyes when he talks about Pinson.

"I've had some weird dudes ... I got some guys that are way out there, but Theo is the most enthusiastic player I've probably coached in a long, long time. But I like kids that are different, that don't just look you in the eye and can't breathe. I like personalities and I enjoy laughing."

And there's a grin on sophomore Justin Jackson's face when he's asked about how his classmate gets to him.

"In a lot of ways," Jackson



DTH/KATIE WILLIAMS

Theo Pinson celebrates while the team makes half-court shots during practice before the Sweet 16 matchup against Indiana.

answers.

Then there's a moment during UNC's 88-74 win over Notre Dame on Sunday.

UNC needed something, anything, to push it up and over the team it had defeated by 31 points in the ACC Tournament. And they got Pinson. The 6-foot-6-inch do-it-all man stole the ball from a Notre Dame forward and called a timeout.

The timeout was enough for UNC to push ahead — and enough for Pinson to earn himself a seat at the press conference.

"I never have to congratulate him," Williams said. "He congratulates himself."

And when UNC goes small, Williams calls for Pinson, whose versatility helps make that happen. His presence

speeds up the game, exactly how the Tar Heels want.

"It makes our defense a little bit faster," sophomore Joel Berry said. "Guys are flying around, and the speed picks up a little bit more when we bring Theo in at the four."

And off the court, even now with the pressure of Saturday's game against Syracuse looming, Pinson is still talking. He's probably talking right now, as you read this. He might be working on a new impression, or making his fellow sophomores Jackson and Berry laugh, or maybe he's taking something away from Jackson and hiding it.

"You always have that one guy," Berry said. "And Theo's that guy."

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THE PATH TO A CHAMPIONSHIP?

The 2015-16 North Carolina squad is similar to Coach Roy Williams' previous two title teams, but this group has crafted its own unique legacy.

Compiled by assistant sports editors C Jackson Cowart and Jeremy Vernon

	2004-05	2008-09	2015-16
PRESEASON RANKING	No. 4	No. 1	No. 1
REGULAR SEASON RESUME	26-3 (14-2 ACC) Won conference championship	27-3 (13-3 ACC) Won conference championship	25-6 (14-4 ACC) Won conference championship
INDIVIDUAL LEADERS	Points: Sean May (17.5) Rebounds: Sean May (10.7) Assists: Raymond Felton (6.9)	Points: Tyler Hansbrough (20.7) Rebounds: Tyler Hansbrough (8.1) Assists: Ty Lawson (6.6)	Points: Brice Johnson (17.1) Rebounds: Brice Johnson (10.5) Assists: Marcus Paige (3.7)
TEAM STATISTICS (KENPOM)	Offensive efficiency: 2nd Defensive efficiency: 12th Tempo: 8th	Offensive efficiency: 1st Defensive efficiency: 21st Tempo: 8th	Offensive efficiency: 1st Defensive efficiency: 22nd Tempo: 62nd
ROAD TO THE FINAL FOUR	No. 16 Oakland, No. 9 Iowa State, No. 5 Villanova, No. 6 Wisconsin	No. 16 Radford, No. 8 LSU, No. 4 Gonzaga, No. 2 Oklahoma	No. 16 FGCU, No. 9 Providence, No. 5 Indiana, No. 6 Notre Dame
FINAL FOUR MATCHUP	No. 5 Michigan State in St. Louis, Missouri	No. 3 Villanova in Detroit, Michigan	No. 10 Syracuse in Houston, Texas
POSTSEASON RESULT	Won NCAA Championship (75-70 over No. 1 Illinois)	Won NCAA Championship (89-72 over No. 2 Michigan State)	???

Justin Jackson finally realizing potential for UNC

**The sophomore has morphed into a consistent scorer.**

By Logan Ulrich  
Assistant Sports Editor

Potential has been the buzzword for sophomore Justin Jackson.

The 6-foot-8 wing joined North Carolina advertised as a three-dimensional scoring threat — a gangly nightmare for defenses who could hit from any spot on the floor.

“When I watched him in high school ... it doesn’t look like he ever took a shot, and he ends up with 20,” Sean May, director of player personnel, said. “He just understands how the play of the ball tends to find him.”

For most of Jackson’s first two seasons, that ability hasn’t quite translated.

He shot 28.1 percent from deep this season after shooting 30.4 percent his rookie year. He’s averaged 11.5 points per game through two seasons. But thanks to heady play, Jackson locked up a spot in the starting five early in his first season for UNC.

He maintained his stranglehold on the spot until his worst shooting game of this year — a 1-for-7, five-point outing in a road loss to Notre Dame. Before UNC’s next game against Boston College, Coach Roy Williams told the slumping Jackson he wouldn’t be starting.

Jackson responded with his best shooting game of the year. He scored 20 points on 9-of-11 shooting and scored in



Sophomore Justin Jackson (44) drives toward the net during the Elite Eight game against Notre Dame. The Tar Heels won 88-74.

double digits in 13 of the next 14 games.

“He may have lost some confidence, it may have just been his shot wasn’t falling, but he stayed with it,” May said.

“He was very persistent, continued to get his work in, and I think that hard work has paid off because now when you watch him, he just plays and good things happen.”

Jackson’s late surge is reminiscent of his first season, where he scored in double digits in 11 of the last 12 games. He’s been an integral part of the Tar Heels’ renewed defensive intensity late in the year and has flashed increased physicality, driving for layups instead of pulling up for his signature floater.

He’s also re-discovered his touch from long range, shooting 46.2 percent on 3-pointers during the NCAA Tournament.

That’s where Williams thinks the next stage in Jackson’s development is; continuing to evolve into more of a pure shooter and maintaining that average. If he does, the NBA scouts already keeping an eye on him could be even more intrigued by his diverse skillset.

“Justin’s like a chameleon,” May said. “He’s very similar to me in the fact that he needs a system, and he can play in pretty much any system because he knows how to play.”

But that’s not what Jackson’s thinking about. Individual accolades and accomplishments always take a backseat to the team.

“At the end of the day, it’s all about the team,” Jackson said. “Everybody could probably on this team could choose another team they could go to. But this is where I am, this is where I think all of us want to be.

“And we’re in the Final Four, you can’t be a lot more happier than that.”

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# STARS OF THE FINAL FOUR

Compiled by Assistant Sports Editor C Jackson Cowart

Each of the remaining tournament teams has relied on its core contributors to reach the Final Four. These are the stars still left standing.



**Marcus Paige** is the unquestioned leader of this Tar Heels team, even with his offensive woes. The senior battled through the toughest shooting season of his career, but the point guard has rediscovered his stroke in the postseason to guide UNC to its first Final Four since 2009.

**NORTH CAROLINA**



**Roy Williams** is headed to his eighth Final Four with possibly his favorite team he has ever coached. Just one season after the death of former UNC coach Dean Smith, Williams could best his mentor with his third national title.



**Brice Johnson** is finally reaching the heights coaches and fans have waited for. The North Carolina senior forward has blossomed into an unstoppable force in his final year in Chapel Hill, earning recognition as a first-team All-American and Wooden Award finalist with his dominant display this season.



**Michael Gbinije** has been a steady source of production for Syracuse this season, scoring in double figures in every contest and leading the team in assists per game. After transferring from Duke in 2012, the fifth-year guard has stabilized his squad through its unlikely tournament run.

**SYRACUSE**



**Jim Boeheim** watched his team's first nine conference games from home after an NCAA suspension. But one season removed from a postseason ban, Boeheim could win his second national championship in 40 seasons.



**Malachi Richardson** was virtually unguardable in the Orange's comeback win over Virginia, scoring 21 second-half points to secure his spot in Syracuse lore. The eccentric first-year has started every game this season, but the guard is showcasing his full potential in this tournament.



**Ryan Arcidiacono** is cementing his legendary status on campus with every diving effort for a loose ball. A four-year starter, the guard has been paramount to reviving the Wildcats' program, earning praise from coaches and players as one of the best players in Villanova history.

**VILLANOVA**



**Jay Wright** has faced heavy criticism for his tournament resume, failing to reach the Sweet 16 in six straight seasons. But the four-time Big East Coach of the Year is back in the Final Four for the first time since 2009.



**Kris Jenkins** is the de facto star on a starless team. Named the South Region's Most Outstanding Player, the junior forward has made the most of his breakout campaign, leading Villanova into the Final Four and out of the shadow of doubt that has plagued the Wildcats in recent years.



**Buddy Hield** became a household name in his resurgent senior season, scoring 25.4 points per game as a Wooden Award finalist. The unanimous first-team All-American guard has torched opponents from beyond the arc, carrying the Sooners to their fifth Final Four in program history.

**OKLAHOMA**



**Lon Kruger** has taken five different schools to the tournament and four to the Sweet 16. In his fifth season with the Sooners, Kruger hopes his second trip to the Final Four will net his first title in 30 years of coaching.



**Jordan Woodard** receives much less fanfare than his All-American teammate, but the junior has been a steady contributor for Oklahoma this season. After starting every game of his career, the heady point guard has proven to be an effective complement in this postseason run.

## Q&A with 2005 national champion Sean May

*Sean May provided the foundation of North Carolina's championship team in 2005, averaging 17.5 points and 10.7 rebounds per game. After a career in the NBA and overseas, May joined the Tar Heels' coaching staff in October, just in time for the team's run to the Final Four this season. Assistant Sports Editor Logan Ulrich caught up with May about his experiences both as a coach and a player on Final Four teams.*

**The Daily Tar Heel:** What's been the difference in seeing this team from a coaching perspective instead of a player's?

**Sean May:** You just see the different dynamics of a team and how a team is constructed. As a player, it's very one-dimensional for you because you're just in it. From this side of it, you can see why things happen, how they happen. You get to take a step back instead of being on that first layer on the front lines — you're behind, and you're seeing how things develop. That's probably been the biggest learning curve for me is not saying, 'Well when I was a player I would have done this,' or, 'If I was playing, I'd have done that,' because it's not the same.

**DTH:** What's the biggest difference you can see between this team and the 2005 team?

**SM:** I mean they're totally different from a style of play per se because at first this team was extremely perimeter oriented, and our bigs have come and developed to where we play primarily through Brice (Johnson). When I was here, we primarily played through me. Rashad (McCants) was our (second) leading scorer, but a lot of stuff ran through me, and then that actually took that evolution as we went through the tournament. The way they're similar is that we're both older teams, so we both are primarily juniors and seniors... There are some differences, (but) there are a lot of similarities in terms of the makeup and the way these teams play.

**DTH:** What do you think the moment this team put it all together was?

**SM:** I think the game here versus Duke, knowing that we had it sealed and that just one more extra play or another sprint back, I think they realized how important every single possession is. Then when we go to Virginia, we battle against Virginia at Virginia, then I think they realized then again just how every possession matters because we

didn't play particularly well, but we were still there. And I think after that, they realized how good they can be because that was two very good teams that we ended up getting a loss from that we easily could have beaten and come out on the other side.

**DTH:** What sticks out for you about that 2005 run?

**SM:** Honestly, you know basketball aside, just the group of guys. Guys I still talk to to this day. We have a group chat, and we talk every other day. We're extremely close. I never knew how close we would be playing, and 11 years later we still get together. Like we were just getting ready to go play pickup in the summer like it was 2004. The closeness of our relationships, I didn't realize at the time how special that would be and then the bond that winning a national championship would carry on forever.

**DTH:** What was the mood in the locker room like at this period in 2005, and how does it compare to this team now?

**SM:** Well it's very similar, and honestly I think it was the exact same. We still have work to do. In the moment after the Elite Eight game going to the Final Four is over, there's a lot of excitement, a lot of jubilation because you've obtained a goal in getting to the Final Four. But very soon after that, maybe as close as the bus ride home, you realize that there's still work to do and there's still games to be played. I feel like this team has the same mindset.

**DTH:** How have you seen the scandal weigh on Roy Williams this year?

**SM:** It's been tough. This team has been a safe haven for him being able to just go to practice every day. For somebody who I hold in such high regard to have his integrity and his leadership questioned, for me it's very disappointing because it has nothing to do with this team and these players, and they're having to answer questions that don't have anything to do with them.

**DTH:** Have you seen Williams interact any differently with this group of players?

**SM:** I think he's close. I don't want to say he's closer because he's close to all his players. He has a bond with all his players. But I think this team, and he's said it in the past, because of everything that's gone on and because

people want to talk about that story, they probably haven't gotten the attention that they deserve or the appreciation that they deserve. When I talk about how good of a group this has been, being able to continue to work, continue to move past that, I think that's why he has such an affinity for this group is because they've had to deal with stuff that doesn't have anything to do with them.

**DTH:** What's it been like working with Williams now as a coach, and how has that relationship changed compared to when you were playing here?

**SM:** It's been great. I got to see a different perspective of him in meetings and the way he may talk about his players or the way he may appreciate his players behind closed doors but not tell them as much. Just seeing that different dynamic, it's been funny. It's been great seeing this perspective because obviously having played for him and seeing the way he interacts with us, it's been different, and it's been fun to see it on the other side. The one thing I've just loved about it is being able to see his basketball mind from a different perspective, every day just talking basketball situations. He remembers every single play from every single game and being able to hear those stories has been really neat.

**DTH:** That's very Dean Smith-




Sean May (right) passes the ball to Theo Pinson (1) during an open practice in Philadelphia.

like.

**SM:** My dad (Scott May) played for Dean Smith in the Olympics, so I know a lot about Coach Smith. One thing people always say is how sharp his mind was. But some of the stuff that (Williams) has been able to just reel off the top of his head — watching me in a high school game in a backyard AAU tournament in Blacksburg, Ind., he'll be able to recall every little detail. It's really impressive, and I admire that.

*@loganulrich  
sports@dailytarheel.com*

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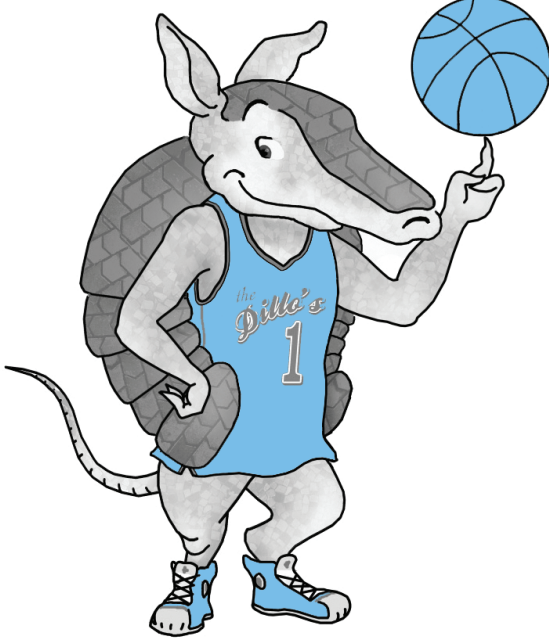
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COLUMN

# When basketball is more than a game

Through the ups and downs, laughs and tears — this North Carolina men’s basketball team, on the cusp of glory, is something greater.

A picture can be worth a thousand words. But it doesn’t always tell the full story. It doesn’t whisper the specter of scandal. The agony of yesterday. The hope of tomorrow. But there is today. There is the light of a team that has driven darkness from this campus. There is Roy’s backward hat and sheepish grin. Brice’s post-dunk roar and crowd-rousing antics. Marcus’ raw intelligence and yearning for more than numbers. Justin’s quiet nature and fierce determination.



**David Allen Jr.**  
Senior sports writer  
Sophomore journalism major from Shelby  
Email: sports@dailytarheel.com  
Joel Berry’s biceps and Joel James’ boyishness. Kennedy’s laugh. Isaiah’s drives through the lane ending with soaring dunks. Nate’s subtle ferocity.

Theo’s ... Theo. Where does it end? I’ve simply run out of words. And the beautiful thing is, I think it’s OK. We’ll gather together and watch those boys in Carolina Blue play one more game, and another one if they’re clicking on all cylinders. We might even get to see them cut down another pair of nets. Maybe this time Roy won’t cut his finger. He’s had a little bit of practice, after all. Some moments just don’t need confirmation. They will stand alone in our memo-

ries forever. It will be 20 years later, and we will tell the tales of where we were when Joel James became an internet sensation. Or when Theo busted into a press conference with the widest of grins. We’ve laughed with this team. We’ve jumped and shouted with this team. And if you’re anything like me, you’ve shed a few tears with this team. The early season loss to Northern Iowa. The last-minute defeat at the hands of Duke. At times this season, it

felt like playing in late March would remain a fantasy, a goal left unfulfilled for this senior class. But here they are. Two games away from eternal glory. Maybe the Tar Heels will pull out two more wins and Franklin Street will be filled with feral bodies, leaping through fires. Maybe this team will lose this weekend, and Chapel Hill will be filled with fans who feel like they’ve been punched in the stomach. But here’s one thing I know: Those guys, they will

never quit. They will fight and bleed and sweat and scream. Not for stats. Not for glory. Not even for us. They’ll fight for one another. They’ll fight because this is what they love, and this is what they dream about when their heads hit the pillow. Not of yesterday and not of tomorrow. Of today. “We all love each other and care about each other so much,” Theo said Sunday, with a piece of net hanging from his hat. “We don’t want this to end.” And neither do we.

## ‘WE NEED TO DO THIS TOGETHER’



North Carolina seniors Brice Johnson (left) and Marcus Paige embrace after winning a spot in the Final Four by defeating Notre Dame 88-74 in the Elite Eight at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia.

### Brice Johnson and Marcus Paige close in on a national title.

By **Brendan Marks**  
Senior Writer

Define success. It’s hard. Really, think about it. Define what it means to achieve success. Maybe it’s measured in rings, or palm-sized crystalline trophies, or inch-long snippets of nylon, sheared from the net in some distant arena. But maybe it’s more than that, or less, if you think of it this way: Maybe success isn’t reaching a goal. What if it’s failing, barely missing that

dream years and years in the making, and continuing on? What if it’s waking up in the morning, when your whole world is crumbling, and having the courage to just get up? The senior stars of the North Carolina men’s basketball team, Marcus Paige and Brice Johnson, didn’t know success before this year. Before an ACC regular season crown, and then an ACC Tournament title, and now a spot in this year’s Final Four in Houston. “They’ve been through a lot,” Joel Berry said. “They made it to the Sweet 16 last year, lost. And they got to the same spot the year before and lost. So you know, it’s been a rough stretch for them.”

Didn’t know success? That’s not fair to say. Remember all the stuff, all the drama, all the headlines and headaches and setbacks. P.J. Hairston’s antics, the academic scandal, Coach Dean Smith’s death — and yet, here they are today. With the odds stacked against them, Paige and Johnson have been there. Sometimes they’ve come out on top, and sometimes they haven’t. But regardless of the outcome, they’ve stuck around. And now they’ve been rewarded, at least somewhat. They made it through the thicket off the court this season and have finally captured some of that ever-elusive success.

First, individually. Paige experienced solo fame his sophomore year, when he was named a second team All-American. Accolades have been fewer and farther between since then, but when he leaves North Carolina, the all-time scoring list will always read his name before UNC-great Michael Jordan’s. That’s not the same case for Johnson. This was — and is still — his year. Twenty-three double-doubles, the most ever in a season in program history. A Wooden Award finalist. And now, the Final Four. His own first-team All-American selection came as a surprise to no one in Chapel Hill.

But for everything they’ve accomplished together, the duo and their legacies will always be measured by their collective effort. A Final Four is nice, but cutting down the nets Monday night is something different entirely. That’s the part of the story that’s yet to be written. “I would give so much for those kids to get something like that,” Coach Roy Williams said on Senior Night. And now Paige and Johnson will finally have that chance. So far, they’ve managed to overcome three years worth of shortcomings all in this final go-around, but there’s one last box left to check. Each name — Florida Gulf

Coast, Providence, Indiana, Notre Dame — brings them one step closer. Go back to that Providence game, when the Tar Heels trailed in the second half. Johnson walks up to Paige, his roommate and best friend of four years, and says the only thing he can. “He just came up to me and said, ‘Hey man, we’ve been through all of this. We need to do this together,’” Paige said. “And he came up and patted me on the back.” Then the pair of them scored 16 straight points that half. UNC would go on to win by 19. Now, think about it again. What is success? @CarlosACollazo sports@dailytarheel.com

## UNC men’s basketball ready to move on from NCAA questions

By **Carlos Collazo**  
Senior Writer

The questions are going to keep coming this weekend. With Syracuse and North Carolina matching up in the Final Four on Saturday, some of the stories have already started popping up online. And just by glancing at the headlines, you know what the questions are going to be about. “North Carolina-Syracuse is a nightmare Final Four matchup for the NCAA” “UNC, Syracuse and their baggage (sanctions, investigations) take Final Four spotlight” “UNC, Syracuse, and the 800 lb. NCAA Gorilla” For the players on this 2016 Tar Heel basketball team, it’s a tired repetition. “We’ve had kind of the residual effects from it,” said senior point guard Marcus Paige. “Dealing with questions and stuff that

doesn’t really apply to us. “That stuff happened before us, so we were all frustrated, like, ‘Why are we talking about this when we have all of the new academic standards put in place and we’re going to tutoring sessions and meeting with academic advisers all the time? They’re checking every single thing we do, so why are we in question about all of this?” With Syracuse reaching the Final Four a year after being banned from the postseason and with Coach Jim Boeheim suspended for the first nine ACC games this season — in addition to the NCAA’s continued investigation into North Carolina’s athletic-academic scandal — there are sure to be lingering questions this weekend. And for this particular edition of the UNC basketball team, that comes with more than a bit of irony. This team resembles the model of NCAA teams

of old, led by experienced upperclassmen. This year, it is the antithesis of almost everything that has plagued the team the majority of the past four seasons — everything that Coach Roy Williams likes to call “all that stuff.” “All that stuff,” of course, is the athletic-academic scandal, the Weinstein Report and the off-the-court issues with P.J. Hairston and Leslie McDonald during the 2013-14 season. “It hasn’t always been smooth,” Williams said Sunday after beating Notre Dame. “And even this year ... This was the least appreciated team, really good team, I’ve ever coached. And the most criticized really good team I’ve ever coached. “I got tired of listening to all that stuff.” More likely than not, Williams and the Tar Heels will have to deal with the “stuff” again this weekend.

Which brings us back to the irony. None of the players on this North Carolina team have ever had anything to do with an athletic-academic scandal — and have even been criticized for being a group of “too nice” players, without the fire needed to win. There’s Paige, the unquestioned leader of the team and the first Tar Heel to earn three Academic All-America honors after his second-team honors in 2014 and 2015 and his first-team selection this year. There’s also Joel James, who represents the ACC on the NCAA’s National Student-Athlete Advisory Committee and is one of just two men’s basketball players in the nation who serves on the committee. “To have them continue to question the integrity of our program — especially when we see it being run from a first-class perspective — it’s



North Carolina men’s basketball head coach Roy Williams celebrates with his team after reaching the Final Four.

tough,” Paige said. The saving grace for North Carolina might be that the “toughness” narrative is one that has already been put to bed. And that this UNC basketball team, which has

continuously addressed the problems it wasn’t the cause of, will manage to be tough for one more weekend. Still, again, they’ll have to answer the questions. @CarlosACollazo sports@dailytarheel.com