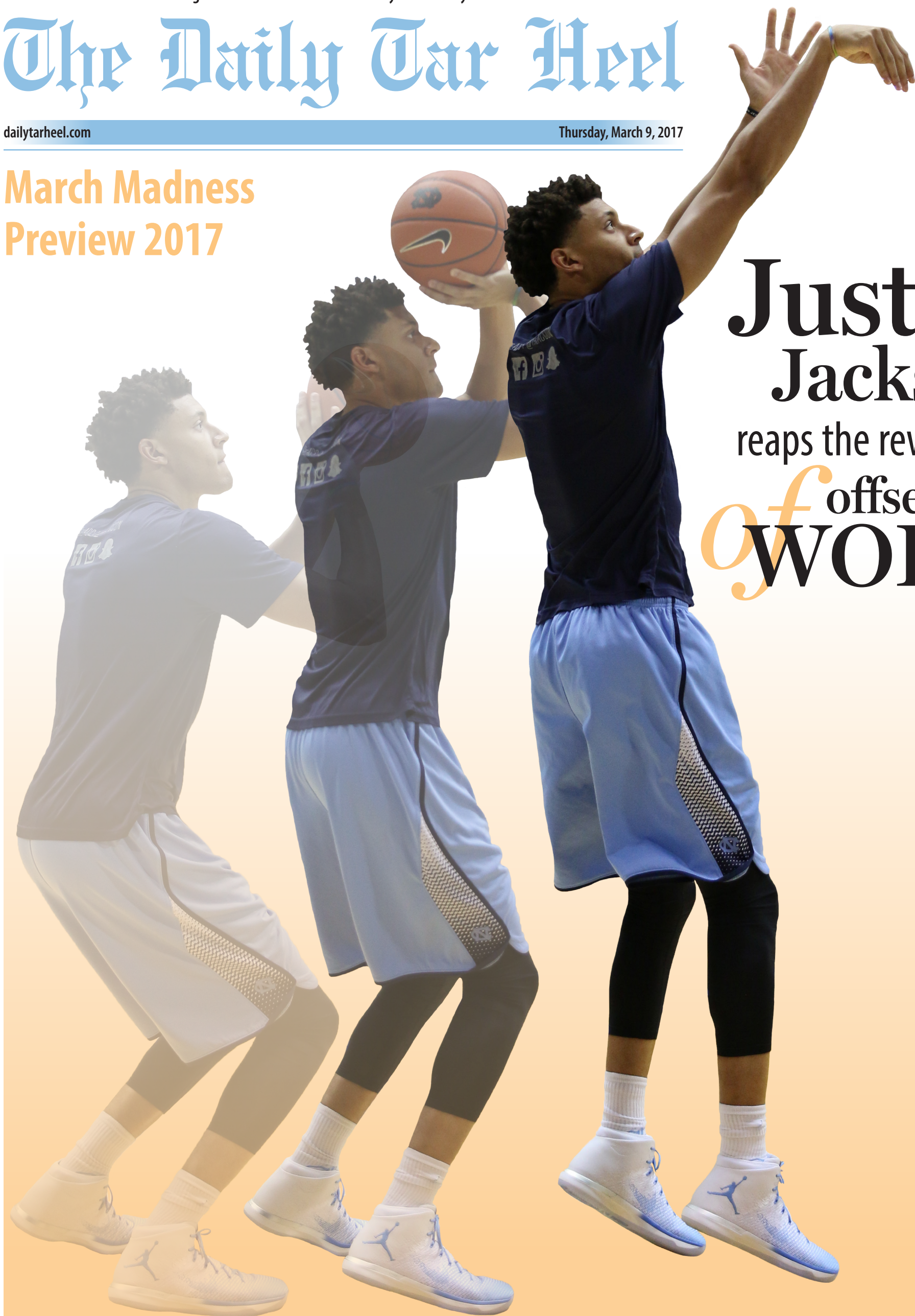


March Madness Preview 2017



Justin Jackson reaps the rewards of offseason WORK

DTH PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/ZITA VOROS; ORIGINAL PHOTO DTH FILE/GABI PALACIO

The North Carolina junior spent hours learning every shot on the court

By **C Jackson Cowart**
Sports Editor

Justin Jackson is tired of the question.

He's heard it hundreds of times now, each time more persistent than the last. After big wins, after tough losses. At the podium, in the hallway. Everybody wants to know.

"Honestly, I feel like I've been answering the same thing all year," he said.

Something's different — that much is clear. Just a year ago, the North Carolina wing looked like an rangy role player whose budding potential would never blossom. Now, he's the ACC Player of the Year. All-American honors are a mere formality, as is his spot in the Smith Center rafters. His jump shot is falling, and his draft stock is soaring.

What changed?

"Obviously I've always said that I've worked on my shot and I've tried to get better at it," he said. "But it hasn't translated. So now whenever it translates, there has to be something."

Jackson's meteoric rise has left the country confounded, his opponents included. This season, the junior is averaging 18.3 points per game — the highest mark for a Tar Heel since Tyler Hansbrough in 2009 — and shooting a career-high 38.5 percent from deep. He's only 10 made 3-pointers away from the single-season school record.

Is it the speed of his release? What about his footwork? His release point? His arc?

"Honestly, I didn't change anything in my shot," he said after a Feb. 25 win at Pittsburgh, one of the many stops on his redemption tour.

"Everybody's asking, 'What did you do to change your shot? What did you do?' I didn't do anything but just get reps up."

But that's too easy, isn't it? Surely, he made some sort of fundamental change to his mechanics or maybe to his mentality. But reps don't make the man. A jump that drastic doesn't come from hours in the gym.

Or does it?

He wasn't doing enough.

He missed seven shots in the national title game: five from the field and two from the line. He missed 70 percent of his 3-point shots during the season, and he missed over a third of his shots at the NBA Combine.

His shot was inconsistent. He didn't need the scouts to tell him that — his coaches had already. For the No. 9 prospect in the Class of 2014, the numbers didn't lie.

"If you shoot two years and shoot 29 percent for two years, that's called reality," head coach Roy Williams said. "And I don't care how much you think you're working — it's not working."

This was a job, and Jackson wasn't putting in his time. So he returned to Chapel Hill from Chicago and went to work.

The teams he interviewed with had two main concerns: strength and shooting. His shot was well documented, but his body needed work. Finish in the lane, fight for your spot, be physical with your man. For a 6-foot-8, 210-pound swingman, it was a big ask.

Early in the summer, weights weren't mandatory, but Jackson still

met with strength and conditioning coordinator Jonas Sahratian in the afternoons. Different exercises, different muscles. There is no favorite in the weight room.

"Honestly, it was just whatever Jonas threw at me," Jackson said. "Most of the time, it wasn't what I wanted to do. And it was hard."

So was improving his shot. He studied himself on Synergy from the previous two seasons, searching for a sign. The only discernible difference between misses and makes was the arc: When his shot fell flat, it had no chance.

But it was hardly a flaw in his mechanics.

"There was nothing wrong with his shot ..." Williams said. "It just didn't go in."

Assistant coach Hubert Davis — UNC's career leader in 3-point percentage — aided Jackson in the offseason. But consistency was something only the gym could address.

Before, volume was enough. But he needed structure. NBA teams don't care about shots — they care about makes.

So, Jackson took what he learned at the combine and put it into action. He adapted the "Atlanta drill" from the Hawks to simulate shooting off screens and on the run, and he switched between stand-still shooting and game-like situations.

Ten makes from each mid-range spot, then pull-ups, then free throws. Seven spots along the 3-point line, nine makes at each. More than two misses triggers a reset. More than two resets? Try again.

"There were some nights where we spent a couple hours in the gym because we'd get almost all the way around, to the sixth-out-of-seven

spot," said Chase Bengel, a UNC student manager. "You get eight out of 10, and he'd already had his reset. And we'd start back over."

Soon, weights were mandatory, but Jackson was already in a rhythm. At 7 a.m., he had a two-hour date with Sahratian, then class — he is a student, after all — then back to the gym with Bengel and roommate Luke Maye. An hour in the afternoon and an hour in the evening, with pick-up in between. Another hour that night, if he was lucky.

"That just kind of became our ritual," Bengel said.

The prize awaiting Jackson was at Old Chicago, which offered \$2 pizzas after 10 p.m. But only if he could make his shots.

"There was never a time where we left the gym because he couldn't finish the drill," Bengel said. "We were gonna stay there until we finished the drill, whether it took two hours or 30 minutes."

The drills carried into the regular season — an hour before practice and an hour after. So, too, did the shooting touch.

In his first game, he set a new career high with 27 points and tied his career high with four 3-pointers against Tulane. A month later, he buried seven triples against Davidson. Two games later? A career-high 34 points against then-No. 6 Kentucky.

"Everybody thinks they're working hard, but nobody's really working anywhere close to what they can do until somebody pushes them or they see a difference," Williams said. "And I think Justin sees a difference."

It felt like practice. A catch-and-shoot corner three in an 18-point first

half against Virginia drew inspiration from Atlanta. A fading shot to beat the shot clock against Pittsburgh came from the third spot in the 9-of-10 drill. The dagger against Duke to swing the momentum? He'd done it months earlier.

"There's not a shot on the court we haven't practiced," Bengel said. "There's not a shot he hasn't put in the time to make."

Maybe he's right.

Maybe the recipe for an All-American is a few thousand reps and \$2 pizzas. Maybe a little more arc, a little more confidence and a little more freedom is all he needed to go from a fourth option to a formidable scorer.

In his Hall of Fame career, Williams doesn't remember any player working on his shot more than Jackson did this summer. And for the Tar Heels' leading scorer, it's all muscle memory.

"It's good to see hard work kind of paying off," he said.

Kind of, because the work isn't over. The Tar Heels (26-6) could still face three teams at the ACC Tournament in Brooklyn, where No. 6 UNC plays Miami today at noon. Beyond that, six more wins separate Jackson from the national title that his team fell seconds short of last season.

But Jackson has put in the work. And maybe that's all it takes.

"The answer to the question is just the hard work ..." Bengel said. "There's no science behind it — it's just hard work."

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Kennedy Meeks hopes to rewrite history

By Mohammed Hedadji
Senior Writer

While nothing's quite like the original, Kennedy Meeks prefers sequels.

Ahead of UNC's matchup with Duke on Saturday, Meeks relished the chance to get a second shot at the Blue Devils.

It wasn't just because the win would mark a turnaround for the Tar Heels after a loss at Virginia on Feb. 27, exactly like last year. It wasn't because the win would crown the Tar Heels outright ACC regular season champions, exactly like last year. It wasn't even for redemption after a loss to Duke in their first matchup — you guessed it — exactly like last year.

"I did tell (the players) how ironic it was that it's the same thing," head coach Roy Williams said. "There are some similarities, but we'll have to wait another week or two, or three, or four, or five, or six to see what happens."

None of the similarities caught Meeks' eye with this sequel, though. This time, it

was completely different.

The game didn't stand out because it was another opportunity for Meeks to help turn around a season, clinch an ACC title or carry out revenge for a past loss. It did because it would be his last.

"I mean, it's my last time playing (at the Smith Center)," Meeks said. "I think it's definitely a little emotional for it to finally be coming to an end."

So while UNC had already clinched the ACC regular season title outright, and some of the lore surrounding the contest had faded, every moment of every play meant that much more to Meeks.

As UNC enters March Madness, the senior knows he's playing through the fleeting moments of his college career. But he hasn't started packing his bags just yet.

While the team recognizes the similarities between this year and last, and the Tar Heels certainly wouldn't turn down an ACC Tournament title, Meeks and the squad are determined to make one key

edit to this year's story line.

"We all have to remember that we didn't win it," Theo Pinson said. "We lost."

"We got to the national championship game, but we didn't complete all of our goals. We did everything else. We did regular season, ACC Tournament and we're in the same driver's seat as we were last time."

In order to achieve the one goal they fell short of last season, the Tar Heels will turn to Meeks for his floor leadership and tenacity. The forward leads his team in both offensive and defensive rebounds, a strength UNC will lean on throughout tournament play.

So while Meeks cherishes the few remaining games at UNC, he knows his team's main goal is getting back to the national championship game. And Meeks knows that it's on him to help change the final scene of his last season.

Because he won't have a chance at another sequel.

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DTH FILE/SARAH DWYER
Senior Kennedy Meeks (3) cheers after an exciting play during the game against Duke on Saturday.

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#4 Louisville

Game 9
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#5 Duke

#2 Florida State

Game 10
7 p.m.*

#7 Virginia Tech / #10 Wake Forest

#3 Notre Dame

Game 11
9 p.m.*

#6 Virginia / #14 Pittsburgh

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Game 13
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Isaiah Hicks among UNC's biggest questions

The senior forward has struggled since returning from injury.

By Jeremy Vernon
Assistant Sports Editor

This was supposed to be Isaiah Hicks' season. And, for a while, it was.

During the North Carolina men's basketball team's seven-game winning streak in January, the senior forward scored in double figures five times and twice had at least

20 points; teasing a Brice Johnson-level jump wasn't out of the question for the 2016 ACC Sixth Man of the Year.

But now, after an injury and a string of poor outings, Hicks has become one of the Tar Heels' biggest question marks as they enter the postseason.

"He had a stretch there ... that his numbers were really outstanding," head coach Roy Williams said. "And he's gotta get back to that if we're going to be as good a team as we want to be."

Things started going downhill for Hicks on Feb.

8, when he injured his hamstring during practice. He was held out the following night at Duke — a game in which the Tar Heels were outrebounded and struggled scoring down low.

In his first game back, Hicks stayed on the floor just seven minutes because of foul trouble. Two games later, he played just 14 minutes and scored 0 points — the first time he had been held scoreless in a game since Feb. 28, 2015.

So why the drop off? First, it might be worth noting that Hicks hasn't really seen a

situation like this in the past.

"I'm not used to dealing with injury because it never happens to me," he said.

Never isn't an exaggeration. Before missing the road Duke game this season, Hicks had played in all 137 of UNC's games since he was a first-year in 2013-14. When he's played that long without any setbacks, it's reasonable to think missing time threw him into a funk.

But at the heart of these poor performances is something that's plagued Hicks for the past two years: foul trouble. During the 2015-

16 season, he committed a whopping 6.7 fouls per 40 minutes. Hicks has dropped that number to 5.6 in 2016-17, but he's still a threat to foul out every time he plays a game. Through 31 games this season, he has picked up at least four fouls 13 times.

"If he can stay out of foul trouble and stay on the court, whether it's getting him the ball down low or him getting offensive rebounds and helping us on the defensive end, all that will help us out," Joel Berry said. "So just the biggest thing, we've just got to

keep him on the court."

But even with the recent struggles, Hicks' teammates haven't lost faith in him. They know he's still capable of big games — like his 21-point, nine-rebound performance against Duke on senior night.

"He gets here in the morning every day to get extra treatment and get back healthy, full, 100 percent so he can be out there with us," Theo Pinson said.

"So I'm not really worried about him. He'll be all right."

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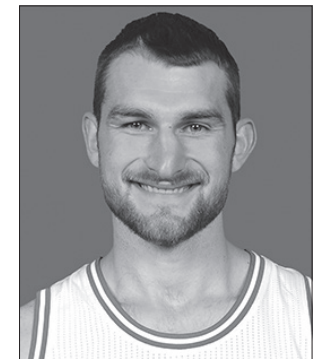
How does Justin Jackson compare to ACC POYs?

Compiled by assistant sports editor Jeremy Vernon

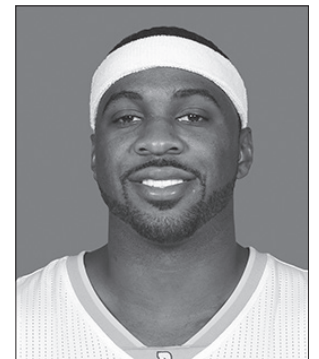
North Carolina junior wing Justin Jackson was named the 2017 ACC Player of the Year on March 5. He is also among the 15 players in the country still vying for the John R. Wooden Award. Here's how he stacks up to the past five Tar Heels who have won ACC Player of the Year.



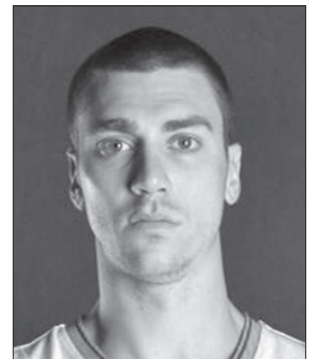
Justin Jackson
Year: 2017
Stats per game: 18.3 points, 4.7 rebounds, 2.6 assists
UNC record: 26-6 (14-4 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: The NCAA Tournament is yet to be played.



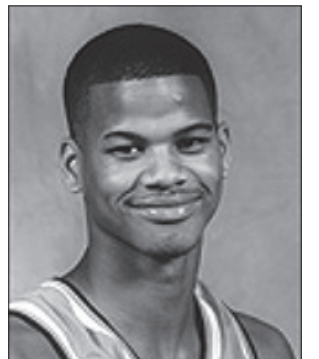
Tyler Zeller
Year: 2012
Stats per game: 16.3 points, 9.6 rebounds, 0.9 assists
UNC record: 32-6 (14-2 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: Lost in Elite Eight (80-67 vs. Kansas)



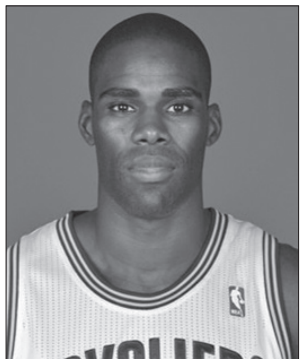
Ty Lawson
Year: 2009
Stats per game: 16.6 points, 3.0 rebounds, 6.6 assists
UNC record: 34-4 (13-3 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: Won national title (89-72 vs. Mich. State)



Tyler Hansbrough
Year: 2008
Stats per game: 22.6 points, 10.2 rebounds, 0.9 assists
UNC record: 36-3 (14-2 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: Lost in Final Four (84-66 vs. Kansas)



Joseph Forte
Year: 2001
Stats per game: 20.9 points, 6.1 rebounds, 3.5 assists
UNC record: 26-7 (13-3 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: Lost in second round (82-74 vs. Penn State)



Antawn Jamison
Year: 1998
Stats per game: 22.2 points, 10.5 rebounds, 0.8 assists
UNC record: 34-4 (13-3 ACC)
NCAA Tournament: Lost in Final Four (65-59 vs. Utah)

Stilman White prepares for end of road map with Tar Heels

By Brendan Marks
Senior Writer

Take a map of the United States — a big one, with all the roads and rivers and wrinkles across the country — and lay it out. Then, chuck darts at it; stick those points wherever they may land.

Maybe in Wilmington, or even Chapel Hill. Or cross completely over to the other side of the map; tack one in northern Utah or Las Vegas or Iowa. No matter where, the basketball player's likely been there over the past six years.

Heck, if you want, miss the map entirely — fire

those pointy suckers straight into the Pacific Ocean. He's been there, too.

Twice.

But now, six years since he first traversed the country with the North Carolina men's basketball team, Stilman White's playing career is finally on its last legs.

"It's how I've identified myself growing — being a basketball player," White said. "And in a couple months, that's not gonna be the case."

Before we come to the end, though, let's go to the start.

His first college game? The 2011 Carrier Classic against Michigan State. Draymond

Green and Harrison Barnes, now in their fifth NBA seasons, each scored in double digits that night on an aircraft carrier in San Diego Bay.

Brandon Robinson, one of White's teammates now, was only 13 then.

"That was so long ago," Joel Berry said of White's first year. "It's pretty wild, but that's just the path he's taken."

And while White played in that first game, it wasn't until several months later that he'd earn serious playing time.

After an injury to starting point guard Kendall Marshall, White stepped into the starting lineup for UNC's

Sweet 16 matchup against Ohio — dropping six assists in 32 minutes. He added seven assists in UNC's next game, an Elite Eight loss to Kansas.

Had the Tar Heels won and made it to the Final Four?

"It would have been one of the great stories of all time," head coach Roy Williams said.

Except that's pretty much where White's basketball map ends — the path just stops. He left the basketball program for the next two years, venturing west to complete his Mormon mission.

When he returned in the fall of 2014, he'd lost any role he warranted with his perfor-

mance years earlier. Ever since, he's largely been relegated to the end of the bench.

But while his on-the-court role has diminished, White is still relevant to this UNC team.

He recounts stories of past games, old teammates, key moments that helped steer the program one way or another. He's picked up a nickname — "Water, or as Kennedy Meeks says, "Wata" — for his smooth jump shot, and there's even a rumor it's tattooed on his side. That camaraderie speaks volumes, even if his play might not.

So what — or where — in the world is next for White?

"I made my LinkedIn profile last week," he admits, "because I know that my basketball career is coming to an end."

But it isn't over just yet. He'll make a stop in Brooklyn for the ACC Tournament this weekend. After that, maybe to South Carolina or Florida for the opening rounds of the NCAA Tournament.

And then?

If all goes according to plan, White will end his college basketball career somewhere new on the map: Phoenix, the site of this year's national title game.

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March Madness Preview 2017

The Daily Tar Heel

How does this Tar Heel team stack up?

There are more similarities between the 2016-17 UNC men’s basketball team and last year’s squad than you might have previously thought.

Compiled by assistant sports editor Jeremy Vernon

	2015-16	2016-17
AP POLL RANKINGS	Preseason: No. 1, End of regular season: No. 7	Preseason: No. 6, End of regular season: No. 6
REGULAR SEASON RESUME	Record: 25-6 (14-4 ACC), 15-1 at home Won outright ACC Championship	Record: 26-6 (14-4 ACC), 16-0 at home Won outright ACC Championship
STATS LEADERS	Brice Johnson: 17.0 ppg, Brice Johnson: 10.4 rpg and Joel Berry: 3.8 apg	Justin Jackson: 18.3 ppg, Kennedy Meeks: 9.1 rpg and Joel Berry: 3.7 apg
TEAM STATS	Offensive efficiency: 123.3 (1st) Defensive efficiency: 93.5 (21st)	Offensive efficiency: 121.9 (4th) Defensive efficiency: 94.1 (23rd)
ACC TOURNAMENT SITE	Washington, D.C.	Brooklyn, N.Y.
ACC TOURNAMENT RESULT	Won ACC Tournament	TBD
NCAA TOURNAMENT RESULT	Lost in national title game to Villanova	TBD

3-point shooting shines within confines of strict UNC offense

Joel Berry and Justin Jackson are top-4 in the ACC in threes per game.

By John Bauman
Assistant Sports Editor

Joel Berry fired a pass to Justin Jackson and started backpedaling before Jackson could even begin his shooting motion. No. 44 had a wide-open transition look at a 3-pointer, his 10th attempt of the day. He drained it.

North Carolina’s bench loved it. Theo Pinson pulled imaginary arrows out of an imaginary bag on his back and fired them into a silent Petersen Events Center.

Even head coach Roy Williams was impressed with his star wing’s performance.

“Five-for-11 from three,” Williams said after UNC’s win over Pittsburgh on Feb. 25. “That’s pretty doggone good. We’ll take that most times.”

It was one of many standout 3-point shooting nights from Jackson. The junior has shot 38.5 percent from beyond the arc this season, a 9.3 percent increase over last year.

On nights when he’s off, Berry takes over. He’s been even better from deep in 2016-17, shooting 42.4 percent in 30 games. Both Jackson (2.7) and Berry (2.5) players rank among the top-four in the ACC in made 3-pointers per game.

All this has come within the confines of Williams’ inside-out, regimented offensive system. Williams’ offense is predicated on getting the ball inside, feeding traditional possession-eaters like Tyler Hansbrough or Brice Johnson. Without a dominant inside force, UNC’s guards and 3-point shooting have flourished.

“We don’t have anybody like Brice that we could just ... throw the ball down to,” Berry said. “This year is more — I feel like it’s more of a guard-play thing than getting the ball down low.”

Williams wants 3-point attempts to come within the flow of the game. Even if Berry and Jackson can shoot like Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson of the Golden State Warriors, you won’t see any North Carolina players pulling up from half court in transition like those pros do.

Instead, Jackson will take open threes after coming around two pin-down screens on the weak side of the floor, spaced around an Isaiah Hicks post-up. Seventy-six percent of Berry’s 3-point field goals have been assisted, per hoop-math.com. Jackson’s mark is even higher — 85.9 percent.

They both have the green light this season, even if it comes at the expense of a post-up look for another Tar Heel.

“Coach just wants the best shot,” Pinson said. “He’d rather

it go inside first and then we shoot them, but he said, ‘Justin and Joel, they make them.’ So he can’t really get mad at them.”

Since Williams started coaching at North Carolina in 2003, the Tar Heels have never ranked higher than 199th in the country in the percentage of 3-point field goal attempts over field goal attempts, per kenpom.com. Simply put, relatively few of UNC’s shots come from beyond the arc.

This season, the team ranks 314th in the country in that category, despite shooting 37 percent from deep as a team.

There’s a gap there — most teams that shoot that well from beyond the arc and have two deadly shooters like Berry and Jackson would increase their volume from deep. But the gap, the persistence in playing an inside-out style of basketball, is the way Williams likes it. His players appreciate it too.

“We still know that we gotta get the ball down low, and we don’t have a problem with that,” Berry said. “We want to get it down there because if they crash in, that’s an open opportunity for us out on the wing. So we don’t mind it all.”

Williams’ offense also doesn’t limit great shooters.

“He’s always let good 3-point shooters shoot,” Hicks said. “I would say that’s his thing. I wouldn’t say he ever limited Danny Green’s or Wayne Ellington’s shot attempts.


It’s all about, “They are good shooters, so let ‘em shoot.”

Let them shoot, but not quite as much as Steph and Klay. Jackson and Berry straddle the theoretical 3-point line: They take as many open threes as they can while still playing within the offense. Williams will take that — most times.

“If we are the Steph and Klay that I know, where they are making threes, then I don’t think he could say anything,” Berry said.

“I mean, it’s three points. Three points add up to a lot of points.”

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DTH FILE/ALEX KORMANN

North Carolina junior wing Justin Jackson (44) shoots a 3-pointer against Louisville on Feb. 22 in the Smith Center.

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DTH SPORTS STAFF PREDICTS

Will UNC repeat as ACC Tournament champions? Will the Tar Heels be able to avenge their loss to Villanova in the 2016 national title game? The Daily Tar Heel Sports Desk explains how it thinks March Madness 2017 will shake out for the North Carolina men's basketball team.

C Jackson Cowart, sports editor and the guy you swore was in your class but hasn't shown up in like three weeks

Nothing confuses me more than this year's North Carolina team.

Before the season, the Tar Heels resembled a Final Four squad with Sweet 16 weaknesses — high-level production across the board but no star player to guide a run through the Big Dance.

Then Joel Berry morphed into an assassin in Maui, Justin Jackson became the most feared scorer in the ACC (I hear his offseason work had something to do with it ...) and Kenny Williams went from cringeworthy backup to crucial starter with Theo Pinson sidelined.

That was before UNC's embarrassing loss at Georgia Tech. That's when the madness began.

Since the turn of the calendar, the North Carolina roster has engaged in a high-stakes game of musical chairs. Seven players score at least nine points against N.C. State, and the Tar Heels are on top of the world. Two players do at Miami, and UNC falls apart.

Jackson drops 18 in the first half against Virginia, and North Carolina is a title favorite. Nine days later in

Charlottesville, Virginia, Jackson scores seven points and the Tar Heels look like amateurs offensively.

That's the issue with this year's team — the ceiling is the roof. There's no limit to UNC's potential, in either direction.

I think the Tar Heels will take home the ACC title, if only because they're unlikely to face nemesis Virginia along the way. But once North Carolina gets to the NCAA Tournament, all bets are off.

Face an opponent with a strong frontcourt and competent 3-point shooters, and it'll be an untimely exit. I think the Tar Heels' kryptonite will come in the Elite Eight, even if they're better than the round would suggest.

John Bauman, assistant sports editor and Wii Bowling world-record holder

I believe in this North Carolina team. I really do.

UNC has as much motivation as any team in the country following last year's defeat in the Final Four. The players have talked a lot about how much that experience — and the fun the team had during it — has motivated them to return.

And this season, the Tar Heels have taken their hits

but come out stronger each time. Losses at Georgia Tech, Miami and Duke only made this team better. UNC's home win against Duke on Senior Night is the best proof of that.

I believe in Isaiah Hicks' ability to not foul in March.

I believe Kennedy Meeks can dial it up an extra gear and lead this team back to the Final Four.

I believe in Joel Berry, Justin Jackson and the likelihood that their shots will keep falling even as the games get more intense.

I believe in North Carolina's bench, one of the deepest in the country. Any coach would love to have Luke Maye or Nate Britt to plug into key moments. First-years Tony Bradley, Brandon Robinson and Seventh Woods have also proven their worth.

Most of all, I believe in Roy Williams. He's been here many times before. I think he has masterfully managed expectations with this current team, ensuring that its best basketball would come in March.

Well, March is here. And I believe that North Carolina will get back to the Final Four — and win it this time.

Blake Richardson, assistant sports editor and dog enthusiast

I know, I know. North Carolina has its weaknesses — chinks in the armor that could be fatal down the stretch in tournament play.

But that doesn't mean UNC will not find success in the ACC and NCAA Tournaments. If anything, the offense will get faster under the spotlight, and the team's depth and experience will prove life-saving in games that hinge on flawless performances in the final minutes.

I know that in the right circumstances, North Carolina could collapse. There are holes in the Tar Heels' play that will turn into craters

against competition that knows how to exploit them.

This, in my mind, is what will make the ACC Tournament particularly threatening, since those opponents know North Carolina better than any other foes in the country.

UNC's strengths are so staggering, though, that I don't see the average team finding those weaknesses fast enough to keep the Tar Heels from winning the ACC Tournament, NCAA Tournament or even both. (Heck, you know what I think. I wrote a whole column about it on page 7.)

Maybe I'm an optimist, maybe I'm crazy, maybe I'm still hurt and hopeful after last year's heartbreak.

But maybe — just maybe — I'm also right.

Jeremy Vernon, assistant sports editor and the guy you've definitely seen at Four Corners

By now, most of you have probably heard enough of my opinions on this team (and if you haven't, please check out my column on Page 7 and try your best to refrain from slinging expletives in my direction if you see me on campus after spring break).

That said, I still think this North Carolina team is a top-tier squad in the country. No team in the ACC matches up great with the Tar Heels. Duke, Florida State and Notre Dame don't rebound well enough. Miami and Virginia don't have the scoring prowess to keep up. And N.C. State — oh, wait, the Wolfpack were eliminated in the first round. Sorry, Mark Gottfried.

The Tar Heels should work past their first round opponent in the ACC Tournament with relative ease. A potential rematch with Louisville could await in the semifinal Friday, but North Carolina has shown

that it can top the Cardinals.

That puts UNC in the final against what could be several different teams. The Cavaliers would pose the biggest threat to the Tar Heels — they figured out how to effectively stop Justin Jackson, something few other teams have been able to do — but I don't see Virginia getting through.

That leaves Florida State and Notre Dame as the likely opponents, neither of which jump off the page. North Carolina will win the ACC Tournament for the second year in a row.

But once the Tar Heels move to the NCAA Tournament, things will start to get very tough for a team with a lot of sketchy parts.

It's hard not to imagine a scenario in which Isaiah Hicks fouls out of a game or Joel Berry has one of his vanishing-act games where he goes 0-for from the floor.

The Tar Heels will be able to weather the first few tests. But once they hit the Sweet 16 and a batch of tougher teams, they'll get punched in the mouth and won't be able to recover.

Mohammed Hedadji, senior writer and founding member of the "Start Isaiah Hicks" Club (Est. 2013)

I dare not count North Carolina out before the team even steps foot in Brooklyn, but it's difficult to see the Tar Heels earning their way to a sixth ACC Championship appearance in seven years — let alone winning it all.

While UNC has dominated its ACC foes as of late, the Tar Heels will ultimately fail to double-up the best conference in the country for a second straight year.

With the ACC regular-season title in hand, and in front of a sea of Orange faithful, the Tar Heels will stumble against Syracuse in stunning fashion.

But expect the Tar Heels to respond to their bitter loss with a blazing start to the NCAA Tournament. UNC has yet to experience a losing streak this season, and it won't before the season is over.

Despite being dropped to a No. 2 seed from an early ACC tournament loss, North Carolina will power its way to a 20th Final Four appearance.

In a redemption story rivaled only by UNC's 2009 national title run (and perhaps the 2008 Redeem Team), the Tar Heels will meet Villanova once more in the national championship — this time as the underdog.

Against a talented but undersized Wildcat group, the Tar Heels will own the glass en route to a sixth NCAA title.

Brendan Marks, senior writer and Marcus Paige jinxer/Brice Johnson whisperer

Yes, North Carolina looked good in its season finale against Duke, and yes, it won the toughest conference in the country by two games.

There's clearly reason for optimism, with Isaiah Hicks' improvement of late and Justin Jackson's shooting from deep.

But there's still reason for concern. UNC has struggled against some of the toughest defenses it has faced, and when the Tar Heels can't outscore their opponents, they haven't proven an ability to get enough stops to win.

An ACC Tournament title is well within their capabilities, but their inconsistency against top defenses means they might fall short of last season's heights.

I see North Carolina making it to the Elite Eight and maybe even the Final Four. But by that point, I don't trust the defense enough to get back to the title game.

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NINE TO FIVE

THE REAL QUESTION: WILL UNC WIN IT ALL?



DTH FILE/ALEX KORMANN
Justin Jackson (44), Joel Berry (2) and Nate Britt (0) share a laugh after defeating Duke on Saturday.

The Tar Heels have what it takes

By Blake Richardson
Assistant Sports Editor

The North Carolina men's basketball team will be the 2017 national champions. (Quick: Stop reading this and go knock on wood.) Did you? Good. Let's continue.

First, I admit that as a UNC student with a photo of Roy Williams in a sideways ACC Championship hat taped to my bedroom door, I'm biased. But hear me out.

The Tar Heels — ACC outright regular-season champions — have the talent. They're led by two stars: ACC Player of the Year Justin Jackson and All-ACC Second Team selection Joel Berry.

While other teams have their hot shots, they pale in comparison to UNC's depth, including Kennedy Meeks — the ACC's second-most efficient shooter and fourth-best rebounder — Isaiah Hicks, Theo Pinson and Tony Bradley. Nine players average over 10 minutes per game, and four average over 10 points.

In NCAA Tournament play, where fatigue or foul trouble can be the kiss of death with so many games decided in the

final minutes, depth is huge. And that's just the top of the list. Don't forget rebounding, where the Tar Heels lead the nation with an average rebounding margin of 13. Remember how they beat Duke on Saturday? How about that 65-41 home win over Virginia? The 11-point Louisville win? Of those games, the Cardinals scored the most second-chance points with eight. Those kinds of numbers win championships.

While UNC uses its rebounding edge to rein in opponents, it buries them with scoring in notoriously fast-paced play; that's why the Tar Heels are so much more fun to watch than other teams (cough, cough, Virginia).

The nation's 11th-best scoring offense boasts an arsenal of 3-point shooters and capitalizes on opportunities with 18 assists per game, the nation's fourth-highest average. But UNC's superior strength is arguably in the paint, where it grabs 42 percent of its misses.

Defending UNC is like leaving Rams Head Dining Hall without taking a cookie for the road: Doable, but to borrow Roy's words, dadgum difficult! That brings me to head

coach Roy Williams. Roy has led UNC to the Final Four or better four times, and only five college coaches in basketball history have more national titles. North Carolina could not be in better hands.

Roy isn't the only experienced one. Every single UNC starter played in last season's national championship game. They know what it takes. And they have something to prove.

Last season had the most painful ending imaginable, but that's also the Tar Heels' biggest strength. Their heart-break became their fire. In the months of ruminating over 4.7 seconds, they — more than anyone else in the country — clung to one goal: going back.

Bring me a team that has greater hunger, motivation and drive than these players do. I'd wait, except you won't find one. Not now, not last year, maybe not ever. A team like this will not go down without bleeding. A team like this will not go down. Period. That leaves only one prediction worth having.

The University of North Carolina will become The University of National Champions.

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DTH FILE/TARYN REVOIR
Joel Berry (2) and Justin Jackson (44) walk off the court in dejection after losing to UVa. on the road.

This team could fall apart any day

By Jeremy Vernon
Assistant Sports Editor

I'm gonna get a lot of shit for this.

Chances are, if you're a North Carolina men's basketball fan, right now you're riding high on the emotions of the Tar Heels' 90-83 win over Duke on Saturday. And that's understandable. North Carolina played well — Grayson Allen didn't. Joel Berry looked like first-half-of-the-season Joel Berry and Isaiah Hicks played more than eight minutes. There were plenty of reasons to celebrate.

But now it's tournament time. These next four weeks will take the Tar Heels out of the comfort of the Smith Center, where UNC went undefeated, and toss them into a gauntlet against college basketball's best conference before facing dozens of other teams vying for a championship crown.

Sure, some of these players have been there before. In fact, all five North Carolina starters played in last season's national title game.

But if you think this team

can get back to that point — let alone win the whole thing — you might have inhaled a little too much smoke on Franklin Street on Saturday night.

Almost every member of the Tar Heels' roster could be a cause for concern heading into the NCAA Tournament. I say "almost" because Brandon Robinson, Stilman White and the walk-ons don't play enough to monumentally screw things up.

Berry has been as inconsistent this season as the Wi-Fi signal in my apartment. Pinson hasn't scored since Feb. 25. Hicks — sans his performance against Duke — has spent more valuable time on the exercise bike than on the court over the past month. He also missed an uncontested dunk against the Blue Devils because he "jumped too high." OK, Isaiah.

It seems like the only way Kennedy Meeks can score is if he misses a shot first. I don't think Tony Bradley has ever used his left hand. Every time Luke Maye touches the ball, he incites more audible gasps and screams of "NOOOOO" than any player in the country. Seventh Woods

elicits the same things but just from Roy Williams.

Even Justin Jackson, the ACC Player of the Year, has air-balled as many threes as he's made over the past two games.

Twenty minutes after I wrote the previous paragraph, my editor let me know I forgot to mention Nate Britt. I guess that's pretty telling given his performance this season.

The Tar Heels have been able to survive this season when one of their wheels falls off the wagon. And when every player is playing his best, UNC can beat anyone in the country.

But as Georgia Tech, the toughest ACC team to ever lose in the first round of the conference tournament, and Miami — which actually had more turnovers than assists this season — showed us, North Carolina has some fatal flaws.

There are too many things that can go wrong with this team for something not to during the NCAA Tournament. It doesn't take 4.7 seconds to figure that out.

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8 GAMES THAT DEFINED UNC’S SEASON

Nov. 23 UNC 71, Wisconsin 56

North Carolina’s 71-56 win over Wisconsin on Nov. 23 was the 2016-17 Tar Heels’ first taste of what a championship feels like. Thanks to 22 points from Joel Berry and 15 points from Kennedy Meeks, the Tar Heels bested the field of the Maui Invitational, earning praise as the potential top team in the nation. North Carolina cruised through the field — beating Chaminade, 104-61, on Nov. 21; destroying Oklahoma State a day later, 107-75; and finishing with a 15-point victory over the Badgers. The Tar Heels’ defensive intensity was as good as it has



DTH FILE/PEGGY MULLIN
Isaiah Hicks (4) throws down a dunk against Florida State.

been all season — UNC held Wisconsin to 38.2 percent field-goal shooting in the game. The win also showed off the Tar Heels’ balance — four players scored in double figures against Wisconsin. UNC’s depth proved to be an asset all season long. Throughout the season, North Carolina could look back on its play in Hawaii as an example of what the team could accomplish when it was at its best.

Nov. 30 Indiana 76, UNC 67

Great teams not only need to learn how to win. They also need to learn how to lose. Indiana and the 17,222 people in attendance at Assembly Hall on Nov. 30 taught North Carolina a hard, but needed, lesson in what it takes to beat good teams on the road. OG Anunoby had 16 points in 29 minutes to lead the Hoosiers. Indiana also shot well all night long, punctuated with 44.4 percent shooting from 3-point land in the second half of the close contest. For the Tar Heels, 21 points on 7-of-13 shooting from Justin Jackson didn’t prove to be enough. This



DTH FILE/TARYN REVOIR
The players sit on the bench at the end of their loss at Virginia.

was one of Jackson’s first big games in the 2016-17 season, but even he couldn’t help the Tar Heels climb out of a 41-29 halftime deficit. North Carolina didn’t lead in this game — the game was tied for the first 20 seconds before Indiana held the advantage for the remaining 39:40. This experience — both from playing behind and competing in front of a hostile road environment — served the Tar Heels well in ACC play.

Dec. 17 Kentucky 103, UNC 100

Great teams also need to learn how to perform on big stages. The CBS Sports Classic, played at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, isn’t quite the same stage as the Final Four — but it’s about the closest a team can get outside of March. The highly anticipated matchup played out in front of a national audience and didn’t disappoint. Kentucky’s Malik Monk played 38 minutes and scored 47 points, knocking down eight of the 12 3-pointers he attempted. UNC’s Kenny Williams did his best to guard the superstar first-year, and Justin Jackson did his best



DTH FILE/BRIANNA LADD
Justin Jackson (44) reaches to ward off a Kentucky defender.

to match each of Monk’s baskets. But the Tar Heels fell short in a 103-100 loss. Jackson finished with 34 points on 10-of-17 shooting from the field. This game was another step forward for him as he came one step closer to the dominant scorer that he became in the ACC season. Head coach Roy Williams found himself with a two-loss team after losses to Indiana and Kentucky, but both left the Tar Heels battle-tested heading into conference play.

Dec. 31 Ga. Tech 75, UNC 63

North Carolina began conference play unceremoniously at noon on New Year’s Eve. The announced attendance at McCamish Pavilion in Atlanta was 7,754, but it’s safe to say at least a third of those in the stands were wearing Carolina blue. Despite what looked to be an easy opening draw against a Georgia Tech team that came into the game with four losses and with a crowd with more than a few friendly faces, North Carolina lost to Georgia Tech, 75-63. The Yellow Jackets didn’t shoot particularly well that afternoon, converting 41.5 percent of their attempts from



DTH FILE/ISABEL DONNOLO
Justin Jackson (44) goes up for a shot over Georgia Tech defenders.

the field and making 27.3 percent of their 3-pointers. But their 1-3-1 zone stifled the Tar Heels just enough to down UNC by 12 points. North Carolina turned the ball over 20 times, took and missed far too many 3-pointers (5-of-26) and couldn’t turn it on in the second half to make a comeback. The mood in the North Carolina locker room was solemn after the defeat — a needed reminder that nothing comes easy in the ACC.

Jan. 8 UNC 107, NC State 56

If North Carolina needed a confidence boost to help jump-start 2017, a 51-point victory over a rival at home certainly did the trick. UNC jumped all over the Wolfpack from the start. The Tar Heels mounted a 26-4 lead after a 3-pointer by Joel Berry with 11:35 remaining in the first half. They dominated and built upon their lead the rest of the afternoon. No one player stood out in this one for UNC. Instead, it was a team effort. Ten Tar Heels played at least 13 minutes and nobody played more than 23. Still, Justin Jackson found a way to pour in an efficient 21 points, while



DTH FILE/NATHAN KLIMA
Kennedy Meeks (3) looks for an open pass against N.C. State.

Joel Berry added 19. This was also a complete effort from the Tar Heels. The defense held the Wolfpack to 36.5 percent shooting for the game. N.C. State also had 26 turnovers and got outrebounded by 14. This big victory over the Wolfpack launched a stretch of strong play to help the Tar Heels recover from the opening stumble against Georgia Tech. It also reminded people just how dominant this North Carolina team can be.

Feb. 9 Duke 86, UNC 78

The first UNC-Duke game feels like so long ago. But just over a month ago, the Tar Heels were feeling down after losing to Duke in Cameron Indoor Stadium, 86-78. Grayson Allen had 25 points, Luke Kennard added 20 points and Jayson Tatum had 19 points in the second half alone to lead the Blue Devils to victory. The Tar Heels were without starting power forward Isaiah Hicks in this one. That meant extended run for sophomore Luke Maye and first-year Tony Bradley. Maye did his best early on against Tatum, but eventually, the first-year



DTH FILE/SARAH DWYER
Joel Berry (2) goes up for a layup between two Duke defenders.

phenom had his way with the UNC defense. North Carolina did a lot of things well in the first meeting with its bitter rival: 13 assists to five turnovers and 52.5 percent shooting for the game. But it wasn’t enough to beat the Blue Devils — at least not the first time around. This loss provided fuel to the fire for the rest of the season and gave the Tar Heels a little extra motivation for the next matchup.

Feb. 18 UNC 65, UVa. 41

North Carolina head coach Roy Williams understands that sometimes, you have to win ugly. One of his favorite phrases tells how he prefers to win in the 70s and 80s, but to be a really good basketball team, you have to be able to win in the 50s and 60s. UNC won in the 60s on Feb. 18 with a 65-41 victory over Virginia in the Smith Center. The Cavaliers just couldn’t get anything going offensively that night, shooting 27.8 percent from the field for the game. Their 0-for-8 shooting from beyond the arc in the first half looks particularly bad in retrospect.



DTH FILE/ALEX KORMANN
Justin Jackson (44) drives in against a Virginia defender.

North Carolina had to grind out its baskets, too. The Tar Heels turned the ball over nine times but found a way to generate enough offense to win. Ten offensive rebounds for the team and 20 points from Justin Jackson served as the key ingredients to success. This win was impressive because of how North Carolina won — in a low-scoring, intense conference matchup. After this one, UNC knew it could win ugly.

March 4 UNC 90, Duke 83

North Carolina’s 90-83 win over Duke felt like the culmination of a season’s worth of trials and triumphs. Luke Kennard had 28 points on 9-of-17 shooting from the field in a potential battle with Justin Jackson for ACC Player of the Year. UNC couldn’t stop him, but slowed him just enough to allow Joel Berry to be the hero. Berry had 28 points, including shooting 5-of-5 from 3-point land, avenging misses against Duke from both this season and last year. Justin Jackson struggled early on, but his strong play down the stretch was the finishing touch on an ACC



DTH FILE/ALEX KORMANN
Joel Berry (2) dives for a loose ball against Duke on Saturday.

Player of the Year season. North Carolina shared the ball, dishing out 19 assists while only committing nine turnovers. The Tar Heels also dialed up the defensive intensity they displayed in Maui by holding Duke to 36.7 percent field-goal shooting in the second half. After a year’s worth of battles, UNC came out on top in its final test of the regular season, cementing an ACC regular-season championship in the process.



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5 potentially tough NCAA matchups

March Madness often comes down to the matchups.

No matter how hot your favorite team might be playing, if they run into a tough draw in the bracket, their season could end.

Many upsets in the tournament also come when two teams with contrasting styles face off. The push and pull of playing styles is entertaining to watch and can shake up the bracket with upsets and close games.

With that in mind, here are five teams that do not match up well with North Carolina. The Tar Heels have a few shortcomings that could do them in during March Madness.

Throughout the regular season, North Carolina struggled playing against

zone defenses. They also struggled at times to play at the tempo of a team like Virginia, one of the slowest squads in the country.

Finally, UNC let shooters get hot and torch them for big days. With Kenny Williams, the Tar Heels' best perimeter defender, out for March Madness with a knee injury, this issue is only more problematic.

There's a chance — a strong chance — that North Carolina won't face most of these teams, let alone all of them. But now's the time to read up on some potential foes during March Madness to see how their strengths and weaknesses compare to the Tar Heels'.

Compiled by assistant sports editors John Bauman and Jeremy Vernon.


WICHITA STATE

Keep an eye out for Wichita State. They are always a dangerous team in March despite not coming from a Power-5 conference.

On Mar. 5, the Shockers claimed the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament crown for the fourth time in program history with a 71-51 win over Illinois State. The win was also their 30th of the season, which marks the fourth time in five seasons that the Shockers have hit that milestone.

The conference tournament title ensured that Wichita State will go dancing for the sixth-straight year, tying Cincinnati's conference record for consecutive NCAA appearances.

Wichita State is led



by junior guard Conner Frankamp, who earned Most Outstanding Player honors in the MVC Tournament.

The Shockers can shoot a high percentage from the 3, rebound well and get to the free-throw line. It's a dangerous combination that could give North Carolina trouble if they meet in the big dance.


PURDUE

Purdue finished the regular season with a 25-6 record. They were impressive at home, dropping only two games throughout their arduous nonconference and Big-10 schedule.

Sophomore sensation Caleb Swanigan started all 31 games for Purdue and grew into a reliable scorer and dominant rebounder. Swanigan averaged 18.7 points and 12.6 rebounds in the regular season, leading his team in both categories.

He could be a tough matchup inside for North Carolina's big men, who sometimes struggle to avoid playing defense without fouling.

With Swanigan setting the



tone, the Boilermakers have built a team identity around rebounding the ball. Their emphasis and ability on the boards could take away one of UNC's biggest strengths — the offensive glass.

Purdue is also a great 3-point shooting team. The Boilermakers shot 40.6 percent as a team from beyond the arc this season.

OREGON

Oregon can flat out score the basketball. The Ducks have averaged 79.2 points per game this season and have outscored their opponents by 14.5 points per game.

Contrary to what the Oregon brand conjures up, they don't actually play that fast. Instead, they create an efficient offense by taking care of the basketball and shooting a lot of threes.

The Ducks shot 38.2 percent from deep in the regular season and aren't afraid to shoot if they get an open look. North Carolina will have to stick to Oregon's best shooters and hope it catches them on an off day.

Oregon also does an excellent job protecting the



rim. In the regular season, the team averaged 6.8 blocks per game. North Carolina's guards won't be able to rely on easy baskets when trying to attack the paint.

UNC's advantage on the boards could be the difference in a potential matchup between these two teams. The Ducks grab only 36.5 boards per game on average.

WEST VIRGINIA

Over the years, West Virginia has earned the nickname "Press Virginia" for their attacking defense that forces boatloads of turnovers and gets opposing teams out of their offensive comfort zone.

The 2016-17 Mountaineers have lived up to that nickname. West Virginia forced opponents to commit 21.2 turnovers per game in the regular season. North Carolina is a veteran ballclub that has seen a lot, but even UNC will have to recalibrate and focus to beat the Mountaineers' aggressive scheme.

West Virginia is also very balanced on offense. Five players average over nine



points per game, while no player averages more than 13. That depth will come in handy throughout March Madness.

But UNC may be able to exploit an edge on the boards in this matchup. West Virginia allows a lot of offensive rebounds — opponents grabbed 346 in the regular season.


FLORIDA

Florida played a tough nonconference schedule this season, facing off against and losing to Gonzaga, Duke and Florida State before the calendar turned to 2017.

While the Gators suffered losses in those close contests, the experience they gained helped them build a dominant basketball team. Florida finished the regular season with a 24-7 record.

Florida has played stellar defense, holding opponents to just 66.4 points per game in the regular season. It is hard to take and make threes against the Gators. Opponents shot just 30.2 percent from beyond the arc in the regular season.

The Gators also play



quickly on the offense end, then make their opponent work for every shot on the defensive side of the floor. North Carolina will have to be ready to grind out possessions if the two teams face off.

Getting to the free-throw line is also a strength of this team. Florida made 17.5 free throws per game in the regular season.

Zone defenses still pose problem for North Carolina

UNC struggled against the zone in ACC play this season.

By John Bauman
Assistant Sports Editor

The North Carolina basketball team's first conference loss left the team flummoxed.

The Tar Heels shot poorly from the field in their 75-63 loss to Georgia Tech, making 24 out of 72 shots. Their 33.3 percent field goal percentage ended up being the lowest of the season. UNC also took 26 3-pointers and made just five of them.

It was all thanks to a 1-3-1 zone.

"Against that type of zone, you have to have some type of penetration, or you've got to have ball movement; you can't just pass it one time and be able to get it in the middle," Justin Jackson said on Dec. 31 after the loss. "And so we were kind of stagnant as far as the guards out there, and so it didn't really open up the inside as much as it should have."

That first game in conference play was a bellwether for how some teams would treat the Tar Heels throughout the season. Miami, Syracuse and Virginia all threw zones at UNC.

But over the course of the year, the Tar Heels have improved in one key aspect of beating zone defenses.

"Well, we shoot the ball better from the 3-point line," head coach Roy Williams said. "That's the biggest thing."

North Carolina's long-range bombers, Joel Berry and Jackson, have proved valuable in busting zone defenses this season. Both are excellent shooters who stretch defenses, in turn, opening up the paint for drives and inside looks.

While shooting helps, UNC hasn't put all of its eggs in one basket to beat zones. A season ago, Brice Johnson's eight assists against Syracuse's zone in the Tar Heels' Jan. 9 road win disassembled that defense.

"We don't pass it inside nearly as well as we did last year," Williams said. "Brice's passing inside against the zone at Syracuse was as good as I've ever had any big man."

Isaiah Hicks and Kennedy Meeks are good passers, but they'll never be great ones. Instead, Theo Pinson has helped shoulder the load. Pinson missed five conference games this season, and UNC went 3-2 in those games. The losses came on the road against Georgia Tech and Miami — which both used

zone defenses.

"Theo's a great passer," Luke Maye said after UNC's 85-67 win over Pittsburgh. "He's got an uncanny eye for seeing open men. You've always got to be on your toes when Theo's got the ball, because you never know when it's going to come."

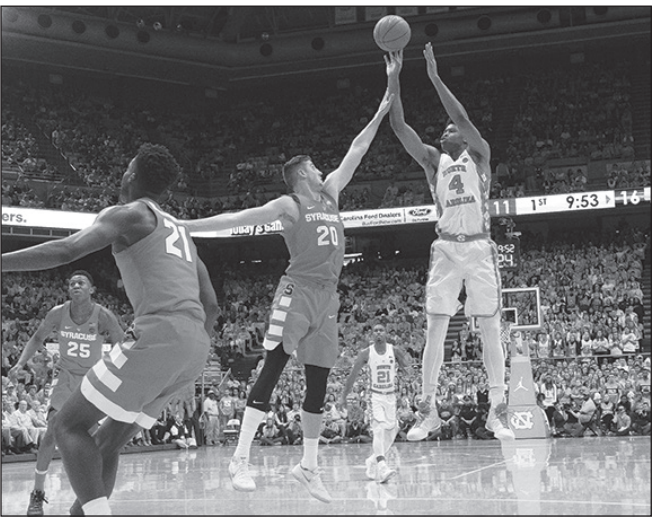
In that Pittsburgh game, North Carolina melted the Panthers' zone defense so badly that they switched back to a man-to-man alignment in the second half. That first half was an example of UNC at its best against zone defenses: the Tar Heels shot well but also moved the ball and dominated on the boards with 11 first-half offensive

rebounds. UNC also moved well without the ball, setting off-ball screens and testing the attentiveness of Panther defenders.

North Carolina wasn't bad on the offensive boards against Georgia Tech, though. The team finished with 44 total rebounds, including 19 on the offensive glass.

At the end of the day, beating zone defenses really comes down to hitting shots. The Tar Heels can't afford a cold shooting day like they suffered against Georgia Tech. Instead of leading to a first conference loss, it could be a season-ending misstep in March.

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DTH FILE/ROBERT GOURLEY
North Carolina forward Isaiah Hicks (4) shoots over a Syracuse defender. Syracuse is known for running a zone defense.

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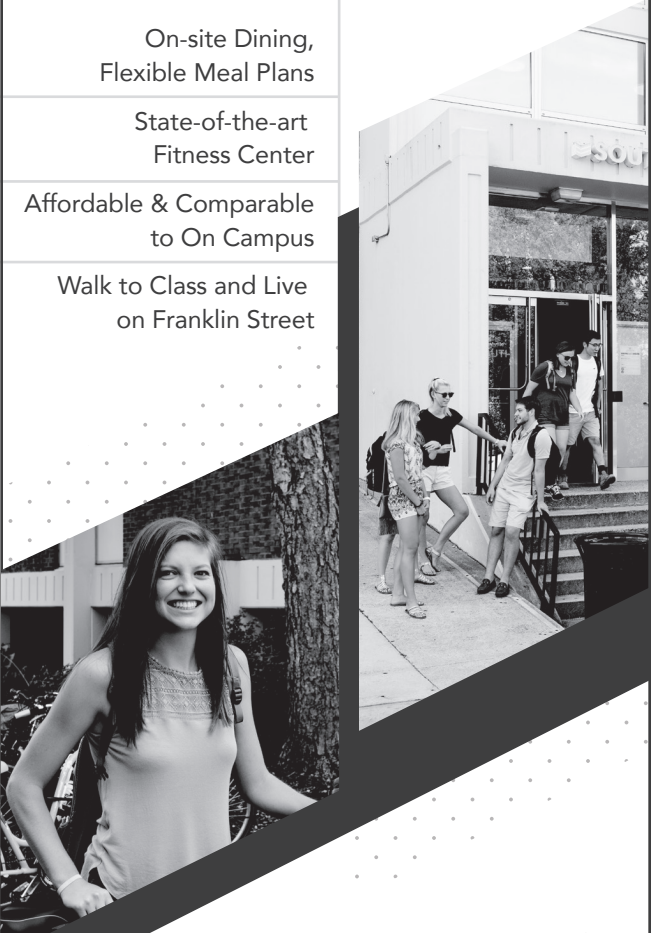
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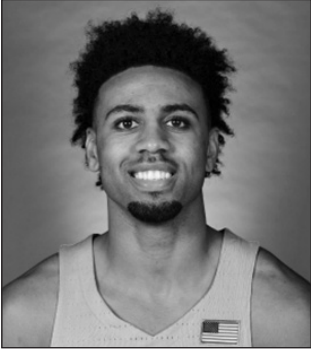
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PLAYERS TO WATCH IN ACC TOURNAMENT

Great players win games in March. While the regular season is all about building depth, gaining experience and hopefully picking up more than a few wins, March Madness is for the superstars. Because of the intense nature of tournament games, the best players on a team rise to the top. Coaches don't like hero ball during the regular season, but if it works in the postseason, it works. The only objective is advancing to the next round, no matter who is scoring the baskets or how many shots it takes. These eight players are among the best on their respective teams and all have the ability to take over the

ACC Tournament, which is being played at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn from March 7 to 11. Many of these players have already been recognized by the ACC for their strong regular seasons. Duke's Luke Kennard, Wake Forest's John Collins, Notre Dame's Bonzie Colson and Louisville's Donovan Mitchell were all represented on the 2016-17 All-ACC first team. The last player on the team was North Carolina's Justin Jackson. They'd all exchange those awards for a conference title. *Compiled by assistant sports editors John Bauman, Blake Richardson and Jeremy Vernon.*

Joel Berry II



After N.C. State fell to Clemson in the ACC Tournament's first round on Tuesday, North Carolina arguably has the best point guard left in junior Joel Berry. While he hasn't gotten much attention late in the season thanks to the emergence of his teammate Justin Jackson, Berry's performance is pretty indicative of how the Tar Heels will play in any given game. In UNC's wins where Berry has played, he's knocking down 48.5 percent of his field goals and 46.1 percent of his 3-pointers. In the Tar Heels' losses, he's

shot just 33.3 percent from the field and 28 percent from beyond the arc. Where Berry goes, so does UNC.

Luke Kennard



Luke Kennard tests the North Carolina defense unlike almost any other player the team will face, mainly because he is so deadly beyond the arc. The sophomore guard — who was unanimously selected to the All-ACC First Team — is the top scorer in the conference. North Carolina felt the burn of his offensive repertoire in its loss to Duke on Feb. 9, where Kennard totaled 20 points. Defending the deep ball has been a weak spot for UNC all season. While the Tar Heels were able to overcome

Kennard's 28-point game in Saturday's win, someone must crack down on guarding him in tournament play. UNC won't get lucky twice.

London Perrantes



Virginia's senior guard and leader adds an additional punch to facing the Cavaliers' pack-line defense. London Perrantes, an ACC Preseason Player of the Year candidate and All-ACC Second Team selection, has found scoring success in both of North Carolina's matchups with Virginia, scoring 12 points when UNC beat the Cavaliers on Feb. 18 and totaling 13 in the Tar Heels' loss on Feb. 27. He leads Virginia in scoring with 12.8 points per game — impressive for a school that focuses on slow-paced play.

To beat Virginia, UNC must overcome the pack-line defense and limit scoring. Containing Perrantes essentially solves the latter.

Bonzie Colson



Like North Carolina, Notre Dame has a variety of weapons in its arsenal. But junior forward Bonzie Colson is arguably the most dangerous. The All-ACC First Team selection averages a double-double (17 points, 10.4 rebounds). He will likely pose an interesting clash with the Tar Heel big men, who have dominated the glass so far. Still, when UNC defeated Notre Dame, Colson was only the team's third-leading scorer, with 17 points. If the Tar Heels face Colson again, he will likely be an even greater force with an

ACC title on the line. But even more daunting than Colson will be the depth of the Fighting Irish that surround him.

Donovan Mitchell



Louisville's Donovan Mitchell is one of the players listed that UNC is most likely to face, and the sophomore guard would give the Tar Heels plenty of trouble. The All-ACC First Team selection poses a threat on both sides of the ball, leading his team in scoring (15.9 points per game) and averages more steals (2.13) than anyone in the conference. When the Tar Heels defeated the Cardinals 74-63 on Feb. 22, they had no solution for Mitchell, who scored 21 points and grabbed four rebounds.

If UNC wants to succeed in the tournament, it will need to find a way to slow down Mitchell. He is too potent to leave unchecked.

Dwayne Bacon



With a game as good as his name, Florida State sophomore guard Dwayne Bacon led the Seminoles in scoring in the regular season, racking up 16.9 points per game on the way to earning second team All-ACC honors. Bacon has played UNC twice in his two seasons at Florida State, tallying 18 points on both occasions. That said, the Seminoles weren't able to beat the Tar Heels either time. Bacon and the rest of his teammates will look to avenge both losses in a potential title-game matchup with UNC.

And if the sophomore is up to his old tricks, the Tar Heels will be hard pressed to stop him and Florida State from scoring at will.

Tyler Lydon



North Carolina has had troubles matching up with stretch fours in the past. Isaiah Hicks does his best, but his best defensive moments don't come running around the perimeter, chasing a dangerous 3-point shooter. Syracuse's Tyler Lydon fits the mold of a stretch four. Lydon shot 113 3-pointers in the regular season. He converted on 41.6 percent of those attempts, an impressive mark for a 6-foot-8 forward. Lydon also rebounds the basketball well. He averaged a team-high 8.3 boards per game and hauled in 67 offen-

sive rebounds. Lydon also does a good job protecting the rim, blocking a team-high 43 shots in the regular season.

Seth Allen



Seth Allen, a red-shirt senior guard from Woodbridge, Va., averaged 13.1 points and 2.3 rebounds per game in the regular season. He ran away with the ACC Sixth Man of the Year award and was also named All-ACC honorable mention for his role in leading Virginia Tech to a 10-8 record in conference play. He made his mark on the season by dominating from beyond the arc. Allen knocked down an incredible 46.5 percent of his threes in the regular season.

He also shot 72.8 percent from the free-throw line, making 59 of his 81 attempts in the Hokies' 30 game regular season.

By the numbers: North Carolina's 2016-17 season

31 UNC won its 31st ACC regular season title, an ACC record.	1,000 Four players hit the 1,000 career point mark this season.	18 UNC averages 18 assists per game, fourth in the country.	3.92 Theo Pinson's assist-turnover ratio this season.
16 The Tar Heels were a perfect 16-0 at home in 2016-17.	85 Justin Jackson made 85 threes this season, 10 off the UNC record.	42 The Tar Heels rebound 42 percent of their missed shots.	26 UNC is the ACC Tournament No. 1 seed for the 26th time.

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10 teams to watch in the ACC Tournament

The ACC is notoriously the toughest conference in the nation. That is even more true this season — 10 or even 11 teams could earn a bid to play in the NCAA Tournament come Selection Sunday.

The ACC's status as the top dog in the country was evident in last year's NCAA Tournament, too. In 2016, four Elite Eight teams and two in the Final Four belonged to the ACC.

With NCAA bids and seeds

on the line, these powerhouse teams will clash for a few fleeting days of elite conference basketball.

Here is a rundown of the top 10 teams in the conference, some of whom UNC will spar with in its quest to earn a second straight ACC Tournament title to match its two outright ACC regular-season titles.

Compiled by Assistant Sports Editors John Bauman, Blake Richardson and Jeremy Vernon

North Carolina

26-6, 14-4 ACC

North Carolina is the No. 1 seed in the ACC Tournament for a reason. The team leads the conference in scoring offense, scoring margin, assists and rebounds. The team's quick play style can be stifling to take on, especially when UNC is playing at the top of its game.

But the Tar Heels have been plagued with inconsistency. They have been able to dodge this issue for the most part with their depth, but this is tournament play in the toughest conference in the nation. Inconsistency could be a killer.

UNC struggles in other areas as well. Namely, the Tar Heels could come into problems with turnovers (they average 12 per game), and a lackluster defense beyond the arc could come back to haunt them. The ACC is full of shooters who can become dangerous if left unchecked. And in the ACC Tournament, UNC will face teams playing at the top of their game.

Any weak spot in the Tar Heel defense could become deadly down the stretch.



Florida State

24-7, 12-6 ACC

Florida State went 24-7 in the regular season, including a 12-6 conference record to earn the No. 2 seed in the ACC Tournament. The Seminoles are led by Dwayne Bacon on offense. He averaged 16.9 points and shot 36.5 percent from the 3-point line in the regular season.

Jonathan Isaac is another player to keep an eye on. The standout first-year and potential NBA lottery pick averages double digits for Florida State (12.2 points per game) while also grabbing 7.2 rebounds per game to pose a potent double threat.

The Seminoles averaged 83 points per game in the regular season. Their up-tempo, explosive offense will challenge opponents in the ACC Tournament.



Notre Dame

23-8, 12-6 ACC

Notre Dame scored 78.5 points per game in the regular season, mixing together 3-pointers, free throws and efficient offensive attempts to create an unquestionably potent offense.

The team went 23-8 in the regular season, including a 12-6 record in conference play. The Fighting Irish went 7-2 at home in ACC play but struggled on the road with a 5-4 record. They earned the No. 3 seed in the ACC Tournament.

The Irish have four players who average more than 13 points per game, but don't have much depth outside of that. This gives UNC an advantage, especially in tournament play. If a matchup with Notre Dame comes down to the wire, North Carolina will benefit.



Louisville

24-7, 12-6 ACC

Louisville dominated a difficult nonconference schedule with a 12-1 record, but ACC play proved to be tougher — the Cardinals finished with a 12-6 record in conference. That record was still good enough to help Louisville earn the No. 4 seed in the 2017 ACC Tournament, though.

The Cardinals made 7.2 3-pointers per game in the regular season, shooting 36.4 percent on attempts from beyond the arc. This could be a sore spot in a matchup against UNC, as the Tar Heels struggle with 3-point defense.

Donovan Mitchell is the team's best player. He averaged 15.9 points and 4.7 rebounds per game in the regular season. He also had a team-high 66 steals.



Duke

24-8, 11-7 ACC

Duke began the 2016-17 college basketball season faced with high expectations and has struggled to live up to them. An early loss to Kansas on Nov. 15 ended the Blue Devil's bid for a perfect season just three games into the schedule.

The team went undefeated in the rest of nonconference play, cruising through a soft schedule. Conference play began on New Year's Eve with a loss to Virginia Tech by a final score of 89-75.

The Blue Devils' struggles continued throughout conference play. They finished the season with an 11-7 conference record and earned the No. 5 seed in the ACC Tournament. But against UNC, the result of a matchup is always unpredictable.



Virginia

21-9, 11-7 ACC

Virginia finished the regular season with a 21-9 record. The Cavaliers play tough, slow and deliberately — exactly how head coach Tony Bennett would like them to. However, they struggled to find wins in a tough ACC schedule and finished with an 11-7 record and a No. 6 seed in the ACC Tournament.

The Cavaliers held opponents to 54.9 points per game in the regular season. They also forced 13.1 turnovers per game while playing at a slow tempo that limited possessions for both teams.

The team also took care of the ball on offense, earning a 1.5 assist to turnover ratio in the regular season. It's not Coach Bennett's best team, but the Cavaliers are always dangerous and difficult to play in March.



Virginia Tech

21-9, 10-8 ACC

Virginia Tech finished the regular season with a 21-9 record and earned the No. 7 seed in the ACC Tournament, being played in Brooklyn from March 7 to 11.

The Hokies are led on offense by guard Seth Allen, who averaged 13.1 points per game in the regular season. Allen is an incredible shooter. His 46.5 percent 3-point shooting percentage on 101 attempts was nothing short of remarkable. Zach LeDay also leads the Hokie offense, averaging 15.6 points per game and contributing 7.1 rebounds per game.

Virginia Tech also shot over 40 percent from beyond the arc as a team in the 2016-17 season. That type of shooting is always dangerous in March.



Miami

21-10, 10-8 ACC

North Carolina's loss to Miami on Jan. 28 is part of an impressive resume of Hurricanes wins — including a win over Duke and a win at Virginia in overtime.

UNC will need to contain Bruce Brown, who totaled a game-leading 30 points against the Tar Heels. But the battle can be won with rebounding. North Carolina ranks first in the conference in rebounding, while Miami is giving up the third fewest rebounds to opponents of any ACC team this season.

The Tar Heels could torch Miami with scoring, since the Hurricanes only average 70.2 a game — the third fewest in the conference. North Carolina was inconsistent offensively in the first matchup. If UNC wants a shot at an ACC Tournament title, that cannot happen again.



Wake Forest

19-12, 9-9 ACC

Wake Forest's season hinged on a March 1 game against Louisville. The Cardinals came in as one of the top-ranked teams in the ACC the country, and Wake Forest needed a marquee win to boost its NCAA Tournament resume.

The Demon Deacons were down one at the half but exploded in the second with 46 points to win 88-81. It was Wake Forest's best win of the season.

Wake Forest consistently didn't play that well throughout the season and ended up with the No. 10 seed in the ACC Tournament. They are still on the NCAA Tournament bubble and need a few more performances like how they played against the Cardinals to secure a place in the Big Dance.



Pittsburgh

16-16, 4-14 ACC

Pittsburgh averaged 73.5 points per game in the 2016-17 regular season — not a bad mark for a team with a difficult conference schedule and thin roster. The problem was that the team allowed opponents to score 75.2 points per game, giving the Panthers a negative 1.6 point differential during the regular season.

The team struggled against ACC opponents. After an overtime win against Virginia on Jan. 4, the Panthers lost their next eight conference games.

They rallied, slightly, over the second half of the season to finish with a 4-14 conference record, with the lone road win coming at Boston College. Pittsburgh has dangerous scorers, but it might not be enough.



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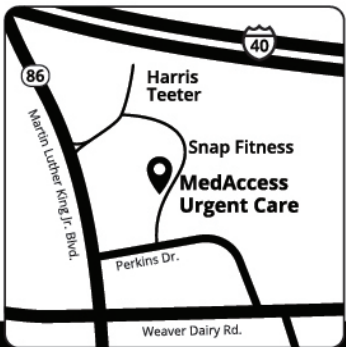
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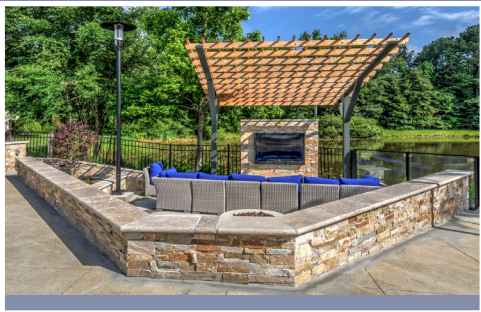


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