A black and white photograph of basketball player Julius Hodge in a white jersey with red and blue trim, dribbling a basketball. He has his mouth open in a shout. The background is a blurred crowd in a gymnasium.

RED

TECHNICIAN

THE MAN

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11/22/2002



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JULIUS HODGE

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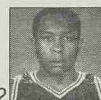
//POLLS

TECHNICIAN'S PICKS

Duke (10) 98
Maryland 76
N.C. State (1) 74
Virginia 62
Georgia Tech 60
North Carolina 49
Wake Forest 41
Clemson 21
Florida State 14



1



2



3



4



5

ALL-ACC

- 1 Julius Hodge 21
- 2 Travis Watson 21
- 3 Steve Blake 18
- 4 Chris Duhon 18
- 5 Dahntay Jones 18

SECOND TEAM

Josh Howard 17
 Ed Scott 15
 Marcus Melvin 8
 Raymond Felton 6
 Drew Nicholas 6

HONORABLE MENTION

Ed Nelson, Daniel Ewing,
 Chris Bosh, Michael Joine,

ALL ROOKIE TEAM

Raymond Felton 11
 Chris Bosh 10
 Shavlik Randolph 7
 Rashad Mccants 5
 J.J Redick 4

Honorable Mention

Sheldon Williams, Sean Dockery, Eric Williams, Sean May,
 Cam Bennerman, Justin Gray, Travis Garrison, John Gilchrist

ACC PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Travis Watson 5
 Chris Duhon 3
 Julius Hodge 1
 Josh Howard 1
 Dahntay Jones 1

ACC ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Raymond Felton 6
 Chris Bosh 4
 Shavlik Randolph 1

2002-2003

MEN'S SCHEDULE

WOMEN'S SCHEDULE

5 // RED // TECHNICIAN

11/22	MOUNT ST. MARY'S	Home	FSNS	7:30
11/30	COPPIN STATE	Home	RJ	8:00
12/4	NORTHWESTERN	Home (ACC/Big 10)	ESPN2	7:30
12/8	SOUTH CAROLINA	Home	FSN	6:30
12/14	NORTH CAROLINA A&T	Reynolds Coliseum	FSNS	7:00
12/17	GONZAGA	Meadowlands, N.J.	ESPN	7:00
12/21	FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON	Home	RJ	2:00
12/29	WOFFORD	Home	FSNS	2:00
1/2	MASSACHUSETTS	Amherst, Mass.	ESPN	7:00
1/5	VIRGINIA	Home	FSN	5:30
1/11	GEORGIA TECH	Atlanta, Ga.	RJ	4:00
1/16	BOSTON COLLEGE	Home	ESPN2	7:00
1/18	FLORIDA STATE	Tallahassee, Fla.	RJ	8:00
1/22	DUKE	Home	RJ	9:00
1/26	NORTH CAROLINA	Home	FSN	3:00
1/30	MARYLAND	College Park, Md.	RJ	9:00
2/2	CLEMSON	Home	RJ	1:00
2/6	WAKE FOREST	Winston-Salem,	ESPN2	7:00
2/9	VIRGINIA	Charlottesville, Va.	RJ/ESPN	4:00
2/12	GEORGIA TECH	Home	RJ	9:00
2/15	TEMPLE	Philadelphia, Pa.	ABC	3:30
2/18	FLORIDA STATE	Home	FSN	7:00
2/22	DUKE	Durham, N.C.	CBS	4:00
2/25	NORTH CAROLINA	Chapel Hill	RJ	8:00
3/2	MARYLAND	Home	FSN	8:00
3/5	CLEMSON	Clemson, S.C.	ESPN2	7:00
3/8	WAKE FOREST	Home	ABC	1:30

11/22	UC SANTA BARBARA	Home		7:00
11/24	UConn (JIMMY V)	@RBC Center	ESPN	4:30
11/29	IOWA (LMU TOURN.)	Los Angeles		8:00
12/3	EAST CAROLINA	Greenville		7:00
12/6	WASHINGTON (GSK)	Home		6:30
12/14	BRIGHAM YOUNG	Home		2:00
12/18	ELON	Home		7:00
12/21	SETON HALL	South Orange, N.J.		1:00
12/30	OLD DOMINION	Norfolk, Va.		7:00
1/2	MARYLAND	Home		7:00
1/5	NORTH CAROLINA	Chapel Hill	FSN	1:00
1/8	FLORIDA STATE	Tallahassee, Fla.		7:00
1/12	VIRGINIA	Home	FSN	1:00
1/20	CLEMSON	Home	FSN	7:00
1/23	WAKE FOREST	Winston-Salem		7:00
1/26	GEORGIA TECH	Atlanta, Ga.		2:00
1/29	DUKE	Home		7:00
2/1	MARYLAND	College Park, Md.		7:00
2/7	NORTH CAROLINA	Home	FSN	7:00
2/9	FLORIDA STATE	Home		2:00
2/13	VIRGINIA	Charlottesville, Va.		7:30
2/20	CLEMSON	Clemson, S.C.		7:00
2/23	WAKE FOREST	Home		2:00
2/27	GEORGIA TECH	Home		7:00
3/2	DUKE	Durham	FSN	5:30



Julius Hodge
N.C. State Wolfpack

WOLFPACK

BY STEVE THOMPSON

In each of the previous preseasons since Herb Sendek took over as men's basketball coach, one question has been the focus: Will State make the NCAA tournament this year?

Last year, however, the Wolfpack ended its decade-long absence from the Big Dance, reaching the second round after finishing 9-7 in the ACC, 23-11 overall and runner-up in the ACC tournament.

So one year removed for such success, the Wolfpack would surely be granted a reprieve on the NCAA tourney questions. Right?

Nope.

Missing from last year's team is a number of key players. First team All-ACC performer Anthony Grundy graduated, taking his 17.8 points, 5.5 rebounds and 3.5 assists per game with him. Also graduated is fellow senior Archie Miller, one of the deadliest three-point shooters in N.C. State history. Miller remains with the team this year, however, as an administrative intern.

"We're going to miss them, but we've got guys on this team that are just as good," said guard Scooter Sherrill. "It's going to be a total team effort, not just

N.C. STATE WILL TRY TO ERASE THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF LAST SEASON WITH ANOTHER TRIP TO THE NCAA TOURNAMENT THIS YEAR.

one of two guys carrying the team."

Thus, since the Pack is without Grundy and Miller, State is getting a slightly modified version of a familiar question: After making the NCAA tournament last year, can you do it again this year without these key players?

"A lot of people are saying we're lacking leadership, and we don't have a point guard," said slashing guard Julius Hodge. "We [are] not necessarily listening to the news, but we're hearing it. We know that we [are] going to go out there and prove everyone wrong."

That's not to say the team isn't getting any respect. In the ACC media writers' annual preseason poll, State was selected third in the conference. It was the first time since 1990 the Pack had been picked in the upper half of the poll.

While the losses of Grundy and Miller were expect-

ed, a surprising absentee from this year's team is 6-8 sophomore Ilian Evtimov — who will miss the entire season after suffering an ACL injury during the Pack's first scrimmage.

Evtimov, who was the mythical sixth man on the ACC All-Rookie team (falling one vote shy of making the team), will be missed for his versatility, accurate outside shot and ability to find the open man. He will be granted a medical redshirt for this year and still have three remaining years of eligibility.

"We're going to have to adjust," said Sendek. "I think that's evident. I don't want to be laboring [on the injury]. At this point we need to move forward. There's nothing we're going to do that will change it. We wish it didn't happen, but at this point we've got to coach the guys we have."

In looking at the players that State still has, the Pack returns seven of its 10 biggest producers from a

"I'M NOT GOING TO MAKE ANY PREDICTIONS, BUT WE'VE GOT A GREAT TEAM." -SCOOTER SHERRILL

year ago. Arguably the biggest returnee is Hodge, who will be looked to by the media and the fans — perhaps even his fellow players — to soften the blow left by the aforementioned departures.

Hodge welcomes the spotlight and is prone to shine in it. He came on particularly strong during postseason play last year, averaging 13.2 points a game during the ACC and NCAA tournaments, including a shot clock-beating 3-pointer against Maryland in the ACC Semifinals, which helped lead the Pack to victory over the eventual national champions.

While the pain from last year's season-ending 77-74 loss to Connecticut still reverberates with Hodge, he's ready to move on and achieve greater heights this season.

"We really learned that we were this close to making the Sweet 16, but we can't live in the past," said Hodge. "We know that this year, that experience has made us a better team."

Another player who came on strong at the end of last year was junior Marcus Melvin. After slumping during the early parts of the season, Melvin came on strong after hitting a 30-foot basket at the buzzer to beat Houston. He scored 19 points in the win over Maryland at the ACC tournament, where he was named to the All-Tournament team after shooting 50 percent from the 3-point line during the tournament.

He was selected to the preseason All-ACC second team for this

that Anthony's gone," and I'm looking to make things happen for the team and myself."

The former McDonald's All-American has shown flashes of what he is capable of achieving, including a 19-point performance at Clemson last year and a 20-point game against Virginia. Despite averaging just over 10 minutes a game last year, Sherrill averaged 5.7 points and shot 33.8 percent from behind the three-point arc.

Powell and Watkins both spent considerable amounts of time bulking up for this season.

After starting his All-Rookie campaign strongly last season — averaging 12.0 points over the first 11 games — Powell faded down the stretch. He is hoping the added bulk from the off-season will help him over the course of the year.

"It was tough to play against those guys, I'm not going to lie," said Powell. "At the same time, I could have done better than I did."

"I always have something to prove. If you want to be the best, you've got to play the best [people.]"

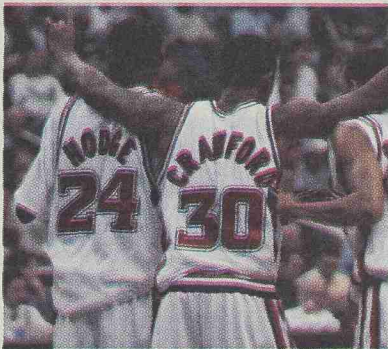
Watkins' freshman season ended after only 13 games, as he suffered an ACL injury in the ACC opener vs. Maryland. During his rehabilitation, he was able to work on his shooting mechanics as well as getting stronger.

"When

significant playing time.

Six-foot-10 center Jordan Collins suffered a broken hand in early season practice, which has limited his playing time in the preseason exhibitions. Walk-on Will Roach appears ready for a larger role on this year's team, after playing 43 of 80 minutes in State's exhibition games.

Two of State's freshmen — Dominick Mejia and Cameron Bennerman — will also see playing time. Freshmen Adam Simons and Justin Flatt will redshirt.



PRIMED FOR RETURN TO NCAA TOURNAMENT

year. He is expecting to be one of State's leading contributors this year.

"Depending on the situation, I feel like Coach will call on me or Julius to score," said Melvin. "I feel everyone will have to score, but in terms of talent level we can take it to another level."

While Melvin and Hodge are likely already penciled in as starters, four other players — Cliff Crawford, Scooter Sherrill, Josh Powell and Levi Watkins — will likely occupy the other three starting positions at various times during the season.

Crawford, the team's only senior, is coming off a season where he saw reduced playing time due to the influx of guards on the team. With Grundy and Miller leaving, however, his duties will increase, as he will likely be one of the main ball handlers for State this year. While he is primarily known for his defensive play, Crawford did shoot 48 percent from the field against ACC competition last year.

After two years spent behind Grundy at the shooting guard spot, Sherrill is looking for a breakout campaign this year.

"I've had two hard years, so this year I'm ready," said Sherrill. "People say, 'Oh, it's Sherrill's time now

you're hurt, you can concentrate on muscles that you otherwise wouldn't concentrate on, so my overall strength is a lot better," said Watkins. "You can get down when you tear your ACL, but I just wanted to make sure I came back stronger than I was before."

His work appears to have paid off, as his 19 points led all scorers in State's first exhibition game.

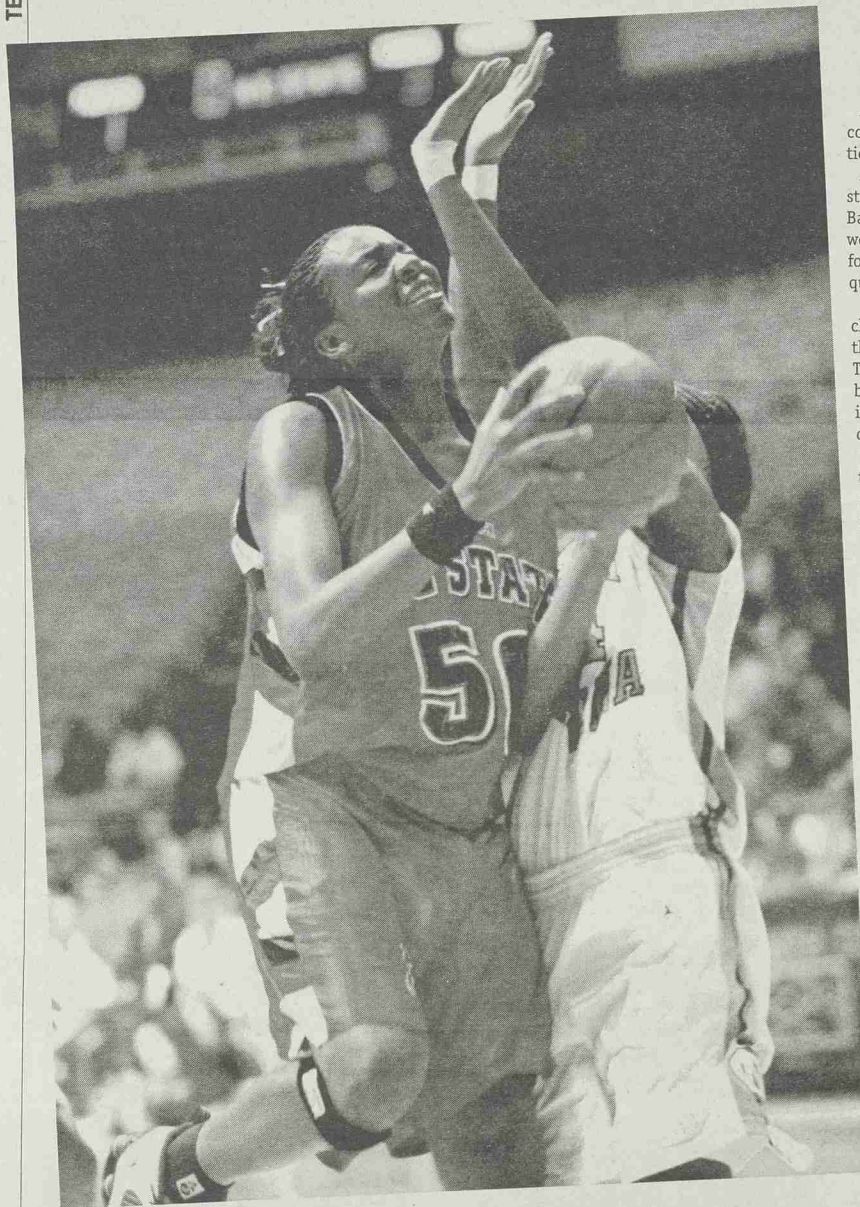
After State's top six, a number of others look to get

The Pack will play a number of challenging nonconference games before the ACC schedule. The Pack will travel to Massachusetts and Temple and host South Carolina. In one of the most anticipated unions, the Pack will finally participate in the Jimmy V Classic, when it travels to upper New Jersey to face Gonzaga.

"I'm not going to make any predictions, but we've got a great team," said Sherrill. "We're working really hard in practice and we're really confident. There are a lot of good teams in the conference, but I feel like we're one of the top teams."



FINDING THEIR



BY MATT MIDDLETON

A proverb that Kay Yow often repeats in her press conferences is, "Success is a journey, not a destination."

After experiencing one of the most memorable stops on her journey — an induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame on Sept. 27 — the Wolfpack women's basketball coach of 27 years now turns her focus to erasing her most disappointing season in quite some time.

A year ago, Yow's team was a preseason favorite to challenge Duke for the conference title. It rested in the nation's top 10, but then the bottom fell out. Two players unexpectedly quit the team; injuries beset some of the team's stars; and the team showed its youth and inexperience, particularly in the backcourt.

All of that led to a losing record (14-15) for just the second time since 1988. The Pack also snapped a streak of seven straight trips to the NCAA tournament.

But with that season behind it, the Pack has set out to prove that last season was nothing more than an aberration — a blemish on the Hall of Fame career of Yow. With the return of an injured star, a talented frontcourt and depth that will open up the offense, the rest of the ACC has been warned: the Pack vows to be back.

"Our whole team is anxious coming off last year to [try] and be the team we can be and play the way we can play," said Yow. "It's been on our minds, and we're really looking forward to playing better and wanting to do better."

WOUNDED IN THE BACKCOURT

As a freshman, Terah James started all 29 games as the Pack's point guard and led the team in assists with 3.9 per game. She would, however, be relegated to nothing more than cheer-leading duties for the next two years. James twice tore her ACL — once in the right knee and once in the left — before the season started the last two years. Thus, the last game the Floridian has played was way back in March of 2000.

Combining solid court vision with flashy ball handling, the return of James is exactly the hole the Pack needed to fill from last season when its starting point guard (Nanna Rivers) appeared more comfortable as shooting guard.

But a quick fix is not in the cards, according to Yow, who still believes James' return will be a slow process.

"With two years off not playing competitively, and add to that two reconstructed knees, she's going to need time to get into the swing of the game again," said Yow.

James' play has looked crisp in two early

WAY BACK

season exhibition games, both easy Pack victories, in which the junior recorded a combined 26 points.

Joining James in the off-guard spot could be any number of players. The move should allow Rivers to hoist more shots, a positive thing considering she was second on the team in field-goal percentage a year ago.

Kendra Bell adds quickness to the position, and senior Amelia Labrador brings three years of experience to the table. Raleigh native Liz Bailey is capable of coming off the bench and knocking down three-pointers at any time.

Yow has praised the play of yet another guard, freshman Billie McDowell, in the preseason, saying she is capable of being "one of the best rebounding guards in the league."

James' injury woes have been passed to another former freshman star. Rachel Stockdale, who made a team-high 40 treys last season, has undergone three surgeries on her knee since April. The injury has even left Yow searching for words on whether or not Stockdale could be available this season.

"Rachel ... wow ... We just don't know," said Yow. "We're still waiting and hoping it's just going to stop and get better. She hardly ever practices two days back-to-back, and when she does, it really swells up and she has to stay off of it. It's still very up in the air about what she will do this season."

Yow said the possibility of a redshirt has not been ruled out.

INSIDE FORCES

Taking the majority of the feeds from the plethora of guards on the Pack's roster will be the inside combination of Kaayla Chones and Carisse Moody. Both Chones and Moody have garnered All-ACC honors in the past, and if they could both put together an injury-free year, they could form the league's best inside tandem.

Chones missed the entire 2000-2001 season after tearing her quadriceps. The following year, Chones broke out in a home contest against Georgia Tech with a 31-point performance against one of the league's top centers. The left-handed center is nearly unstoppable if given the ball down low in the post, particularly from the left side.

Chones was named second-team All-ACC and second-team ACC All-Tournament last year — a year in which Moody battled injury problems throughout the ACC slate. As a sophomore, Moody also gained second-team All-ACC honors and led State to the Sweet

16 by developing a healthy mix of deadly jump shots and post moves.

Injured virtually the entire offseason, Moody was a nonstarter in both exhibition games. Getting a healthy Moody back in the lineup is a priority for Yow, who, for now, is content with rotating Moody and Chones in the center position.

"Carisse was injured in preseason and was out all summer," said Yow. "She couldn't do anything, so when we first started she wasn't in rhythm at all. In practice we played them together at times, and we could never get the rhythm and chemistry. We started playing them at the five and substituting in and out, and when we were doing that we had good rhythm either way."

Once Moody returns to full playing speed, expect the two to play with each other more and more and to help create openings for each other in the paint.

READY TO RUN

Although the math may not sound right, State has the rare luxury of returning six starters to this year's team by adding James the mix, coupled with the return of all five starters from a year ago.

Nine players who played in 20 or more games a year ago will be joined by three newcomers that could all challenge for playing time.

"I think we have more experience and depth on this team than we've had in a while," said Yow. "Due to injuries, a lot of people have had a chance to get a lot of playing time, and that helps us this year. The aggressiveness of this team, their unselfishness and the way they play so hard on defense sets them apart from a lot of other teams."

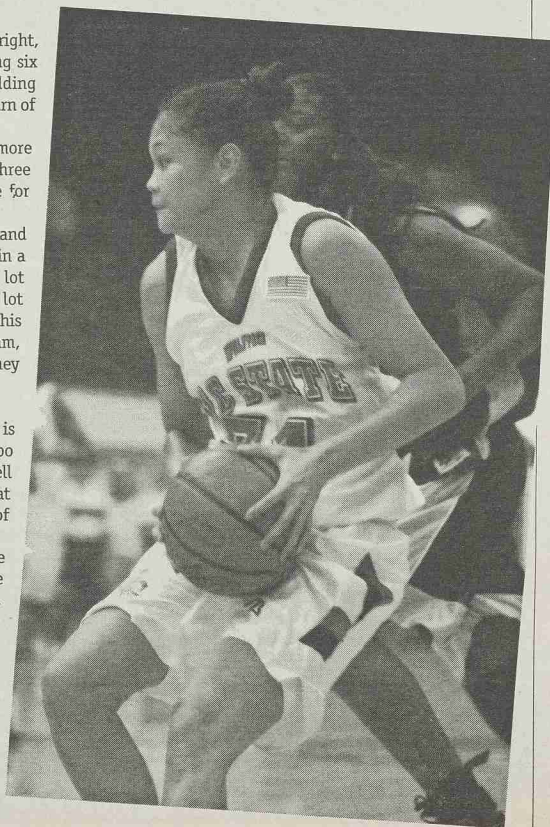
What this depth means for Yow is that she will be able to force the tempo and push the ball up the court, as well as maintain a balanced attack that won't strictly rely on the scoring of Moody and Chones.

"I'm looking for the offense to be up," said Yow. "Now that we have some people back, we have depth, and depth and versatility will be the two key things about this team. We've had to depend primarily on our defense the last two years."

The frontcourt will get a boost from Kentucky transfer Alvine Mendeng, who was the only Wildcat to start all 27 games in her freshman season. Per NCAA transfer rules, Mendeng will be eligible to begin playing on Dec. 21 against Seton Hall.

Until her debut, senior Amy Simpson and junior Adeola Olanrewaju will log more time at the forward positions. Simpson, probably the team's best defender, is coming off an impressive ACC tournament and could be a darkhorse to challenge for all-league honors.

If the team can overcome the lingering and seemingly perpetual injury problems, the depth and versatility of this year's team could be the one deciding factor that decides exactly if this will be a repeat of last year — or another stop that Yow will remember on her journey of success.





BY STEVE THOMPSON

In the fall of 1999 the most heralded recruiting class since the days of Jim Valvano arrived at N.C. State. Three years later, only player from that class remains.

He has seen the Pack grow from disappointing seasons in his first two years to its triumphant run into the NCAA tournament last year. Now it's his turn.

The key to the success of this year's State team may rest on that one player — senior guard Clifford Crawford.

"It's a great program here," he said. "Every time you put on that jersey, it's a piece of history. There's a lot of tradition in putting on the N.C. State jersey."

"I just want to make sure my senior year is a good one."

Ever since he arrived at State, he has been nondescript. He was the third wheel in his recruiting class — overshadowed by high school All-Americans Damien Wilkins and Marshall Williams. Last year, talk about the program either focused on the freshmen or the senior guards. This year, preseason talk focuses on the emerging stardom of Julius Hodge or the injury to Ilian Evtimov.

A utility man of sorts for the Pack over the last three

years, this year Crawford has his ticket to a better life.

"I love my family," Crawford said. "I put them first. I want to do whatever I can to make things better for them. I don't want my sisters to have to grow up like I did."

"Sometimes times were hard for me, but I just want all their times to be good. I don't want them to have to want for anything. Basketball probably won't be an opening for them like it was for me, so I want to make sure that I can pay for them to go to college."

Crawford hopes to use his athletic abilities to provide for his family, but he realizes that this is the year to prove himself to professional scouts.

"I want to let this season take care of itself," said Crawford. "Hopefully I can put myself in a good position to look forward to a season after this one."

Over the last three years, Crawford has primarily served as a backup to former point guard Archie Miller, starting only when Miller was injured. He saw his most significant time during his sophomore season, when he was called on for extended duty when Miller went down with a stress fracture.

This year, however, the position is Crawford's.

"Right now, Cliff is our point guard," said Marcus Melvin. "A lot of guys will probably have to handle the ball, but Cliff is our point guard."

SENIOR STEPPING UP

AFTER THREE YEARS AS A BACKUP, CLIFF CRAWFORD LOOKS TO STABILIZE THIS YEAR'S TEAM AS A SENIOR.

years, this year Crawford will look to fill a gaping hole in State's starting line-up as the primary ball handler on this year's team.

Growing up in Winston-Salem, life was not always easy for Crawford. Along with his brother and two younger sisters, Crawford was raised by his mother.

Crawford's strengths lie in his tenacious defense and his ability to find the open man. In late-game situations last year, he would often rotate with Miller in offensive and defensive situations. He has averaged more than a steal a game over his three years with the team. He also boasts the highest career assist-to-turnover ratio (1.1) of any returning player.

In preparation for his senior season, Crawford has invested a lot of time to get ready. He participated in the Chavis League, which features a number of current and former ACC players, in addition to adhering to a regimented workout schedule. Around the program, the consensus is that Crawford is ready to take over reigns at point guard.

"I think Cliff has continued to grow as a young man," said head coach Herb Sendek. "He has really made terrific strides through the course of his three years and now going into his senior year. This year he's had the best preseason since he's been at State."

On a team that's loaded with wing players — Hodge, Levi Watkins, Will Roach, Scooter Sherrill and Cameron Bennerman — only Crawford and freshman Dominick Mejia could be considered true point guards. While entrusting the point guard slot to a freshman can be deadly for an ACC team (see Virginia and Keith Jennifer last year), a senior at the position is a pretty safe formula for success (see State and Miller last year).

And while State's players and coaches may stress the use of many players as ball handlers, entrenching Crawford in that role would likely help other players focus on other duties, allowing the team to maximize its chances at a return bid to the Big Dance.

So while Crawford may enter this season quietly, a move to the limelight may be in store for Crawford during his senior season.

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HOPS, SIZE, SHOT AND SLASH

FRESHMEN CAMERON BENNERMAN, JUSTIN FLATT, DOMINIC MEJIA AND ADAM SIMONS ARE UNHERALDED, UNPROVEN AND HUNGRY FOR OPPORTUNITY.

11//RED//TECHNICIAN

BY ANDREW B. CARTER

They came from as far away as New Jersey and as close as Burlington. A year ago, one had no idea he'd ever wind up at N.C. State, while the other three had already determined their futures would include playing in Raleigh.

One can jump out of his boxers without taking his shorts off, and another could plain wear the nets off the rim in an afternoon shootaround. One just looks like a basketball player for no other reason that he's 7 feet tall. More importantly, he plays his part, too.

No matter how you divide or categorize them, however, they all welcome the task of playing big-time college basketball in the nation's brightest college basketball spotlight: the ACC.

And for everyone of them — Cameron Bennerman, Justin Flatt, Dominick Mejia and Adam Simons — the opportunity to play for the Wolfpack is a dream come true.

For Flatt and Simons, however, the dream to play in a live game will have to be put on hold. The two will redshirt this season but can still participate in invaluable ways via team practices.

Despite coach Herb Sendek and rest of the coaching staff's decision to redshirt Flatt and Simons, the pair wouldn't trade their experiences for anything.

"It's awesome. It's a dream come true," said Flatt. "I've always wanted to play at a big-time school like this. It's everything I expected and more."

That's right. It's class, practice, study hall, games, curfews. It's finding time to sleep and study while playing slave to a demanding top-notch program. It's what many college freshman could only hope to do — to play basketball at N.C. State, in front of 19,000 raucous fans, the game on the line, the ball in hand. It's pressure.

"Everything is one level up," said Flatt. "Basketball, in the classroom, socially. I'm from a small town, family oriented, and I've never been away from home more than a week at a time. To come up here and be away from home is a little different, but with basketball and class, time goes by pretty fast. Plus, when you're doing something that you love, it's always a little easier."

The feeling of love is shared by Sendek, who, despite the class' low ranking by so-called recruiting "gurus," believes it's one of the most solid groups he's brought in. But he's also realistic.

"Those guys right now are challenged," said Sendek. "Last year at this time, everyone was learning a new system, so there wasn't a big gap between

the returners and the new guys. This year, with so many of those guys having playing experience, they know what we're going to put in before we put it in."

"I think from that standpoint, there's an initial disparity that wasn't there last year. I'm not sure to what measure some of those freshman are able to break through yet."

This year's class is also missing the bona-fide stud of its past counterparts. In each of the previous three years, the Wolfpack had brought in a McDonald's All-American. First it was Damien Wilkins, then came Scooter Sherrill. Last year, it was Julius Hodge that garnered the most attention.

This season, the title of most highly touted is probably a toss-up between Bennerman, a product of Greensboro, and Mejia, who was born in New Orleans before growing up in Voorhees, N.J. Both are 6-foot-4, athletic guards who should fit well into Sendek's system of interchangeable parts. At the same time, they're different.

Bennerman has the kind of jumping ability that a trampoline would envy. Mejia has more ball-handling and natural playmaking ability.

"I get it all from my dad," said Bennerman of his ability to sky. "He's 47, 5-foot-11, and he can still dunk — two-handed. I get [height] from my mom's side. But I get 'it' from my dad. He's always telling stories of my jumping through the house, touching ceilings, touching doorways. I stayed real active when I was little."

Bennerman, who committed early to State while at Hargrave Military Academy, grew up playing soccer and basketball. At the age of 12, he probably made the right decision to focus entirely on hoops.

Mejia, who is often mistaken as Bennerman and vice versa, had a much more indirect path to Raleigh. A year ago, he didn't even know State was interested in offering him a scholarship at all. He had softly verbally committed to Rutgers but left the door open for other programs such as Virginia Tech and Illinois. If it weren't for the coaches at Tech that told the Wolfpack staff about Mejia, the versatile guard might have gone another way.

"I was lucky for that to happen when Virginia Tech told [State] about me," said Mejia. "The big issue was me leaving home. I had committed to Rutgers, and that's where I felt most comfortable with. It was only an hour away. But you've got one life to live, and it was time to step up and be a man. I'd been living with my parents all my life, it was time to be on my own."

And so it came to be. In their brief months on campus, the freshmen have gone a long way to impress

their teammates. They're already learning that being a part of the Wolfpack family means moving into the gym and marrying a basketball.

"I think our freshmen are really making strides to becoming better, and they're really starting to learn the offense quicker than we thought," said Hodge. "They're just a bunch of hard-nosed guys. They work hard; I make them."

Hodge, one of the hardest workers in college basketball, also likes the fact that no one is whining — at least not yet.

"No one is telling me, 'Hey Jules, this is too much,' or 'Hey Jules, I need some sleep.' Everyone knows what they have to do. I think they're going to be very successful this year."

Sleep? Who needs it. Thus far, the class has attacked its work with an uncanny determination. It's like they're trying to prove that people are wrong for counting them out. For Simons, a 7-footer from Burlington, he is trying to make an impression.

"I think I do have something to prove, and I think I will," said Simons. "I just want to prove I can be a player in the ACC. Lots of people said I couldn't play in the league. It adds fuel to the fire."

Simons believes the class' friendship is also important.

"I think we're a tight knit group. Everything is new to us, and we're always together. We've become pretty close."

The fact that this year's freshman class has a lighter burden on it should also come as a relief. Last season, the Pack started two, sometimes three, true freshmen. With depth such a question at the start of last season, Sendek couldn't even think of redshirting a freshman here or there.

This year, he has the luxury of bringing his players along more slowly. The coaches' efforts and methods haven't gone unnoticed by the newest members of the team.

"He's a man who I can relate to," said Flatt. "He really loves the game and the players that play for him. He'll do anything in the world for you, I can tell that already. He's always there for you and he's going to push you as far as he can to get the best out of you."

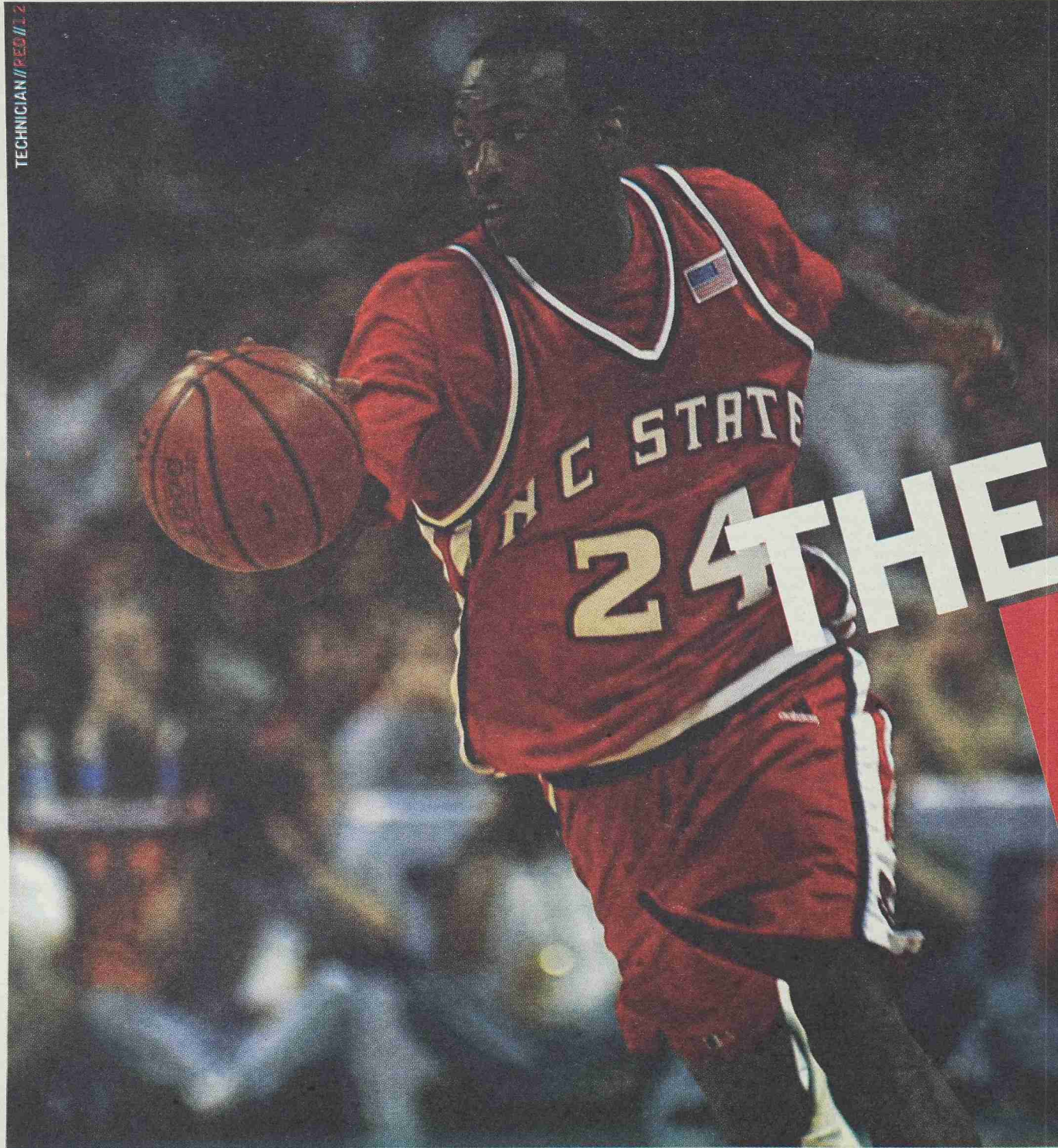
"He's going to make you the best player you can be."

Bennerman agreed.

"He's like a teacher. The first thing he does is tell you what the play is," he said. "Then he'll ask you what the play is. It's like review. Everything is a quiz and you really have to pay attention."



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N.C. STATE SOPHOMORE
JULIUS HODGE IS READY
TO PROVE WHAT HE ALREADY KNOWS:
**HE'S THE BEST PLAYER
IN THE ACC.**

MAN

BY ANDREW B. CARTER

The image was a poignant one for those who know him best and even more so for those who felt like they did from watching him play all season.

It was near center court, the clock on the scoreboard having just run out, the ball having just bounced the wrong way. N.C. State had lost, its season had come to a sudden end, one that almost seemed to vanish with despair just as quickly as it came with hope. Its freshman star in the making, who by that time was a freshman in age only, melted to the floor and lay face down in a heap of emotion.

He had played 38 minutes against the No. 2 seed Connecticut in the second round of the NCAA tournament, scored 13 points and grabbed nine rebounds. But a last-minute foul on a controversial

call helped UConn to a 77-74 win. Even more painful was his desperation, last-second, half-court heave that raised false hopes, teased and mocked before ricocheting spitefully off the rim.

He just wanted to keep on playing. But it was over — and so quickly.

"Next year, we won't be denied by anything," he said afterward. Julius Hodge couldn't help but show his passion as he crumbled to the floor at the final horn and in his words in State's somber locker room. He is, as others have noted, one of the most passionate and driven individuals in college basketball. As the 6-foot-6 do-everything player lay on the MCI Center court, teammate Anthony Grundy came to Hodge's aide, pulling him up like a father pulls up his son, like a soldier reaches for a fallen comrade.

"I felt for him when he was lying on court of the MCI Center," said Gary DeCesare, Hodge's high school coach. "I knew how much pain he felt."

If only.

The drama almost seemed a foreshadowing then, and it could prove to be so: Grundy, the elder, the senior, the leader, passing down his team to Hodge, the student, the learner, the apprentice. As if to say, "Julius, this is your team now. Next year, it's your time."

For Hodge, that time has arrived. It came either over the summer, when he spent an infinite amount of time in the gym, or that second in the MCI Center when old man Grundy came rushing to him. Then again, one could argue that it's always been that time, and it has always been his team. Hodge has little trouble identifying himself as "the guy" for the Wolfpack.

"When I'm on the court, I fear no one," said the lanky sophomore from Harlem, N.Y., speaking through his New York City accent. "I feel like I'm the best player on the court whenever I step foot onto it. I'm going to continue to take strides on becoming a better player. I know I don't know everything."

The admittance that he's not omniscient is close to the only sense of modesty to which

Hodge confesses. During his first year at State, burdened by perhaps the highest expectations of a player since David Thompson, he flourished. He garnered the most votes for All-ACC Freshmen Team, led all ACC freshmen in scoring with nearly 11 points a game — and arguably led the conference in confidence.

After his first collegiate game, in which he scored 16 points, Hodge wasted no time in making friends with the tape recorders.

"I turn on WRAL Channel 5, and they say 'Julius Hodge, the No. 2 freshman in the country,'" he said then. "And I'm saying, 'Who's better than me?'"

The brash, multi-positioned Hodge learned throughout last season that a lot of people were better than he was. He was shut out at home against Duke. In a Valentine's Day rematch, the Blue Devils showed no love again, holding him to just three points in Cameron Indoor Stadium. In both games, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski was reported as specifically telling his team to shut down "the cocky kid;" to make sure that Hodge knew this wasn't a playground back home; to make sure he knew this was the ACC, and it takes time for boys to become men.

Before both games, Hodge could be seen warming up on Duke's goal. In fact, he warmed up with some shots on nearly every opponent's basket before each game last season. In the baby blue Smith Center, there was Hodge, the only dot of red in a crowd of North Carolina players shooting and rebounding at Carolina's end



"A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T LIKE JULIUS FROM OTHER SCHOOLS BECAUSE HE HAS SO MUCH CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF AND HE LETS YOU KNOW IT."

-MARCUS MELVIN

of the court. Before every home game, Hodge mingled with the opposition, firing shot after shot and ignoring the strange looks he received from the other team's players.

It was those kinds of antics, along with lots of talking on the court during the games, that made Hodge the target of rival teams, coaches and fans.

Heck, not even his own teammates would want to play against him.

"I wouldn't like him if he weren't on my team," said teammate Marcus Melvin. "He talks too much, but it's all in fun though. Sometimes in practice, if a younger guy is guarding him, he'll say, 'Oh, you're guarding me? You're guarding me today?' A lot of people don't like Julius from other schools because he has so much confidence in himself. And he lets you know it. A lot of people have confidence and don't try to say too much about it.

"But with Julius, he doesn't care."

To the contrary, he does care. He cares about his family, and especially his mom, Mary Hodge. He cares about winning and losing. He cares, maybe even too much, about basketball.

And as a kid growing up in Harlem, he cared about making it, about becoming the best he could possibly be. A star player at St. Raymond's High School in the Bronx, DeCesare recalls Hodge as one of the hardest working, most driven and gifted individuals he's seen.

"As a basketball player, he was one of the most talented players I've ever coached," said DeCesare, who has seen his share of Division I college players come through St. Raymond's in his 17 years. "He could play all five positions, and he was really as unselfish a player as I've ever encountered. He always came up big in clutch situations.

"He was such a great competitor, and every time he played, he thought he was the best player on the court. He absolutely hated to lose. As a person, he was focused, determined. He always wanted to reach

his potential."

Hodge led his high school team to a city and state championship his senior season, earning a full-closet's worth of awards and honors on the way. But it might have been the work he did when no one was watching that was most impressive.

"With public transportation, Julius lived about 40 minutes away from the school," said DeCesare. "As assistant principal at the time, I usually got there around 7 in the morning. Well one morning when I got there, I went into the gym, and there was Julius. He was just shooting all by himself. I asked him what he was doing there, and he said, 'I'm shooting.' I asked him how he got in, and he said he had a key and walked in the door. 'Well who gave you the key?' It turned out he'd cut a deal with the janitor."

What's even more remarkable is the fact that Hodge got to the gym at 6:30 a.m. — about the same time that many of his classmates were finally stumbling out of bed.

Hodge has brought the same relentless work ethic to college. He is frequently found in Reynolds Coliseum on a given night, shooting by himself into the early morning hours. After the team returned home from its loss at Maryland last February, Hodge stayed in Reynolds until 1:30 a.m. with a ball, a basket and his thoughts.

"I wouldn't say [anyone] spends more time in the gym than Julius," said Melvin. "Julius' work ethic is tremendous. I really applaud him for having a work ethic like that."

DeCesare recalls days when he actually had to stop Hodge from over doing it.

"Sometimes, I thought he pushed himself too hard," he said. "I had to tell him to go home at times, to spend less time in the gym. But as a coach, it's always special when your best player is also your hardest worker. That was the case with Julius."

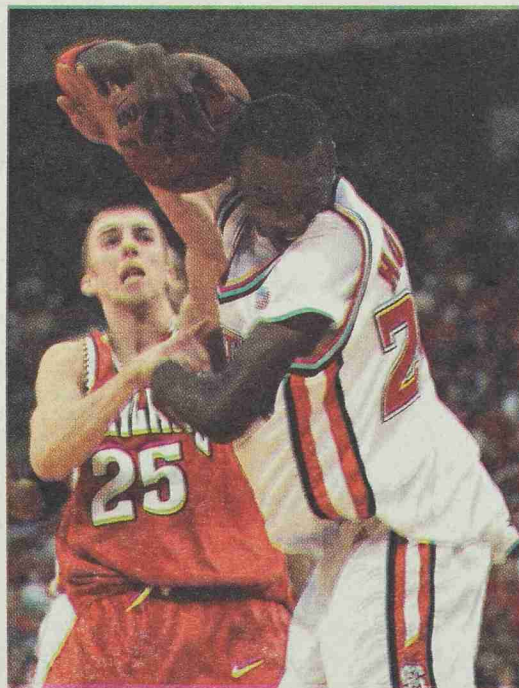
Despite his hard work, the preseason All-ACC selection has not been immune to criticism and his own mistakes.

At Cameron Indoor, Duke All-American Jay Williams was heard telling Hodge that he wasn't the man yet, that it wasn't his time. Hodge remembers differently.

"I don't remember him saying that," said Hodge. "You heard him say that? I don't remember him saying that. I think he was telling me I had a pretty smile. That's what I heard."

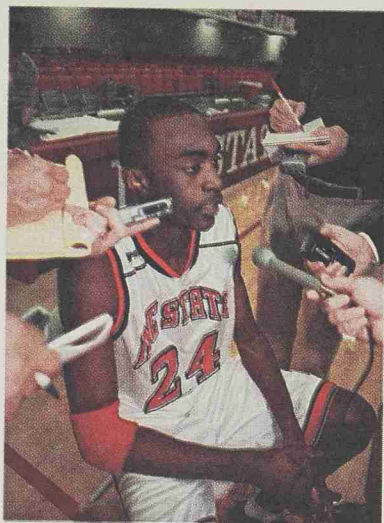
And at Maryland last season, Hodge was involved in an ugly incident with Terrapin point guard Steve Blake, whom Hodge elbowed in the back of the head.

After the game, Blake — who actually incited the incident but never admitted it — summed up the feelings of many ACC players.



"HE'S JUST A LITTLE PUNK."

-STEVE BLAKE



"He's just a little punk," he said, referring to the Wolfpack's No. 24.

Hodge was suspended by the league office for the elbow and sat out the team's next game against Virginia. Post-suspension, it took the former playground star six games to get the type of minutes he was used to prior to the Blake incident, and when he did, he turned in one of the finest performances of his freshman campaign at Wake Forest. Hodge dropped 21 points in 30-plus minutes and held his own against Wake's Josh Howard. Still, the Pack lost.

What was almost more important, though, was that Hodge was back.

This season, State coach Herb Sendek is looking to his most gifted player to become the team's leader.

"I think Julius is even more ready to assume a leadership role," said Sendek. "I think he has one of those special, magnetic personalities. Guys tend to gravitate to him. I think we all saw some of that begin to manifest itself as we came down the home stretch last year."

During last season's final six games, Hodge averaged 15 points and played more than 30 minutes a game. Even with the presence of seniors Grundy and Archie Miller, one could almost sense that Hodge was taking over. His versatility throughout the final games certainly became evident.

"The thing about Julius is he can influence the game in any number of ways," said Sendek. "On any given night he can do it with his scoring. He can do it on the defensive end. He's just extremely versatile, and he has those innate qualities that you can't teach."

"Guys want to be on his team even in a pick-up game."

This summer, the self-proclaimed gym rat spent countless hours doing what he loves. He played in the Chavis League, a highly competitive summer league chock full of college and NBA talent held at St. Augustine's College. And of course, he spent nearly every other moment in the gym, sometimes getting there as early as 5:30 a.m. to work out.

"I just know all the hard work I put in this summer is going to pay off," said Hodge. "I make sure I'm in the gym the longest."

His focuses this year include becoming even more of a potent offensive threat and a defensive stopper. But if Sendek wanted Hodge to go into a telephone booth and come out with a red cape and big "S" on his chest, he'd probably do that, too.

In fact, DeCesare remembers a Superman-like effort from Hodge the first time he ever saw him play. As a skinny middle schooler, Hodge came to DeCesare for a basketball camp wearing a cast on his broken right hand. The coach wasn't going to let him play. The kid insisted, and he won.

"I was doubtful," remembered DeCesare. "But I think that's how he got so good with both hands."

Even at a young age, Hodge was not to be denied. He's always wanted to be the best.

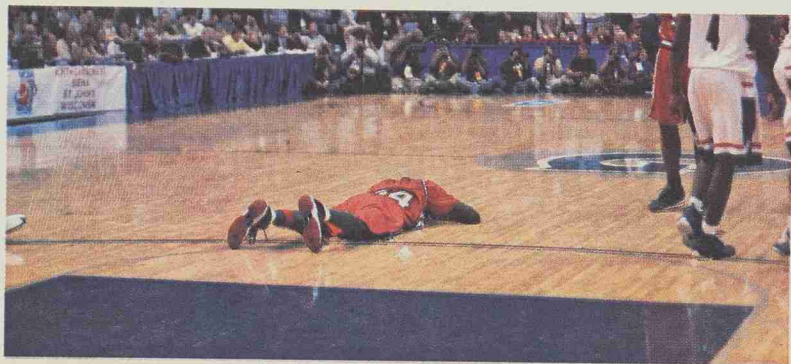
"I'm not going to let us lose," said Hodge. "Whatever it takes for us to win, I'm going to do it whether it's to play point guard or center."

Hodge has already shown such determination this season. In State's first exhibition game, he missed a triple-double by a few assists and rebounds. In the Pack's second exhibition, he drove the length of the court in five seconds and sank a jumper near the free throw line at the buzzer to give the Pack a 60-58 win.

Though he was disappointed State didn't win by more and play to its potential, Hodge knew what he had to do with the game on the line. Would anyone else have taken that last second shot?

"Not unless Michael Jordan was on the team," he said, that wide-faced grin of his as big as his last second heroics.

Right. As if Hodge really believes Jordan can take him. 



DEVIL OF A TIME

A YEAR AFTER DUKE COMPLETED A PERFECT ACC SEASON, THE REST OF THE CONFERENCE WILL ONCE AGAIN HAVE TROUBLE DETHRONING WHAT IS LIKELY AN IMPROVED BLUE DEVIL TEAM.

BY MATT MIDDLETON

Each and every one of them knew the questions were coming. One by one, the eight ACC women's basketball coaches in the who spent last season chasing Duke filed into the media room in Greensboro and were hit with a slew of questions pertaining to the Blue Devils, the nation's consensus No. 1 team.

"Coach, how good are the Blue Devils going to be?"

"Coach, is this the greatest ACC team ever?"

"Coach, does this team have any weaknesses to attack?"

The answers were all the same: The Devils are going to be good — real good.

But the other eight teams in the league have all made it their collective goal to try and bring them down.

"We're sick of it," said Georgia Tech center Sonja Mallory. "When I'm in the gym at 10 or 11 at night, that's when I'm thinking about beating Duke."

A year after going 19-0 in ACC games, the Devils are reloading for another run at perfection. Before a preseason knee injury sidelined sophomore Monique Curry for the season, Duke was set to return seven of its top eight players from last year's Final Four team. Still, the Devils are hardly short on talent, and some coaches will use the familiarity to better attack Duke.

"Duke has their five starters back, but they also have a full stable of players," said Virginia's Debbie Ryan. "We have a better idea of how to play them."

Having a better idea of the talents of players like Alana Beard and Iciss Tillis may not be that much of an advantage. Beard was the unanimous choice for preseason ACC Player of the Year after winning the award a year ago, and Tillis was first-team All-ACC last season.

Want more talent?

The Devils also inked one of the nation's best recruiting classes, including inaugural McDonald's All-Americans Mistie Bass and Brooke Smith.

"I wouldn't say there are any superstars in the class but very solid players all-around," said Goestenors.

Maybe not, but that incoming class coupled with the horde of returnees will probably yield another conference title.

In addition to N.C. State, seven teams stand in the way of the Blue Devils, and here's a look at each and every one of them.

CLEMSON

When the ACC announced its 50th anniversary team in September, two active players made the list: Beard and Clemson's Chrissy Floyd.

Floyd has led the Tigers in scoring the last three years and ended last year by scoring 30 points in

Clemson's last two games of the season, both losses.

Even more amazing is that fact that the ultra-quick Floyd scores loads of points without having an offense truly designed for her.

"You can't teach quickness, and Chrissy is one of the quickest players in the country," said head coach Jim Davis. "She's led us in scoring for the last three years, but we really don't have a lot of plays [designed] for her."

Davis attributed last year's early exit in both the conference and NCAA tournaments to a lack of rebounding, something that he hopes will be immediately fixed with the addition of two freshman post players, including 6-foot-4 Amanda White.

"We could start two freshman post players," said Davis. "Amanda White, if she's not one of the best freshman in this league, then I don't know much about this game. I just think Amanda's going to be great."

However great White may be, the key to the Tigers' success probably lies in how well point guard Kanetra Queen meshes with Floyd in the backcourt. If she gets the ball to Floyd for 20 shots a game, there's no reason to believe Clemson won't finish in the upper-half of the league.

FLORIDA STATE

Not much is expected out of the Seminoles this year, as they were voted to finish in last place along with Wake Forest in the preseason media poll.

But the Seminoles have defied expectations at least once under youthful head coach Sue Semrau, particularly when the team finished the year ranked in the top 25 in 2000-2001 — its first winning season in 10 years.

After a slip-up last year in the form of 14 losses, FSU will look to rally around guard Tasheika Morris, a third-team All-ACC selection last year.

"We have some experience at some key positions, obviously our biggest question is at point guard," said Semrau.

Unless that position can be filled with relative ease, making it out of the conference's basement will be a challenge for Semrau's sixth FSU club.

GEORGIA TECH

The women's Final Four will be played this year in Atlanta with Georgia Tech serving as the host school. While head coach Agnus Berenato may talk about what a thrill it would be for her team to play in it as the host school, just making it back to the Big Dance seems to be a more realistic goal for the Yellow Jackets, who have eight freshman on the roster.

That goal was dealt a devastating blow on the second day of practice when incumbent point guard

Nina Barlin broke her right hand in three places.

Barlin, who recorded double-digit assists in six games last season, is the best of three returning starters along with Mallory and Fallon Stokes. With the league's most colorful coach in Berenato, the three have set lofty goals for the team.

"Duke is the only ACC team I haven't beaten in my four years, and I'm not leaving without a win," said Barlin.

Although a win in Duke may not be in the cards, there's no reason to think this team can't make a run at a tournament bid provided Barlin recovers well from her injury.

MARYLAND

For the first time in 27 seasons, Chris Weller will not be roaming the sidelines of a Maryland women's basketball game. Weller, who left College Park with 499 career wins, retired after last season and yielded the program to 2001 Associated Press Coach of the Year Brenda Frese.

"I have the utmost respect for the things that Chris was able to do for Maryland," said Frese. "I hope that we can build on it and continue that tradition."

Frese, who came to the Terrapins from Minnesota, returns just one full-time starter from last year's underachieving squad. A new, up-tempo look may be just what the Terps need as they move into the brand new Comcast Center.

"You're going to see this team get after it on both ends of the floor," said Frese. "They really like the running game that we've installed; we're going to go up-tempo and score a lot of points."

Renneika Razor, who started 28 games last year, returns to lead the team in a style of play that will probably suit her athleticism more so than Weller's traditional offense.

For a young team going through the most important transition period in its program's history, besting last year's mark of 12-17 seems like an attainable goal.

NORTH CAROLINA

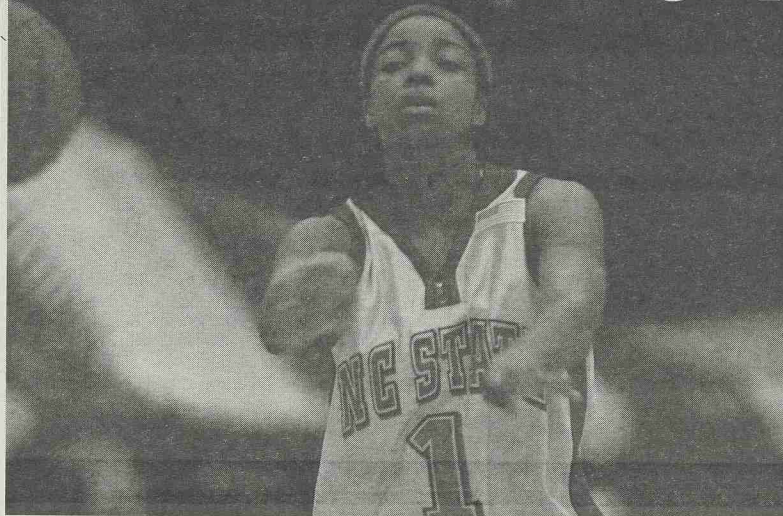
Sylvia Hatchell got everyone's attention right away at ACC media day.

"This is one of my most favorite teams that I've ever had," said Hatchell, who has won the 1994 national championship, over 600 career games and a national Coach of the Year award.

Hatchell returns nearly everyone from last year's ACC tournament runner-up club. Gone is the controversial and flashy Nikki Teasley, but left behind are superstar Coretta Brown, intimidating post presence Candace Sutton and a core of role players.

Brown, who averaged 17.1 points per game last

JAMES IS BACK



BY JON PAGE

year, is one of the league's deadliest shooters and with the departure of Teasley, will now be the go-to guard.

Sutton, who at times looks awkward in the paint, spent a part of her summer at the acclaimed Pete Newell Big Man Camp.

"There were 60 girls, and it was a great camp," said Sutton, who paid her own way to the West Coast for the camp. "It helped my footwork a lot, and it's really going to help me out a lot."

The Heels also have the preseason ACC Freshman of the Year, La'Tangela Atkinson, who could fill the void left by Teasley.

"She's going to be one of the best ever to play here," said Hatchell. "She's a lot like Nikki — good drive, good shooter, tremendous defensive player. Defensively [she] reminds me of Marion Jones and Alana Beard the way she steals the basketball."

With perhaps her best team since the 1994 national title club, a run at Duke's dominance is not out of the question for Hatchell.

VIRGINIA

With the possible exception of Kay Yow, no coach in the league has seen more ACC women's basketball than Virginia's Debbie Ryan. The veteran pulled one of her all-time greatest coaching coups a year ago after her team was picked to finish at the bottom of the ACC. The Cavaliers made the NCAA tournament and gave Duke probably its best game of the season in the ACC tournament.

The loss of Talisha Quarles, a quick guard that gave teams fits with her slashing ability, hurts the Cavs, who will hope to compensate with the emergence of youthful talents like Brandi Teamer and LaTonya Blue.

The modest Teamer was the ACC Freshman of the Year last season after averaging 16.1 points per ACC contest.

"I'm looking [to score] whatever the team needs me to average to win," said Teamer. "My team was very much responsible for my success; I wish there was a way to divide the trophy up to share it."

With a good mix of young talent and veteran guards, Virginia could be a sleeper team to upend the Devils under Ryan.

WAKE FOREST

Charlene Curtis had no qualms about saying it.

"We're tired of sitting at home during the postseason," said Curtis. "We want to be somewhere after the ACC tournament playing this year."

Playing in the state shadow of the three Triangle schools that have all tasted the Final Four is certainly no easy task. The Demon Deacons have seemingly forever lingered in the conference's lower tier but showed signs of life by winning five conference games last year — the team's most since 1996.

Trying to bring them out of the ACC's cellar will be guard Tonia Brown, a third-team All-ACC member last season.

"I believe we can make it into the top five, but the whole team needs to believe it," said Curtis.

While that may be a bit optimistic, if the Deacs can get offensive production from forwards Tiffani Listenbee and Eafon Hill, an improvement on last year's 5-11 league record is possible.

Redshirt junior Terrah James stole a pass and sunk a jumper in transition to put N.C. State up 52-43 on the Premier Players in its first exhibition game of the season. The shot was hardly a key play for the Wolfpack as they stormed to a 101-78 victory, but James' bucket was as significant as any buzzer beat — it was her first field goal since March of 2000.

Less than one month before, State held a women's basketball preseason press conference. At its conclusion, James told reporters seeking an individual interview to step into her office — a hallway just outside of Room 122 in Reynolds Coliseum. While it may have sounded like a joke at first, it's not hard to imagine why James' life pertaining to basketball seemed more like a job than a game over the past two years.

The 5-foot-8 point guard played her freshman year with a partially torn ACL in her right knee, yet still managed to start all 29 games for the Pack, the first freshman to start at the point since Jennifer Howard in 1993. As a freshman, James ranked fifth in the ACC with 3.9 assists per game.

James underwent reconstructive surgery after her freshman season and did not participate in any preseason workouts or practices before her sophomore season, which ended only 13 minutes after it began when she injured her other knee. She sat out the remainder of the season, only to be disappointed again the following season with a tear to her left ACL and meniscus.

Had it not been for the support of loved ones, James said she would have quit altogether.

"I was about to go home and just give it all up," said James. "But I had a lot of support from my teammates, the coaching staff, my parents, the rest of my family and my friends. They just kept my spirits up and motivated me on it."

That support has paid off. James averaged 13

points and 4.5 assists in State's two exhibition games this year. While she was cold from the field in the first half vs. Premiere Players, James heated up vs. Stockholm Human Rights, knocking down 2-of-3 three-point shots. With the regular season ready to get underway, James tries not to think about the injuries that kept her from leading the Pack the last two seasons.

"Over the summer I was hesitant to play pick-up [games], but now I have a lot of confidence in my knee and how strong it is from rehab," said James.

But it is the confidence her teammates have in James as a leader that has them eager to tip it up.

"It's totally different [having her back on the court]," said center Kaayla Chones. "I haven't played with her since our freshman year, and to have her back I think it's just going to take us to another level, having a true point guard out there with her leadership. I'm excited."

Along with Chones and junior guard Nanna Rivers, James was selected by her teammates to serve as team captain for the 2002-2003 season, an honor coach Kay Yow wholeheartedly agrees with.

"She's a big-time point guard, and she knows how to handle it," said Yow. "She knows how to play with the best and has been able to take care of the ball. She has the savvy that you have to have at this level, and she sees the court very well."

James hopes she can use her abilities at the point to lead the Pack to the Final Four in Atlanta and add more honors to Yow's resume.

"Everyone keeps talking about Coach Yow's induction into the Hall of Fame, but we were talking as a team, and I was telling them I'd like to add two more things to it that she doesn't have," said James. "I want to win her a national championship, and I don't think she's ever been ACC Coach of the Year."

The road to the Final Four begins in James' office tonight. Work starts at 7 p.m.

DUKE

Despite losing three starters to the NBA, Duke is still the team to beat.

BY AUSTIN JOHNSON

For the fourth time in five years, the Duke men's basketball team finds itself picked to finish first in the ACC.

But unlike the past, this team has many question marks going into the season. Like so many teams in the ACC this year, No. 6 Duke is going to be relying on young players to make major contributions.

Duke will have six freshmen on the team this year — Shavlik Randolph, Sean Dockery, J.J. Redick, Michael Thompson, Lee Melchionni and Shelden Williams. All except Williams and Melchionni were McDonald's All-Americans.

With three starters from last year's squad — Mike Dunleavy, Jay Williams, and Carlos Boozer — all leaving early for the NBA, the freshman class is going to have to play a big part if Duke expects to win the ACC title.

"It's easier, compared to five or 10 years ago, for freshmen to contribute," said head coach Mike Krzyzewski, "A lot of times they're playing against their peers or people a

year or two ahead of them, so it's not as dramatic. There aren't as many older people, and there aren't the established stars.

Despite the relatively young nature of the team this year, Duke will be looking to its upperclassmen for leadership.

Tabbed as the ACC preseason Player of the Year, junior guard Chris Duhon will be asked to play the role of team leader this season. For Duhon, who averaged 8.9 points and 5.9 assists last year, it is a role he is ready to assume.

"My last two years have been me learning and being groomed to be a leader of a team one day," said Duhon, "Now is my time. I'm not doing it alone, and I'm excited. This is something I've dreamed of doing, and it's a dream come true for me. I can't wait for it to happen."

Senior Dahntay Jones and sophomore Daniel Ewing will also be asked to play more important roles for Duke. Jones started 32 games last season, averaging 11.2 points and 4.2 rebounds. He is also considered one of the better defenders in the ACC.

Ewing is a dangerous shooter who came off the bench last year for the Blue Devils. He averaged 6.5 points in 18 minutes per game.

Duke's other two starting spots will probably go to the freshmen. Randolph, Redick and Williams all started in

exhibition games for the Blue Devils.

One of the advantages this Duke team has over past teams is its size. Both Randolph and Thompson are listed at 6-foot-10, and senior center Casey Sanders is 6-foot-11.

"This year I think we're going to finally have the opportunity to do it inside and outside, which will be great," said Duhon, "It will make our team more versatile, and we'll be able to do a lot more things."

Duke will have a lot of talent on the team this year, though much of it is unproven. But with a Hall of Fame coach like Krzyzewski guiding the team, one can expect another successful season. Although it was picked as the No. 6 team in the nation in the preseason ESPN/USA Today Coaches' Poll, Duke is convinced that it's not getting the respect it deserves this year.

"I think there's a lot of people who don't think Duke is going to be Duke," said Duhon, "They think that we're not going to have a chance to win a national championship."

"We use that as motivation. We're going to go out with something to prove — that we're one of the best teams in the country, and we're capable of winning a national championship."

MARYLAND

New arena, new starters — same results?

BY TAYLOR FRANCIS

Maryland's basketball team officially started the 2002-2003 college basketball season with Midnight Madness at 12:01 a.m. on Oct. 12. That same night, the Terrapins opened their brand new, \$125 million arena, the Comcast Center, and introduced a team featuring four new starters.

"It's great to leave Cole [Field House] with a national championship. That place really deserved it," head coach Gary Williams said. "But ... the Comcast Center is as good as any on-campus arena, if not the best. This place was built for basketball."

Last year, Maryland won the national championship with a 64-52 victory over Indiana. The previous year the Terrapins made it to the Final Four before eventually losing to ACC foe Duke. Williams has established an excellent program at Maryland, but along with success comes high expectations.

"Obviously we'll be looked at as the defending champions, especially early in the season," said Williams. "So until

each team shows how good they are we'll have to take their best hit."

The players that carried those two Terrapins teams deep into the NCAA tournament are nearly all gone now. Seniors Juan Dixon, last season's ACC Player of the Year, Lonny Baxter and Byron Mouton all graduated. Sophomore Chris Wilcox left with two years of eligibility remaining.

"You don't replace players like that," said Williams. "That's a tremendous loss."

While those players were crucial to Maryland's success, five seniors will be returning, and four of them will be starting for this year's team. Tajh Holden, Ryan Randle and Drew Nicholas have all seen significant playing time in the past coming off of the bench, and all the seniors have a wealth of NCAA tournament experience.

"A lot of guys will have to change their roles," said Williams. "They will have to go from coming off the bench and really contributing to starting. That's part of the progression as a college basketball player."

But the player to focus on is senior point guard Steve Blake, who will be the point guard and leader for the Terrapins. He has been the starting point guard the past two seasons but toiled in the large shadows cast by stars such as Dixon, Baxter and Wilcox. This year, the pressure is

squarely on Blake's shoulders. He has been named to the preseason All-ACC first team and is a preseason candidate for ACC Player of the Year.

"In Steve Blake, we have one of the best point guards in college basketball," said Williams. "We need Steve to have a great year."

Along with the returning upperclassmen, another question Maryland must answer will be the play of the bevy of freshmen in College Park this year. They include McDonald's All-American Travis Garrison, as well as projected starter John Gilchrist.

"We've got a good group of seniors who were a big part of things for us last season," Williams said. "The key is if we can find the guys to give us an eight-man rotation. If so, some of the freshmen are going to have to contribute right away."

Despite the new faces, increased playing time and importance of some veterans, Maryland is not expected to struggle this year. They are ranked No. 15 in the ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll and No. 13 in the Associated Press poll. The Terps were also picked by the media to finish second in the ACC this season, behind only Duke. But Williams is keeping things in perspective.

"Well we're not worried about the Final Four. We're worried about our first game," he said. "If we're going to be a good team this year, we're going to have to be a developing team. Only time will tell but I think we can be competitive."

VIRGINIA

Travis Watson and Elton Brown could give Virginia the best inside presence in the ACC.

BY RYAN REYNOLDS

Last season the table was set for the Virginia Cavaliers. The team was poised to make a run at the Final Four, and it appeared that might happen as the Cavs approached the ACC season undefeated.

Then came opening ACC losses to N.C. State and Clemson, and the rest of the teams in the ACC seemed to follow suit. The only ACC team not to beat Virginia was North Carolina.

The season ended with a 7-9 ACC record and a disappointing first-round loss to South Carolina in the first round of the NIT, and with only one returning starter, aspirations of a trip to the Big Dance will be even tougher for Virginia this year.

Virginia lost starters J.C. Mathis, Adam Hall and Chris Williams to graduation, and Roger Mason Jr. decided to bolt for the NBA after a successful junior year with the Cavaliers.

Senior Travis Watson is the only returning starter and will be the focal point of the Cavs this season. The All-America

and Naismith candidate, who averaged 14.1 points and 9.7 rebounds per game as a junior, is considered undersized for his position of forward/center at 6-foot-8, but that doesn't stop him from being one of the most dominating players in the ACC.

"One aspect of it is I have to stick them on this end, but then they have to come back and stick me," said Watson. "I've got the body where I can body up with somebody. It really doesn't bother me at all."

Several newcomers must have an impact if Virginia hopes to have a successful season. Freshman Derrick Byars, sophomore Devin Smith and junior Todd Billet should see significant time in their first season with the Cavaliers.

Byars, a 6-foot-7 forward, was a fourth-team Parade All-American and the Gatorade Player of the Year in Tennessee as a senior in high school. Smith, a 6-foot-5 forward from Delaware, was a first-team junior college All-American as a freshman at Coffeyville Community College in Coffeyville, Kan.

Todd Billet, a transfer from Rutgers University, could have the biggest impact out of any of the newcomers. Billet set the Rutgers record for 3-pointers in a season with 82 in 2000-01. The 6-foot guard could be the answer to Virginia's point-guard troubles since Donald Hand graduated after

the 2000-2001 season.

"He's a more balanced, more controlled point guard," said Virginia head coach Pete Gillen. "He makes good decisions and doesn't get rattled. We've always had guys running around with their heads cut off, chucking and ducking, but they were pretty good players. Todd is more poised and under control."

Originally, the Cavaliers hoped to have redshirt junior Majestic Mapp starting at point guard, but injuries may once again sideline him for some, if not all, of the season.

Sophomore Elton Brown looks to be a big contributor to the team after earning an honorable mention selection on the 2002 ACC All-freshman team. The 6-foot-9 forward averaged 7.6 points per game even though he only started five games. If he plays well then the tandem of Brown and Watson could prove to be the best inside presence in the ACC.

It appeared that sophomore guard Jermaine Harper was in line to get significant playing time this season, but he was suspended indefinitely by Gillen for a violation of team rules.

Virginia was one of the most unpredictable teams in the conference last year with losses to Clemson and Florida State but big wins over Wake Forest and Duke. The Cavs hope to change that this year.

"Last year, we could have been among the top teams," said Watson. "This year we're going to put in a lot of effort and just bring up the intensity on defense."

NORTH CAROLINA

The Tar Heels get a much-needed fresh start.

BY JON PAGE

For 31 consecutive glorious seasons, North Carolina won 20 games or more a year — an NCAA record. Perhaps even more impressive, from 1965 to 2001 the Tar Heels finished in third place or better in the ACC.

But last season, both streaks came to an abrupt halt. The 20 came in the form of losses instead of wins, and the Heels finished the season tied for seventh place in the ACC. The uncharacteristic season was enough to make 2001 Associated Press National Coach of the Year Matt Doherty ponder what, if anything, he could have done to prevent Carolina's 8-20 campaign.

"I'm sure there's a lot of things that I'd do differently, but I don't think about it a lot, not now," said Doherty. "I thought about it in the spring, I thought about it in the months off, on a recruiting trip when you're driving around. But now, I don't think about it a lot."

While Doherty may not dwell on the past, he has learned from it. The former UNC forward says he will be more

patient this season to introduce things to his team.

"Instead of having 20 plays, we'll have 10 plays that they know really well," said Doherty. "Instead of having five out-of-bounds plays, we'll have two out-of-bounds plays that they know really well. And when the league starts, add a few things."

Doherty's new approach to teaching may bode well for a team primarily composed of freshmen. Will Johnson and Jonathan Holmes are the only seniors, and even they don't have a wealth of experience. Sophomores Jackie Manuel, Melvin Scott and Jawad Williams also return, but Adam Boone, Neil Fingleton and Brian Morrison transferred to different schools.

The Heels are fortunate to boast one of the top incoming freshman classes in the country. Raymond Felton, Sean May and Rashad McCants were all McDonalds High School All-Americans. Felton, the 2002 Naismith National High School Player of the Year, led Latta High School to two South Carolina state championships. The sure-handed point guard averaged 30.8 points per game as a senior to go along with 7.7 assists and 3.9 steals per game.

"He adds an element to our team — speed, quickness, the ability to penetrate, his vision, his ability to deliver the ball — that we haven't had," said Doherty. "That's not a knock

on anybody, it's just a fact. He can find people, he can get into gaps and deliver the basketball."

In his third season at the helm, Doherty believes he has built a team in his own image through recruiting that will hold better than last year's squad.

"I think the foundation is there now with this group," said Doherty. "I've recruited them, I've worked with them. And there's a trust there. There's a respect there."

Picked to finish sixth in the ACC, Doherty praised the likes of Duke, Maryland, Virginia and N.C. State, but he admits that there is still a certain confidence in the steps of his players, even coming off a losing season.

"I want our players to have swagger, and you better have swagger going into Cameron Indoor," said Doherty. "You better have a swagger going into Maryland. Because if you don't, boy, you're going to get you're butt kicked. Our players do have a swagger, even the freshmen, and that's a good thing."

Swagger alone will not be enough to propel Carolina back to its usual elite status in college basketball, but expectations in Chapel Hill are as lofty as ever.

"I think we can turn it around in one year," said Johnson. "It depends on your expectations. We have lofty goals for ourselves. I think we have good guys who can accomplish those goals."

WAKE FOREST

The departure of five seniors and injuries to two starters leave Wake Forest looking to its youth.

BY JAY KOHLER

Last season, Wake Forest finished 9-7 in conference play and compiled a 21-12 record during the regular season. Head coach Skip Prosser, in his first season at Wake, led his team to a seventh seed in the NCAA tournament, where the Deacons made it to the second round before losing 92-87 to Oregon.

In the off-season, the Demon Deacons have had to deal with the loss of five seniors, Darius Songaila, Antwan Scott, Craig Dawson, Broderick Hicks and Ervin Murray — all major contributors to the Deacon's NCAA run. Songaila was arguably the best player on Wake Forest last season.

"We're going to miss him a great deal," said Prosser. "Not only was he a great player, he was a great leader. He gave our players tremendous courage. He's a tough kid, and when you threw the ball to him on the block, you felt like good things were going to happen. So we're going to miss him a lot on and off the floor."

The role of team leader this season will fall upon the

shoulders of senior Josh Howard. Howard averaged 14.3 points per game, second on the team behind Songaila. Howard is one of only two seniors on the team. The rest of the squad this season includes two juniors, four sophomores and five seniors. The biggest problem for Wake right now is that Howard is hurting.

"I think if [Howard] has a great year, that gives us a chance to have a great year," said Prosser. "Unfortunately, all that's beyond his control because he's battling an injury right now, so we'll see.

"[It's a] stress reaction, some pain in his shin that we haven't been able to isolate and eliminate."

With Howard's status currently questionable, Prosser needs other players to step up their level of play, at least until Howard is ready to return. With such a young team, it is no surprise who Prosser believes will have to help out Wake this season.

"The three sophomores we have — [Taron] Downey, [Vyatas] Danielus and [Jamaal] Levy — have to play well for us to have any chance to be good," said Prosser. "They're trying very hard to do that."

In the preseason media poll, the Deacons were picked to finish sixth in the ACC, behind Duke, Maryland, N.C. State, Georgia Tech and Virginia. But as the entire league knows,

the conference race is wide open this year.

"I think it's exciting," said Prosser. "There's a lot of things that have to be determined. There are still some very talented players in the league, their names just aren't as familiar. But I think it's still going to be a very strong league."

Wake Forest will begin regular-season play on Wednesday with a game against Yale at home. ACC play for the Deacons kicks off against Duke in Durham on Jan. 12.

As far as what a successful year would be for the Deacons, Prosser refuses to look into his crystal ball and give a season prediction.

"I never quantify that," said Prosser. "We're just trying to get to 1-0. I let other people worry about that."

CLEMSON

Ed Scott and the 'Bruise Brothers' will lead the Tigers' balanced roster.

BY JUSTIN SELLERS

At Clemson, basketball seemingly always takes a back seat to football. The Tigers simply haven't had much success on the hardwood recently.

But the 2002-2003 version of Tiger men's basketball hopes to buck the trend with a roster that is balanced with a generous mix of upperclassmen and newcomers. Clemson hopes to journey out of the bottom of the conference and into a more respectful standing.

"I think sometimes there is a perception that it's [Clemson] a football school, and I don't think that's bad because Americans love underdogs," said head coach Larry Shyatt. "At the same time, we'd like to do something about it."

Senior point guard Ed Scott leads this year's team. The second-year captain is coming off a season in which he averaged 11.9 points and a school-best 7.9 assists per contest — helping him earn third-team All-ACC honors. During the 2001-2002 season, Scott exploded for 30 points and 16

assists in Clemson's 118-115 double-overtime victory over No. 17 Wake Forest. His performance marked only the second time in ACC history that a league player had at least 30 points and 15 assists in one game.

"I think it's been a great advantage to have him over the last few years," said Shyatt. "I've enjoyed having him and I wouldn't trade him right now for any point guard in the country because one has to live with his point guard on and off the court. In a world lacking a whole lot of role models, he's a damn good one."

Joining Scott will be fellow seniors Ray Henderson and Thomas Nagys, both of who will look to pound the ball in the paint. Henderson, who has shot at least 54 percent from the field in each of his three years at Clemson, is one of the better rebounders in the conference after grabbing an average of 8.8 per game last year.

Despite only averaging 4.9 points and 4.5 rebounds a contest last season, Nagys will surely be looked to for added strength in the low post. The 6-foot-10 Lithuanian enters his final year with 83 games under his belt, a career free-throw accuracy of 67.4 percent and 37-career blocked shots, second to only Henderson.

"Certainly, two of the prime leaders will be Edward Scott at guard and Ray Henderson up front," said Shyatt. "They,

along with Thomas Nagys, are four-year players who have logged a lot of playing time against ACC competition. Scott has a high level of respect after earning All-ACC honors last year and the same for Ray Henderson after finishing second in the league in rebounding."

Junior forward Chris Hobbs should also give Clemson added performance and strength around the net. Hobbs, the other half (along with Henderson) of what Shyatt has nicknamed the "Bruise Brothers," ranked fourth on the team in scoring with an average of 11.6 points and combined with Henderson for 593 points and 447 boards last year.

"We have four upperclassmen — one junior and three seniors," said Shyatt. "What I like is they're in two areas that are very important: in the paint and the lead guard that is an unselfish player. That's a great place to start."

"We feel our frontcourt will not back down from any ACC team or any team on our schedule. They have the experience and intellect to play with anyone from a strength standpoint," Shyatt said.

With his balanced roster, Shyatt isn't shy about setting high goals for the team.

"Getting past the first round of the NCAA," said Shyatt, when asked to define a good season for his Tigers. "I believe that would be a successful year. You don't belong in this conference if you're not [aiming high]."

FLORIDA STATE

Leonard Hamilton takes over an athletic but raw Seminoles team.

BY JIMMY RYALS

Steve Robinson led Florida State to wins over Duke and North Carolina last year. And then he got fired.

Wins over the ACC traditional top two couldn't offset Robinson's four-year NCAA tournament drought and 64-86 five-year record at FSU. Replacing him in Tallahassee is former University of Miami and Washington Wizards coach Leonard Hamilton.

Hamilton, at this point, seems less than set on what his team will look like come Sunday, when FSU tips off its season against Savannah State.

"For me to [assess where my team stands,] I'd have to evaluate my talent with all the other talent in the ACC," Hamilton said. "That's not important to me. I have the talent that I have. My job is to make sure we are the best team we can be."

In strictly athletic terms, Hamilton has plenty of talent, led by high-flying junior forward Michael Joiner and former Leesville Road star Anthony Richardson. Joiner, a two-year

starter, is the team's top returning scorer, rebounder, assist man, 3-point shooter and foul shooter. Richardson, a McDonalds All-American in high school, was honorable mention on the ACC All-Rookie team last year and won the ACC Rookie of the Week award once.

Still, the Seminoles lost a lot from last year's 12-17 team — point guard Delvon Arrington, leading scorer Monte Cummings and big man Nigel Dixon. A focus on teaching the players in preseason has made it difficult for Hamilton to gauge their talents.

"It's hard for me to single any particular player out when each is learning [my system]," Hamilton said. "They all have had moments when they've showed us what they're capable of doing, but none consistently enough for me to hang my hat on any one particular player."

A pair of junior college transfers, Nate Johnson and Tim Pickett, could start in the backcourt for FSU. Pickett averaged 21 points and six rebounds at Indian River (Fla.) Community College last year. He also had 29 points and four steals in his first game for FSU, an exhibition loss to Team Nike. Johnson, a point guard, averaged 10.3 points, 7.3 assists and 3.1 steals per game at Mobley Area (Mo.) Community College.

For the second consecutive year, FSU has the ACC's top-

returning shot blocker in senior center Mike Mathews. Last season, Mathews ranked fifth in the conference in blocked shots, swatting 1.6 per game. FSU may get a boon at mid-season from the addition of point guard/quarterback Adrian McPherson.

Also competing for starting jobs are sophomore forward Adam Waleskowski (2.9 ppg, 2.4 rpg in 2001-2002) and guard Andrew Wilson.

Hamilton has a history of accomplishing the sort of turnaround job required of him at Florida State. He took Miami from a 9-19 season his first year to consecutive 23-win seasons his last two and a share of the Big East regular season title in 1999-2000.

Michael Jordan handpicked Hamilton to coach the Washington Wizards in 2000. The marriage didn't last long, and Hamilton resigned in April 2001.

It took Hamilton five seasons to turn Miami into a winner. He's not looking that far down the road with his new team, which is picked to finish last in the ACC preseason media poll.

"I'm not concerned about the future," Hamilton said. "I'm concerned about what I can control today. I want to make sure we'll be better tomorrow than we are today. That's the way you make progress."

GEORGIA TECH

Big expectations loom for Paul Hewitt and his young Yellow Jackets.

BY MEMIE EZIKE

At the end of last year, Georgia Tech caught fire — winning seven of its last nine games to finish sixth in conference and one game away from a berth in the NIT. The Jackets put on a string of wins that surprised the ACC's top teams such as Virginia, Wake Forest and N.C. State. The Jackets also upset the Cavaliers in the ACC tournament before losing a close game to Wake.

This year, optimism is running extremely high on the urban Atlanta campus. Tech boasts the ninth-best recruiting class in the country and only lost one starter who saw significant minutes — talented point guard Tony Akins.

Hewitt enters his third season as head coach of the Jackets with a plethora of youth. Hewitt was quick to point out his team's inexperience.

"I don't [feel like we have experience]. In Marvin Lewis we really have only one guy who's been to the NCAA tournament. We have three sophomores who I think have shown a great deal of potential, and then you've got four

freshmen," Hewitt said. "I would much rather have a senior point guard or a fifth-year guy who's been around."

That senior point guard of last year, Akins, was an All-ACC second team selectee and led the team in assists, points and steals. Tech also lost talented forward Clarence Moore, who decided to give up basketball. Nevertheless, Hewitt is expecting a lot from his young players.

"I think we have some talented guys, definitely," Hewitt said. "But they have yet to demonstrate they have what it takes to have a successful extended run. We had a good run last year, but we didn't get to the NCAA tournament. If you asked me which was my better coaching job, my first or second year here, it would [have been] the first year because we got to the tournament."

Leading the way for the Jackets will be junior Marvin Lewis. The 6-foot-4 guard averaged 10.9 points last season and is the only Tech player with post-season experience. Lewis is an excellent shooter, connecting on 38 percent of his 3-point shots and 87 percent from the foul line.

Sophomores Ed Nelson and B.J. Elder look to build off ACC All-Rookie seasons. Nelson, at 6-foot-8, played center last year, but with the return of 7-foot-1 center Luke Schenscher, Nelson will log more minutes at his natural power forward position.

After finishing last season strongly, Elder enters this season as one of the team's most complete players, and Hewitt is looking for him to become a vocal leader.

"He sees a lot out there, he knows the game very well, and he needs to impart some of that wisdom of what he sees happening on the court to some of his teammates," Hewitt said.

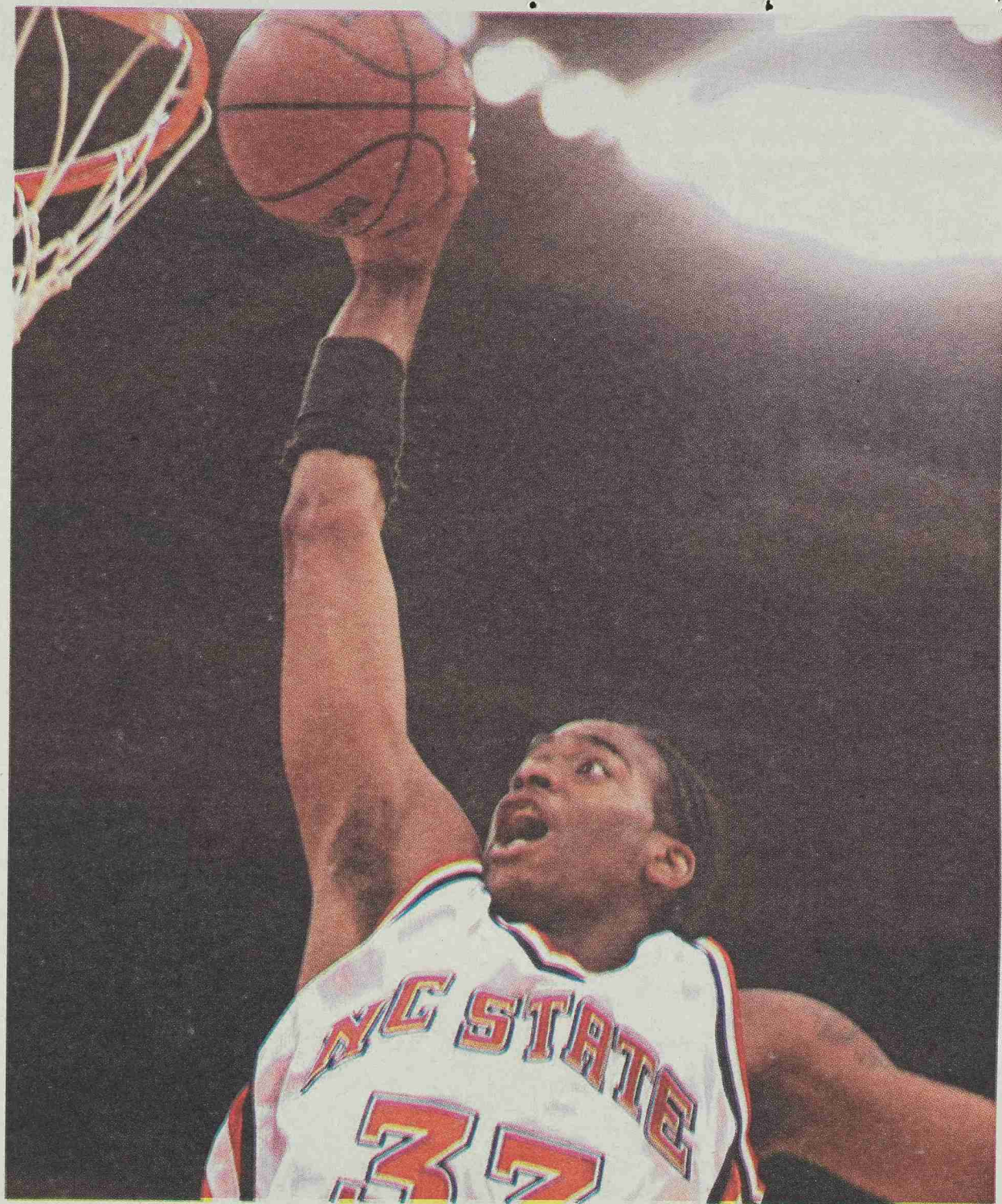
Perhaps Tech's biggest strength is in its very deep bench. Returning players who played significant minutes last year off the bench include Schenscher and forwards Isma'il Muhammad, Anthony McHenry and Robert Brooks.

The freshman class is one of the most heralded in Tech's history and ranked in the top 10 in the nation. Jarrett Jack averaged 20.2 points as a senior in high school and will likely start as the point guard. Six-foot-10 forward Chris Bosh from Texas and 6-foot-9 power forward Theodis Tarver of Louisiana will also see significant playing time.

Hewitt has a young team — without a single scholarship senior — and knows that it will take a huge effort from the players and the coaching staff to bring Georgia Tech back into the field of competitiveness.

"We were 0-7 [in the ACC] at some point last year, and we lost the most important piece of that talent in Tony Akins," Hewitt said. "I'm not trying to downplay our team. We're talented, physically. In terms of mental toughness and knowing what it takes to win games, we've got a long way to go."





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