

NORTH CAROLINA BASKETBALL



Photo by Jim R. Bounds

North Carolina JV player Steven Samuels shoots over a Southern Wesleyan player Thursday. UNC may be the last major college basketball program with a JV team.

JUNIOR ACHIEVERS

By Dan Wiederer ■ Staff writer

The North Carolina JV team plays in front of sparse crowds for a chance to be part of the tradition, and maybe make the big squad

CHAPEL HILL — With the clock winding toward zero Thursday evening, North Carolina guard Thomas Thornton curled toward the top of the key, watched the ball into his hands, dribbled once and rose to launch a 3-pointer.

As the buzzer sounded and the red light behind the backboard illuminated, Thornton's long jumper hit nothing but net.

The Carolina bench erupted. Thornton pumped his fist. His teammates darted to greet him with a barrage of high-fives and head rubs.

It's exactly what the polished and explosive

Tar Heels had come to expect from their senior leader, whose 18 points Thursday catalyzed a huge victory for a squad that's now won 12 times in 13 games.

And now that Thornton has that melodramatic description for his scrapbook, here's the fine print: Thursday's heroics came not against Clemson nor Maryland in a high-intensity February ACC clash.

They came versus Southern Wesleyan. For

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Photo by Jim R. Bounds

North Carolina JV coach C.B. McGrath coaches during the Tar Heels' 120-37 win over Southern Wesleyan.

JV

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UNC's junior varsity team. With just 47 spectators sprinkled throughout the 21,750-seat Dean E. Smith Center.

And that oh-so-dramatic buzzer beater? It came just before halftime as the Tar Heels extended their lead to 52 points in what would eventually become a 120-37 runaway.

This is JV basketball at UNC.



The intense spotlight and palpable buzz that typically charges this arena on game night weren't present Thursday with perhaps the loudest cry of the evening coming from a sparrow fluttering around the rafters in Section 209.

Sure, this may seem like glorified intramurals. And in many ways, it is with the lopsided wins, unidentifiable opponents and an average attendance that makes a Roman Civilization lecture look like the hottest event on campus.

But for North Carolina basketball, the JV team carries its own charm, its own twist of tradition.

Roy Williams, the Hall of Fame coach who's taken the real Tar Heels to two Final Fours in the last five seasons, once moonlighted as the JV coach — for eight years back when he was an assistant to Dean Smith in the early 1980s.

"As a young coach, it was a laboratory for me," Williams says. "If I wanted to run something that I maybe didn't have a great deal of confidence in but still wanted to see how it might work, I could do it and not have to read in the morning paper about how stupid it was."

That was one part of the excitement.

The other thrill for Williams came from giving a handful of otherwise ordinary students the chance to be legitimate Carolina basketball players, an experience that clearly still packs the same nostalgic punch for players today.

"As a kid, you have these fairy tale visions," says JV freshman Patrick Crouch, who happens to hail from Williams' alma mater: T.C. Roberson High School in Asheville. "But I never thought I'd really be wearing a Carolina jersey and practicing every day in the Smith Center."

Adds Thornton, who grew up in Greensboro and spent many an afternoon pretending to be Donald Williams: "Just wearing this jersey is incredible. And beyond that, we're running the UNC system, practicing the same way. Even though we're not on varsity, just being around the program and being some small part of it is an honor."



It's an honor and a rarity at a program as prestigious as Carolina's.

Once upon a time, when freshmen were ineligible to play on varsity teams, JV basketball was far more prevalent across the country, something of a feeder system for the big team.

But those days are long gone and UNC may just be the last major college basketball program still dabbling in the JV trade.

This winter, the Tar Heels' schedule consists of 13 games, all played at the Smith Center against JV teams from Division II and Division III programs with the occasional community college and prep school opponent mixed in.

No conference, no standings. Thursday's 83-point shellacking of Southern Wesleyan was Carolina's most lopsided win of the season.

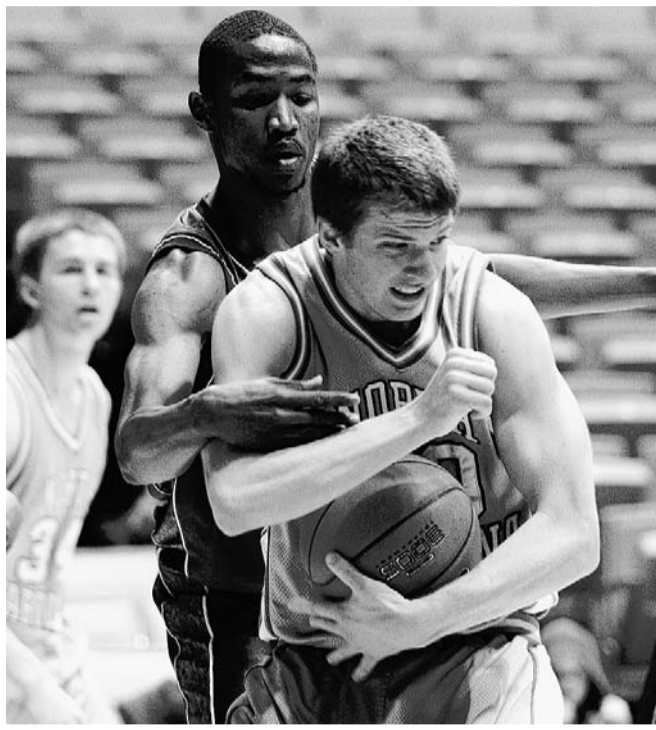


Photo by Jim R. Bounds

North Carolina senior JV player Thomas Thornton, front, says his time on the team 'will always be special.'

The Heels' only loss came last week, 106-86 to Hargrave Military Academy, which features a horde of marquee talent, including Indiana-bound guard Maurice Creek, Florida-bound big man Deshawn Painter and Charlotte-bound forward Chris Braswell.

At 33 years old, C.B. McGrath has coached this year's JV team with a slogan that would seem to be a pretty compelling recruiting pitch.

"Everybody has the green light," McGrath says, a strategy that was obvious Thursday as 10 different players propelled the Tar Heels to a season-high 120 points.

An assistant for the Carolina varsity, McGrath coaches the JV team every other year, switching off with current director of basketball operations Jerod Haase in that role.

Both McGrath and Haase embrace the opportunity to cut their teeth on the bench, hoping to use their JV experiences as study sessions for potential head coaching jobs somewhere up the road.

"For me, it's been a lot of fun to coach kids who are always so eager to do what you ask," McGrath says. "They try to set the right screens and they try their hardest to box out. And they don't have any of those peripheral concerns worrying about how many NBA scouts were there to see them go 0-for-8 from the 3-point line."

Sure, there aren't the same kind of adrenaline rushes that come with reaching the Final Four. But for Williams, the fulfillment from coaching was just as satisfying.

"It's the greatest purity there is," he says. "It's trying to take your team and seeing what you can do the best against other teams you don't know much about. The only people in the stands are a couple of girlfriends and a couple of parents. It's basketball at its purest, coaching at its purest."



The purity may be undeniable. But there's another motivation that drives these players every day: the dream of perhaps one day getting the call-up.

In that regard, tryouts every fall are the Carolina basketball equivalent of "American Idol" auditions. The 15 players on this year's JV roster have received

their golden tickets. Now they're giving everything they have, hoping to emerge on the biggest stage of all.

"Every single player in this locker room has that on their mind," Crouch says. "There's an extra level of excitement when you have that in the back of your head — those aspirations of, 'Oh man, if I do well here I could be playing in the big time.'"

Only a very small percentage of these Tar Heels will ever realize the dream of playing for the varsity. Since Williams' return to Chapel Hill in 2003, 12 JV players have made the jump.

But as long as that possibility is out there even remotely, the hope percolates through every practice drill and every possession on game night.

At the end of the season, McGrath will sit down with each of his players and give them a Simon Cowell-esque critique of their game, detailing what they need to improve on to become a more complete player.

But the kids hear only one thing.

Says McGrath: "You can tell them straight up, 'I don't think you're going to make varsity. But here's what you need to work on.' And all they hear is, 'I'm going to make varsity. I'm going to make varsity.'"

"It's total tunnel vision."



And it's not as if JV players haven't seen some precedent of success. This year's varsity Tar Heels — or as their better known, the No. 4 team in the nation — features three players who got their start with the JV program.

Take J.B. Tanner, for example, a senior from Hendersonville. When Tanner graduated from high school in 2005, he was fairly certain his playing days were over.

He went out for JV tryouts for the heck of it, made the cut and now finds himself at the tail end of a college career that would have seemed unimaginable four years ago.

Last April, Tanner played in the Final Four — albeit for the final 20 seconds of Carolina's 82-64 loss to Kansas.

"It's like 'Wow. I'm actually here. This is actually happening.' You're in that Carolina jersey and here you are checking into the game in front of 50,000

fans."

In November, Tanner drained two 3-pointers and scored nine points against Chaminade at the Maui Invitational. He has 20 total points this season and a strong urge to snip at a few more nets.

"I look back to high school after my freshman or sophomore year," Tanner says, "and I'm thinking best-case scenario I might wind up playing ball at some mid-major somewhere in the middle of Georgia or something. And now if you told me as a senior in college, I'd have played in a Final Four, I'm on the No. 4 team in the country and I've got a chance to win a national championship at UNC? There's just no way."

Same goes for Jack Wooten, who figured his career was probably finished after a stand-out stint at Williams High School in Burlington. Like Tanner, Wooten clawed his way onto the JV squad in 2005 and figured his next two seasons would certainly be his last.

Yet now, near the end of Year 4, he's got truckloads of tales to tell for years to come.

Like how he scored his first career points in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Or how in an impromptu pick-up game last March he had two much-talked about blocked shots — against President Barack Obama.

Wooten, a political science major, blames an all-night study session for his lack of discretion that morning. But a surge of Carolina competitiveness probably also played a role.

"I didn't want to get embarrassed," he says. "I didn't want Obama to have any stories to tell on the campaign trail about dominating the walk-ons at Carolina."

Tanner and Wooten and fellow senior walk-on Patrick Moody can tell the current JV players that their ultimate basketball fantasies depend a lot on talent and even more on timing.

During the 2006-07 season, Tanner, Wooten and Moody, spent plenty of time doing the math, trying to figure out how many roster spots would be available the next year. Brandan Wright's early departure to the NBA that spring led to a quiet three-man celebration.

Says Wooten: "The three of us never really tried to figure out which one of us truly benefited from that. But we were OK with Brandan's decision."

In that regard, there may be no better time than now to be a Carolina JV player. This year's varsity Tar Heels, after all, will graduate four scholarship seniors and three senior walk-ons. And there's a good chance junior point guard Ty Lawson is entering this final month of his college career as well.

So when next October rolls around, there's a good chance Williams will be looking for two, three, maybe even four JV walk-ons to fill-out his roster.

"That's definitely motivational fuel," Crouch says.

Thornton, however, doesn't have the same hopes. Unfortunately, he's a senior already.

And so on Saturday morning he played the final game of his college career — against Guilford Tech Community College in front of a few dozen fans at the Smith Center.

"For me, it's been all about being a part of Carolina basketball and striving to be the best you can be," he says. "For two years, I've gotten to come into the Dean Dome every day to shoot and practice. I've gotten to wear a Carolina jersey. That will always be special."

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