

SO LONG, SENIORS



Campbell lives his dream at UNC

By Dan Wiederer
Staff writer

CHAPEL HILL — By the time Marc Campbell saw the stat sheet after North Carolina's 69-62 defeat of Miami on Tuesday night, he knew it wasn't a treasured souvenir.

On Senior Night at the Smith Center, as part of tradition, Campbell made his first career start as a Tar Heel. But he didn't register a single stat.

And if you were slow in parking, you may have missed his cameo altogether — a quick and energized spurt that carried a straightforward philosophy.

"Just stay alive," Campbell said.

That mission, it's worth noting, was a success. Campbell left the game for good with 16:51 left before halftime and UNC ahead 5-3.

Not that any of that mattered.

On a Senior Night in which Deon Thompson (14 points) and Marcus Ginyard (12 points, 12 rebounds) carried the team and stole the spotlight, Marc Campbell was once again thrilled to be along for the ride, once again proud to be a Tar Heel.

"Sometimes I just sit there and say to myself, 'Are you kidding me?'" he said. "You think about doing something your whole life and then this chance comes to live and breathe that dream and it's unfathomable the privileges and opportunities you have."

The detour

Campbell wound up in Chapel Hill, in part because his father Greg lettered for Dean Smith in the mid-1960s and remains a loyal supporter of the program.

But that would only provide a surface-level explanation of the path Campbell took to get here and how he and Greg became the only father-son combination to ever play at UNC.

In 2005, after a standout career at Ravenscroft High School in Raleigh, Marc actually turned down an offer from Roy Williams to be

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Photo courtesy of Robert Willett/The News & Observer

UNC's Marc Campbell enjoys recognition during Senior Night on Tuesday. Campbell was held up at gunpoint and lost his best friend before transferring to UNC, where his father played.

Senior: Watching UNC spoil Duke's Senior Night convinced Campbell to be a Heel

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an invited walk-on at UNC. That was his dad's dream.

"But I wanted to go and be my own person," Campbell said. "For me, accepting a scholarship was more important than the whole Carolina tradition, the whole Carolina family."

So Campbell chose UNC-Greensboro over High Point and through some cruel and unfathomable twists of fate wound up suffering through what, in his words, became "the most trying year of my life."

The anxiety started with playing time fluctuations early in his freshman season. But things grew far more sobering in December of that year when, while driving around with a few teammates, Campbell was held up at gunpoint.

During the chaos, the assailant put the gun down Campbell's pants and threatened to shoot unless Campbell and his friends surrendered their money and belongings.

Campbell and his mates escaped unharmed. But mentally, he was traumatized.

Then less than a week later, while having his ankles taped before a game, Campbell got a crushing call from his dad, informing him that T.J. Collins, one of

Marc's basketball buddies growing up, had committed suicide.

"It was like being in an emotional tsunami," Campbell says. "Everything came crashing down at once."

A Tar Heel born

Shattered emotionally, Campbell persevered through his freshman season but never made a huge impact, scoring just 17 points.

He knew it would be his only year in Greensboro. The Spartan coaches knew, too.

So a few days after UNCG's season ended at the Southern Conference tournament, Campbell sat down with coach Mike Dement. Dement asked Campbell how he felt about his future but Campbell could muster only one candid answer.

"I don't want to be here," he said.

That weekend, with spring break beginning, Campbell drove back to Raleigh and as fate would have it, he watched a Tyler Hansbrough-led North Carolina team ruin Senior Night for J.J. Redick and Duke with an 83-76 upset at Cameron Indoor.

Suddenly, Campbell felt himself wanting badly to be a Tar Heel again, just as he had as a kid when he went

crazy for Hubert Davis and Donald Williams and later Antawn Jamison.

Suddenly, he wanted his chance to taste that UNC glory firsthand.

"Seeing that 2005-06 season they had, the year after the national championship, really left an impression," Campbell said. "You saw how much those guys cared about each other when they played. I had been to the lowest of the lows. So right there I said to myself, I really want to be a part of that."

Witness to history

Four years later, Campbell finds it hard to fathom all he's been a part of as a Tar Heel.

He has posed for snapshots with Michael Jordan, played pickup ball with Barack Obama. He has contributed to teams that have won three ACC championships and gone to two Final Fours.

He has seen Williams notch his 500th career win and later his 600th. And he's had a VIP pass all winter for Carolina's "100 years of basketball" celebration with Tuesday providing win No. 2,000.

More than anything, though, Campbell cherishes the lasting friendships he's made. You may know Tyler Hansbrough as an ACC legend. Campbell sees him

more as "the goofiest kid you'll ever meet, the butt of every joke."

You may forever remember Ty Lawson as the 2009 ACC Player of the Year and the driving force behind last season's national title run. Campbell, though, knew Lawson better as a best friend and messy roommate, the kid who used to buy Fruit by the Foot in bulk and drink applesauce right from the jar.

Lasting legacy

Campbell can't remember the first game he played in as a Heel. (It was against Iona on Nov. 18, 2007). And he doesn't remember his first points either. (Those came five weeks later in the final minutes of a blowout of UC-Santa Barbara.)

But if there's an image that will never fade from his mind, it came with the clock ticking toward zero in last season's national title game. Campbell knew from the first day of practice there was a very real chance he would get to experience a national championship triumph. But he never imagined he'd be on the floor in the final minute.

When the buzzer sounded on UNC's 89-72 championship win, Campbell felt the ultimate rush. The streamers exploded from

the roof as he stood at halfcourt watching the legends of that UNC team race towards him.

"The irony," Campbell said, "still gets me. For the most part, unless something astronomically crazy happens, you know as a walk-on there's no way you're going to be out on the court at the end of the national championship game. So then, for me to have Ty and Tyler and Wayne (Ellington) rushing the court towards me instead of me rushing towards them? That was something pretty magical that I will absolutely never forget."

Tuesday's Senior Night couldn't quite top that. But, on the jog off the court, Campbell reminded himself to soak it in one last time.

"This has been an amazing four years," he said. "All the legends I've been around, all the bonds I've made, all the history I've seen, I don't know that anybody could have an experience this fulfilling and this incredible. Running back into that tunnel, it was special for me to realize that in some small way I've been a part of Carolina basketball and everything it's about."

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