



AP photos

Wake Forest men's basketball coach Dino Gaudio, above, watches as the Demon Deacons run wind sprints at the end of their first practice of the season on Oct. 12. Gaudio takes over the program following the death of Skip Prosser, bottom right, on July 26.

# ON WITH THE MISSION

Less than four months after the death of his best friend and mentor, Dino Gaudio leads Wake Forest forward on a journey of healing and inspiration

By Dan Wiederer  
Staff writer

**WINSTON-SALEM** — The lights are off inside the downstairs locker room.

Close your eyes and envision him here — his smirk, his energy, his enjoyment of this space.

This was one of Skip Prosser's classrooms, where he'd come with a friend's warmth and a teacher's presence and inject his teams with discipline, intelligence, enthusiasm.

Take a deep breath and absorb Prosser's wisdom, once spoken, now preserved in the fresh black paint on these concrete walls.

*"It's not where you play or who you play but how you play."*

Digest his messages.

*"If you can't be on time, be early."*

Appreciate his wit.

*"Basketball is not Halloween. Just because you're wearing a uniform doesn't mean you're going to get candy."*

Dino Gaudio misses that affable touch. He misses the insight, the dry humor. Mostly, he misses his best friend.

For the last 27 years, Gaudio has relied on Skip Prosser for guidance, followed him on an impossible journey that whisked them from high school classrooms in West Virginia to two of the most



prestigious seats in college basketball.

And now suddenly, with Prosser stolen from him, Gaudio stands unaccompanied at the helm of the Wake Forest basketball program, left to shape his own legacy as head coach.

It's nothing short of surreal. Gaudio is where he is now because of what Skip Prosser brought to his life. The companionship, the guidance, the inspiration. He is

where he is now because of Prosser's untimely death.

"Makes no sense," Gaudio says. "It never will."

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The most direct route from the hillside gymnasium at Wheeling Central Catholic High School in West Virginia, to the epicenter of ACC hysteria on Tobacco Road carves west down Interstate 70

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# Wake Forest: Coaches bonded during road trips taken to learn from the likes of Dean Smith

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toward Cambridge, Ohio, then south on I-77 toward Mount Airy, snaking southeast along U.S. 52 and finally to I-40 East toward Durham and Chapel Hill.

That may be the easiest way to explain how Dino Gaudio traveled from a business classroom at a small private high school to his seat among legends in college basketball's Mecca.

Four hundred and seventy-two miles. Seven-plus hours. Riding shotgun with Skip Prosser.

In the early 1980s, they were two young high school teachers and basketball coaches with one simple itinerary. Leave school on Thursday afternoon, drive non-stop from Wheeling to North Carolina and convert from teachers to students of the game.

"We'd be in the car and literally talk basketball for eight hours," Gaudio says. "A to Z. The kids we had coming back, the upcoming season, the schedule, what we wanted to do, where we were headed with the JV team."

This was their bond, their shared passion.

They'd hit UNC practice on Friday afternoon, Duke practice on Saturday, then back to Carolina on Sunday to soak in the presence of their coaching idol, Dean Smith.

Gaudio and Prosser simply wanted to learn something new. A defensive drill, an offensive concept, a new saying that would resonate with their players.

"We were like sponges," Gaudio says, "trying to pick up everything we could."

It seemed obsessive at times, the time commitment and their attention to detail. Logically, this was the closest they'd ever come to coaching in the ACC. Glory had a different flavor in the Secondary Schools Activities Commission of West Virginia and so Prosser would often nudge Gaudio and chuckle at their hoops addiction, how they were bottling wisdom from Dean Smith to uncork against Wheeling Park and John Marshall and Weir high schools. "Right profession," Prosser would say. "Wrong level."

Gaudio, now 50, could have never imagined that pilgrimage would foreshadow his career path — an infatuation with basketball and thirst for knowledge magnetizing him to follow in Prosser's footsteps for nearly three decades.

He could never have guessed that the man who greeted his 1980 hiring as the Knights' new assistant coach with great skepticism — "What's a Dino Gaudio?" — would become his lifelong cohort.

A man never circles a classified ad in the local paper and expects a random teaching job to open the doors to the greatest career journey and truest friendship he's ever known.

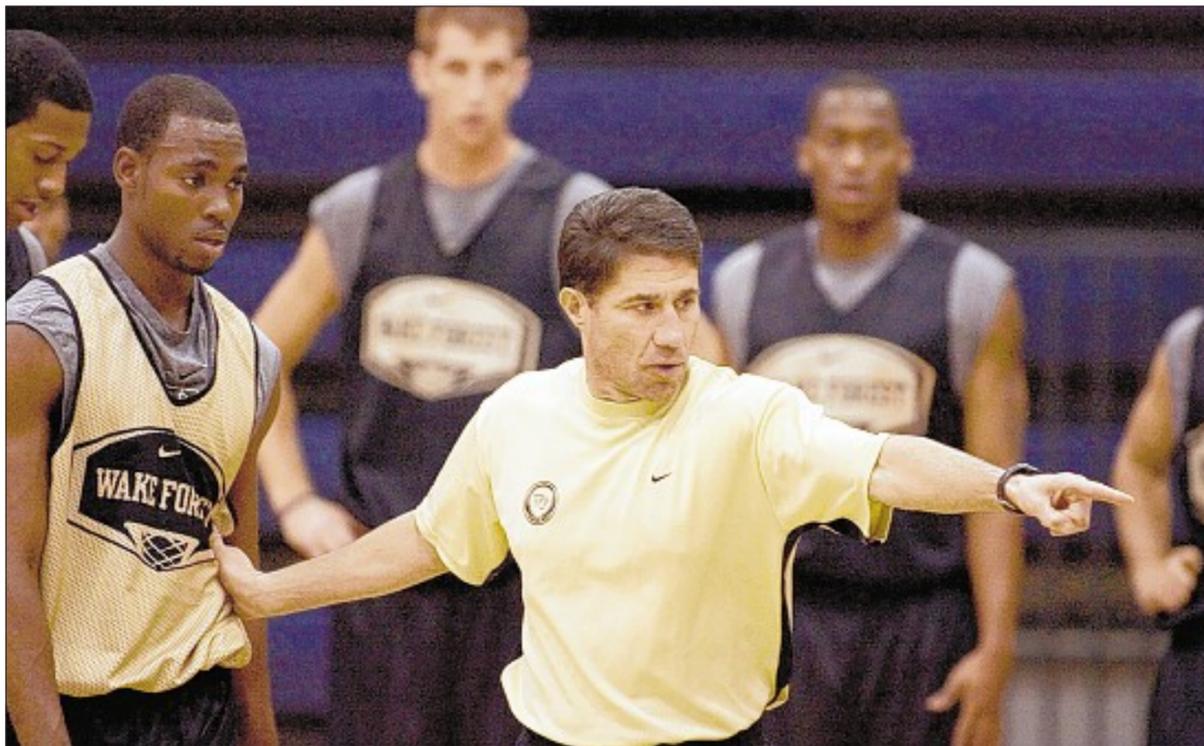
On that first evening outside Wheeling Central — when the introduction to his new boss came with a free copy of Bobby Knight's "How to play defense" — Gaudio had no way of knowing that one day Prosser would baptize his youngest daughter, Alyssa; that Gaudio would deliver the best man toast at Prosser's wedding; that their shared competitiveness and wisdom would one day lead them, side-by-side, to No. 1 in all of college basketball.

Life, unlike weekend road trips, doesn't come with directions. It never told two young and hopeful high school basketball coaches how their wit and ambition would become invaluable networking tools, how their passion for basketball would open doors at summer camps and lift them from the prep ranks in the Ohio Valley Athletic Conference to the Division I college stages at Loyola (Maryland) and Xavier and Wake Forest.

And life certainly didn't forewarn Gaudio that this invigorating fairy tale of friendship would end suddenly on July 26 when Prosser returned to his office after a jog in the noontime swelter and slumped onto a couch, dead at age 56 from a massive heart attack.

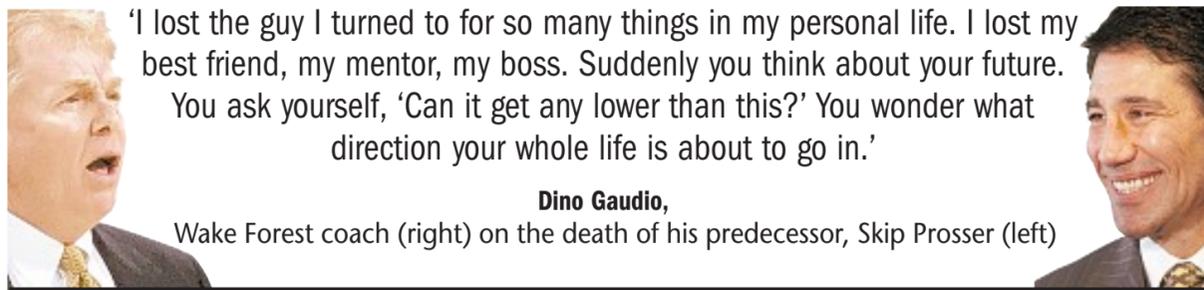
Makes no sense. It never will.

"Just buckets of tears,"



AP photos

Wake Forest coach Dino Gaudio, right, moves freshman Gary Clark into position during the first practice of the new season, held Oct. 12. The Demon Deacons will look to improve on last season's next-to-last finish with a 5-11 record in the ACC.



'I lost the guy I turned to for so many things in my personal life. I lost my best friend, my mentor, my boss. Suddenly you think about your future. You ask yourself, 'Can it get any lower than this?' You wonder what direction your whole life is about to go in.'

Dino Gaudio,

Wake Forest coach (right) on the death of his predecessor, Skip Prosser (left)

Gaudio says. "Suddenly you have no control."

The shock ripped through his sturdy physique, shattering his heart. In a 14-day span, Gaudio spun through a tornado of numbness, delivering a eulogy at his mentor's funeral mass in Clemmons; carrying his best friend's casket to its burial in Cincinnati; lying in bed, heartbroken and confused, wondering if the ripple effect was going to steal his job too.

"I lost the guy I turned to for so many things in my personal life. I lost my best friend, my mentor, my boss," Gaudio says. "Suddenly you think about your future. You ask yourself, 'Can it get any lower than this?' You wonder what direction your whole life is about to go in."

Yet before Gaudio could swallow, suddenly he was on the phone with Prosser's mom and two sons, seeking their approval on a promotion. In a blink he was smiling at a lectern inside Bridger Field House, accepting his new role as Wake Forest's head basketball coach, digesting his destiny as Skip Prosser's replacement.

"I have a very heavy heart with how this opportunity presented itself," he said that day. "You know how much Skip meant to me. He always looked out for me. And I think maybe he's looking out for me right now."

To understand the camaraderie, the loyalty, the simplicity of their bond, you needed only spend a few nights with Gaudio and Prosser at Rafferty's or Bridget McGuire's near the campus of Notre Dame in the early-1980s.

Digger Phelps' annual summer basketball camp, Shangri-la for a pair of high school coaches relishing the week-long getaway to interact amongst peers, to talk hoops, drink beers and just be guys.

"Those were the best times," Gaudio says. "We'd work our tails off all day, then go X and O and let our hair down at night."

The trust Prosser and Gaudio had as coaches was forged in those early days, sharpened on the Wheeling Central sidelines — two guys combining intellect to lead the Knights to the 1982 West Virginia AA state championship.

The support they lent each other was obvious. It was evident on Gaudio's wedding day when Prosser took his two sons, Mark and Scotty, to present Gaudio's bride with a sparkling glass slipper.

"They told me I was the princess for the day," Maureen Gaudio says. "And they were headed to Dino's house to give him a crown. That's how sweet Skip was."

If you saw all this, in brief

## SEASON-OPENER

- **What:** A pre-game tribute to former coach Skip Prosser will highlight Wake Forest's season-opener against Fairfield.
- **When:** Friday, 7 p.m.
- **Where:** Lawrence Joel Memorial Coliseum, Winston-Salem

snippets, you'd understand that over 27 years Prosser and Gaudio carved out the quintessential friendship with the way they complemented each other, the way they rooted for each other, the way they razed each other.

Gaudio always admired the way Prosser, six years his elder, could launch into a stirring soliloquy in the weight room after practice. But he never hesitated to tease his boss about the frequency of those pep talks.

"Skip would give speeches before practice that were like Knute Rockne talks before the biggest game of the year," Gaudio said. "I'd tell him, 'Coach, let them catch their breath. You're beating them up with words.'"

Prosser would jab back, pointing out how high-maintenance Gaudio was, how he never had a hair out of place, how he never missed an afternoon workout, how at the game-day breakfast buffets — with eggs and bacon and sausage and pastries and fruit on the spread — Gaudio just had to request an egg-white omelette or bran muffin or fresh fruit parfait.

"Skip would tease Dino," said Pete Gillen, who gave both Prosser and Gaudio their first college coaching jobs at Xavier. "He'd say, 'It's always something. If they were going to hang Dino, he'd complain if they weren't using a brand new rope.'"

All of that razzing was simply frosting on a relationship rooted in admiration. Even in timeout huddles during hotly contested games, Prosser would solicit Gaudio's input, then push the dry erase board into his belly and ask his right-hand man to diagram the play.

Gaudio loved that responsibility, loved the freedom to speak his mind. So much so that he'd speak it all day and all night, on nearly every possession of every game, even when Prosser didn't need the aid.

Prosser never told him to sit down and shut up. Like a grade school crossing guard, he'd simply raise his palm and utter his three favorite words: "I got it."

It was a big brother-little brother dynamic that worked perfectly. In coaches meetings, simple discussions on recruiting strategy or how to defend the post would turn into all-out wars. Prosser would calmly

state his philosophies and if Gaudio had even an ounce of disagreement, he'd pop the cork on his Italian side.

The arguments would become hellacious, like two kids disputing a one-on-one call in the driveway.

Prosser would just laugh at his right-hand man's bluster, then look to the other assistants and point his thumb towards Gaudio.

"Sometimes right. Sometimes wrong. Never in doubt," he'd say.

"Fire and ice," says Wake assistant Mike Muse. "You could always tell they fed off that, that they were good for each other. Skip didn't want 'Yes-men' around him. He wanted strong guys who could voice their opinions."

Now Gaudio is in charge, his voice the final say. It's strange.

"Even now," says Maureen, "I think we have trouble believing where our life is and processing everything that has happened. We don't always understand that Skip is gone."

Gaudio still bounces into the basketball office at the Manchester Athletic Center on occasion and makes a beeline for his old desk. It still takes him a minute to realize his is now the head office in the back right corner, the workspace where Prosser deliberated for six years, the same room in which he took his final breath.

Gaudio has rearranged things. He kept Prosser's desk and chair as a tribute. But there are no pictures of his buddy on the walls or on the desk or on the end table.

"I just can't do it," Gaudio says. "When I see him, I get upset. You'll be having a good day. And then all of a sudden it's not a good day anymore."

Gaudio can still hear Prosser's voice, can still feel his biting sarcasm. He wishes he could solicit his input on how to tackle the upcoming season.

The challenge is so unique. The Demon Deacons have vowed to make this season a celebration of Prosser's life, a tribute to his influence. It's a gripping mission that will lure cameras and tape recorders and aspiring storytellers to Winston-Salem, seeking reflection.

Inevitably, the sincere questions will grow redundant and the answers will become formulaic, diluting the driving sentiment of the season and masking a very real sorrow. Yet Gaudio has no intentions of stifling the storyline.

"I don't care if we're talking about Skip the next 10 years," he says. "I don't think it's fair to turn the page."

And so the Demon Deacons, a green team with a brand new leader, will balance along a tightrope of emotion, trying to honor Prosser's memory without letting its heaviness knock them into freefall.

"I've talked to a lot of people wondering if this is going to be my dad's legacy — those kids and this team," says Mark Prosser. "I just hope they don't put that pressure on themselves. You can't turn this into a positive. There's just no way. But you can make it a

celebration of my dad's life and do your best to enjoy basketball as much as you ever have."

Gaudio wants Prosser's fingerprints to remain on the program. He wants his mentor's inspiration to sing from the walls.

From that downstairs locker room at the Miller Center, a flight of stairs leads to the practice gym where outside the doors a message left in black paint offers the Demon Deacons a splash of perspective.

"The gym. The best place you'll ever be."

This was a Prosser favorite, his way of soothing a team that seemed flustered or burnt out or unnecessarily pressured by a two-week ACC tailspin. He wanted to convince his players what he could never convince himself — that the losing he so abhorred was part of the ride and that the opportunity they were all given to grow together on the exhilarating stage of big-time college basketball was to be enjoyed and cherished because it wasn't going to last forever.

For the Demon Deacons, the gym has become their therapy, the cathartic channel for their grief and inspiration.

"What happened with Coach Prosser took its toll on all of us," said junior forward Cam Stanley. "But Coach Gaudio has been there to let us know that it's all going to be OK. He's the one that's kept a focus on staying together, being a team. It's not all about basketball."

"It's hard to even imagine how much of a loss this was for him. But it's been inspiring to see how he's approached this."

From time to time, Gaudio will flash back to that July afternoon at the AAU national championships in Orlando, where he and Prosser sat side-by-side in the bleachers watching two of their prized recruits, Al-Farouq Aminu and Tony Woods, revive their dreams of Final Four glory.

On the heels of two disheartening seasons full of losing, Prosser saw the Demon Deacons' future and felt incredible about where everything was headed.

"I'll never forget it," Gaudio says. "He looked at me and said, 'Dino, we're going to be good again.'"

Seven words, enough to fuel a man for 70 years. Two days later, Prosser was gone.

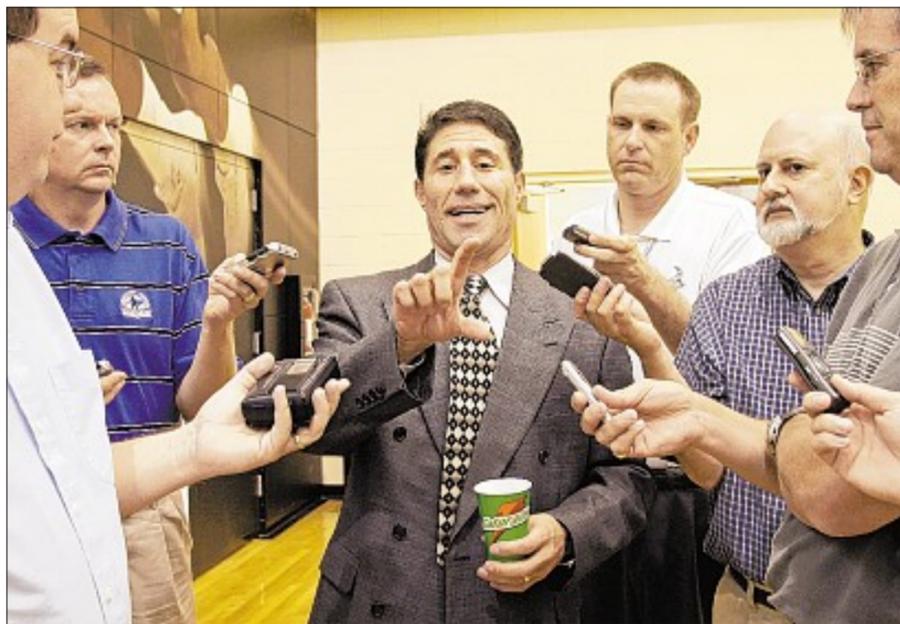
Makes no sense. It never will.

"You get up every morning and say to yourself, 'I have to continue on with the mission we started,'" Gaudio says. "I can tell you nobody is more driven to continue Skip's legacy and finish what he started here than I am."

Inside the Wake Forest practice gym, Gaudio stands a long way from the origins of his coaching career. He feels fulfilled by the magnitude of his climb, from little Wheeling Central to the pinnacle of the profession. He knows how he got here.

"It's not where you're at. It's who you're with," Gaudio says. "And I was with the best guy in the world."

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Dino Gaudio, center, talks to reporters during Wake Forest's media day Oct. 10. He spent five years as associate head coach at Wake and has coached at Xavier and Army.