

MISSION. MISSION. IMPOSSIBLE? IMPOSSIBLE?

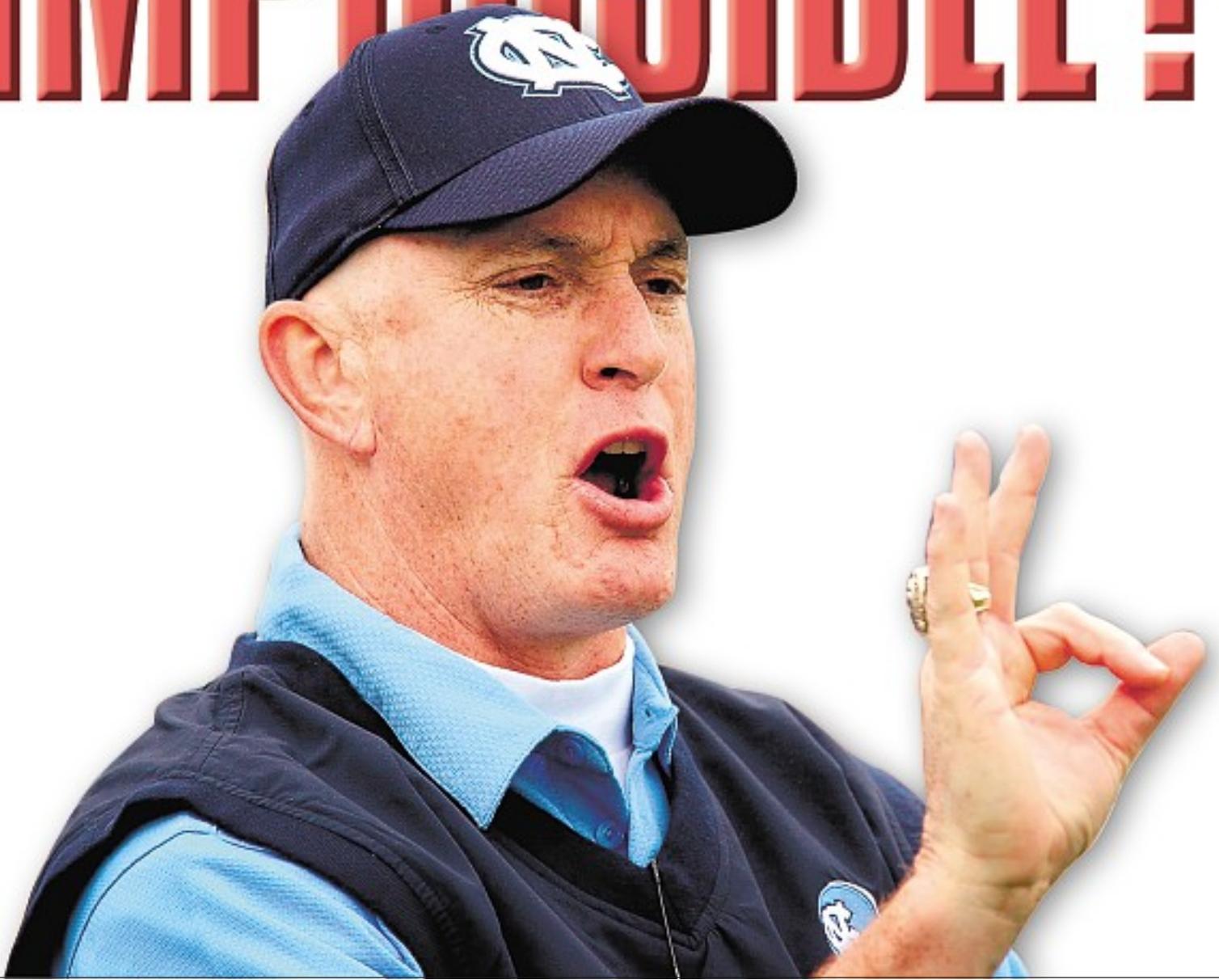


Photo illustration by Marc Hall and Suzanne Schubert

Daring to make football important at a legendary basketball school, Butch Davis faces a historic challenge

By Dan Wiederer ■ Staff writer

At 55 years old, Butch Davis should be old enough to understand history and wise enough to grasp tradition.

Yet here at the University of North Carolina — on a campus where one sport played indoors with a round, bouncing ball is and always will be king — Davis is enthusiastically defying convention and daring to turn the Tar Heels football program into a championship contender.

His aspirations have one intriguing wrinkle.

“Just walk down Franklin Street,” said Tar Heels linebacker Chase Rice, “and take a look at all the Carolina basketball shirts. This is a basketball school and everyone knows it.”

SATURDAY'S GAME

- **Who:** James Madison at North Carolina
- **Where:** Kenan Stadium, Chapel Hill
- **When:** 6 p.m. (ESPN 360) ■ **Tickets:** Sold out

Davis doesn't mind. In his very first meeting with his new players last November, he wasted no time raising the bar for Tar Heels football.

Without hesitation, he uncorked his vitality and scrawled one giant goal at the top of the program's checklist.

National championship.

Never mind that UNC lost nine games in 2006, finished 112th in the nation in turnover margin and just barely got by Division I-AA Furman.

Davis wanted his grand objectives to be known immediately.

“Why? Because it's part of the vision,” he said. “You want to talk about goals. You need to talk about winning. It gives the players an aiming point. This is what we want to achieve and this is what we want to aspire to.”

Perhaps Davis is overly enthusiastic. Perhaps he's delusional. Or maybe, just maybe, he is am-

See **IMPOSSIBLE**, Page 6C

TITLE NEEDED

A look at how six traditional basketball schools have fared on the gridiron in the last 25 years.



KENTUCKY

Bowl games

6

Coaches

5

Ranked in final top 20

0

Last conference title

1976



N. CAROLINA

Bowl games

12

Coaches

5

Ranked in final top 20

5

Last conference title

1980



INDIANA

Bowl games

6

Coaches

6

Ranked in final top 20

0

Last conference title

1967



DUKE

Bowl games

2

Coaches

7

Ranked in final top 20

0

Last conference title

1989



KANSAS

Bowl games

4

Coaches

6

Ranked in final top 20

0

Last conference title

1968



UCLA

Bowl games

18

Coaches

3

Ranked in final top 20

12

Last conference title

1998

Impossible: UNC is taking the steps (monetarily) to make the Tar Heels relevant on the gridiron

From Page 1C

bitious and talented enough to revamp the landscape in Chapel Hill.

With a season opener Saturday against James Madison at Kenan Stadium, this is Davis' mission: make football relevant on a campus known for its prestigious basketball tradition.

It may sound simple. But it's arguably never been done before. Not at Kentucky. Not at Kansas. Not at Indiana or Duke.

Basketball schools just don't produce football champions.

Said tight end Richard Quinn: "We see the impact the basketball team has on this campus and on our fans. It makes no sense to ignore that. But it should make us hungry — to be successful like them."

A road less traveled

Achieving high-level success in both football and basketball is far from unprecedented. Last year both Florida and Ohio State played for national titles in both sports. But those universities are renowned football schools that made rapid advances on the hardwood.

At Carolina, Davis is attempting to take the reverse path, a road on which the obstacles are greater and far more imposing. For starters, piecing together a championship-level 22-man starting lineup is inherently more complicated than establishing a five-man unit.

At Ohio State last winter, the Buckeyes basketball program parlayed one stellar recruiting class — an eye-popping 2006 score that included McDonald's All-Americans Greg Oden, Mike Conley and Daequan Cook — into an immediate Final Four berth.

But football programs typically require two, three, even four landmark recruiting hauls to make half that noise. Florida's starting lineup last season, for example, had four top 250 recruits from the Classes of 2003 and 2004, two each from 2002 and 2005 and one from 2006.

So while Davis' first recruiting class was superb, ranked 14th in the nation by Scout.com and headlined by five-star defensive tackle Marvin Austin, those gains won't immediately translate into a memorable season. No matter how fast and how strong Austin is, no matter how certain it is that he will one day be a first-round NFL draft pick, players of his ilk just aren't unlikely to have the same impact in college football as Oden had in basketball.

"Clearly there are no short cuts," Davis said. "There is no switch you can flip on and say, 'In the next 12 months, we're absolutely going to go from who we were to where we'd like to be.'"

Set priorities

Few celebrated basketball schools have ever produced significant national football success, even for a brief period of time. Why? For starters, few have ever had the gall to try.

At most large universities, the athletic administration typically keeps a close pulse on the desires of its fan base and dedicates its efforts and resources accordingly. At places like Kentucky or Kansas or Indiana, for example, football mediocrity can be tolerated so long as the basketball team provides five months of winter exhilaration.

That may help explain how John Bunting, with just one winning season and an overall winning percentage of .375, was able to last six years at North Carolina.

It's not so much a lack of resources that impedes football success. It's a lack of tradition and the subsequent pressure that comes with that.

"In reality, most universities are going to have higher expectations and bigger budgets and grander goals in one sport over all the others," said David Glenn, the editor of the ACC Sports Journal, who's been covering the conference for 20 years. "And it's a heck of a lot easier in this world to keep a good thing going and revisit places a program has already been that it is to take a program to unprecedented heights."

The challenge for Davis now lies in guiding the hungry Tar Heels from point A — four losing seasons since 2002 — to point BCS (college football's national championship game.)

He must do so on a campus where Hall of Fame coach Roy

THE FAB FIVE

Here are five universities that are currently succeeding in both football and basketball:

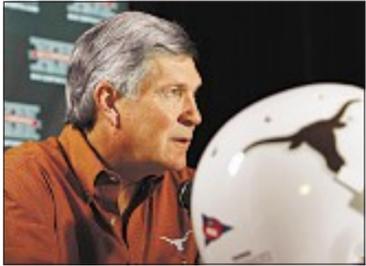
FLORIDA

The Gators won national championships in football and basketball within 90 days of each other earlier this year. Enough said.



TEXAS

Two coaches with Carolina ties — former UNC football coach Mack Brown and Hickory native Rick Barnes — have proven that two big-time programs can co-exist. Brown's Longhorns have averaged 11 victories per season since 2002 with a national title in 2005. Barnes' squad has averaged 25 victories with 10 NCAA tournament wins in that span.



OHIO STATE

Produced national title game appearances in both basketball and football last year; also turned out the Heisman Trophy winner (Troy Smith) and the No. 1 pick in the NBA draft (Greg Oden).



WISCONSIN

Badgers basketball team boasts a streak of nine straight NCAA tournament appearances, behind only Arizona, Kansas, Kentucky, Duke and Michigan State. Football squad has finished in the top three of the Big Ten the last three years, averaging 10 victories in that span.



UCLA

Hoops program flourishing again with back-to-back Final Four trips. Bruins football squad has made six straight bowl appearances.



■ Four on the verge: Southern California, Tennessee, Louisville and Oregon

Williams is an established icon and where basketball will always attract the bulk of the spotlight.

Davis understands the glamour of Carolina basketball yet seems unburdened by it. ESPN analyst Bob Davie applauds that approach. Acknowledge the prestige of Tar Heels hoops, he advises, but don't be intimidated by it.

"Carolina basketball," Davie said, "is not on Carolina football's schedule."

Davie believes UNC's basketball success can provide the football program with certain advantages, giving the university an identity and a recruiting forum to show football prospects the excitement UNC athletics can generate.

But now it's up to Davis to find his niche in that world. And he must do so with his ego buried deep in a locker somewhere.

"A lot of this comes down to personality and the realistic nature of a coach," Davie said, "Simply put, you're not very smart if you're trying to win a battle for attention and popularity with Roy Williams."

Two for the money

The culture of college athletics today seems to be evolving with some of the country's biggest athletic programs now striving to compete at the highest levels in football and basketball, then investing to make it happen.

It is no coincidence that Ohio State football coach Jim Tressel and basketball coach Thad Matta will combine to make approximately \$4.6 million this upcoming year. At Texas, Mack Brown (\$2.5 million) and Rick Barnes (\$2 million) will enjoy similar pay days.

Meanwhile Florida has taken things to another stratosphere. Eye-popping raises given to hoops leader Billy Donovan and football coach Urban Meyer after their respective national championships last year, put the two Gators head coaches in line

to make a combined \$6.75 million this year.

Translation: winning big in both sports may require spending big in both sports, a financial undertaking few programs are willing to accept.

At Carolina, however, athletic director Dick Baddour seems ready to take that leap of faith and crack open the safe. In November, Baddour signed Davis to a seven-year contract that will pay the new coach close to \$1.8 million this season, adding to the estimated \$2.2 million Roy Williams will take in.

At the very least, Carolina seems to be making a concentrated financial effort to resuscitate football.

"Programs that are trying harder don't just think big," Glenn said. "Programs that are trying harder spend more money. Programs that are trying harder ask themselves, 'Who is the absolute best person on earth for this program who's available and excited about coming?' Programs that are trying harder don't settle for the NFL assistant who's available and the best guy on the family tree, which is essentially what John Bunting was."

A brief history

Davis firmly believes his football program will flourish. And his conviction is not without supporting evidence. In Mack Brown's final six seasons at UNC, the Tar Heels football program averaged nine wins and won four bowl games, hardly impeded by the celebrated success of Dean Smith and the basketball program.

Yet in December 1997, during an 11-win season that finished with a 42-3 Gator Bowl stomping of Virginia Tech and a No. 6 final ranking, Brown bolted for Texas, lured by the promise of more money, more spotlight and a fan base that was more passionate about football.

Since Brown's departure, the Tar Heels have averaged just

4.8 wins per season and won just two bowl games. Predictably, Carolina football has slid down the priority list in Chapel Hill. And even with Davis regenerating the buzz, it is unlikely his program will ever attract the fervent following seen every winter inside the Dean E. Smith Center.

North Carolina's inconsistent football history won't do Davis any favors. The Tar Heels' last ACC title came in 1980. Nationwide, 45 programs in the six power conferences have won a league title since Carolina last tasted that glory. The only school in the ACC with a longer championship drought is N.C. State.

Meanwhile, Carolina's hoops program has been to nine Final Fours and won three national championships in that time, bolstering an identity that Davis and his Tar Heels have no choice but to recognize. Basketball will always come first at North Carolina.

Said Davie: "You can't change the landscape of an entire university."

'No fear'

With Davis trumpeting the vision and his players committed to following, the excitement is now simmering in Chapel Hill in anticipation of Saturday's season opener. But the reality is that Year 1 of the Butch Davis era will have its bumps.

Carolina was picked by the media to finish last in the Coastal Division of the ACC this season; Sports Illustrated projected a 3-9 record; and CBS Sportsline slated the Tar Heels as the 74th best team out of 119 in Division I.

Placing those numbers beside Davis' national championship wishes seems laughable to many outsiders. For now.

"People forget," Glenn said. "But not long ago people around the country were holding their bellies laughing at the idea of UNC football being able to attract Butch Davis for its head

who believe with great certainty that a renaissance will happen.

"Coach Davis is changing the attitude around here," said wide receiver Brooks Foster. "It's all about having hope and realizing it's OK to dream big."

Added Davis, the mastermind of this plan: "We need to create an atmosphere where there's no fear of failure. When you're afraid to fail, you're also afraid to find out how good you can actually be."

Mettle of achievement

Strange as it sounds, the revival of UNC football may have received its most significant boost last December at a Metropolitan Police Department awards banquet in Washington, D.C.

Inside DAR Constitution Hall that night detective Todd Amis, also the top assistant coach at Ballou High School, accepted a medal of achievement. On hand to support him: Ballou's star defensive tackle Marvin Austin, widely considered the top defensive prospect in the country. On hand to introduce himself to Austin: Butch Davis.

The first interaction proved momentous.

Firm handshake. Sincere conversation. One grand sales pitch from an eager and proven coach to a five-star 300-pound defensive tackle who previously had as much interest in North Carolina football as he had in skipping dinner.

Come to Chapel Hill, Davis implored, and we can build a national power.

Austin listened to the fantastic proposition and envisioned his future.

Inspired Saturday victories. BCS Bowl trips. A paved path to the NFL.

They were the same promises delivered by the coaches at Southern California, Florida State and Tennessee, the schools at the top of Austin's wish list and programs with more substance with which to back those claims. Yet somehow, Davis' ambition and energy won out.

"I was sold, man," Austin said. "Coach Davis wanted to bring world class football to North Carolina and I wanted to be a part of that. The way he expressed himself convinced me it was going to happen. Without any doubts. I knew he was an articulate guy who could rally the troops. But I didn't know he could do it like that."

A year ago, neither Davis nor Austin meant anything to UNC. The former was an out-of-work coach serving as an analyst for the NFL Network. The latter was a highly sought after lineman likely headed to a campus where football ruled.

Improbably the duo has now united as the most important catalysts in a quest to lift UNC football to national prominence.

"I know this is a basketball school," Austin said. "But why can't Carolina be a football school, too?"

Staff writer Dan Wiederer can be reached at wiedererd@fayobserver.com or 486-3536.

ED's

TIRE & AUTO SERVICE

Serving Fayetteville For 30 Years

Voted Fayetteville's Best 5 Years in a Row

12 month, 12,000 mile "nationwide warranty" on all vehicle services. See store for details.

Lube, Oil & Filter Special

\$12.95

Shell 10W30 OIL

Includes up to 5 qts. of Shell 10W30 oil, filter and lube. Must Present Coupon Expires 9/1/07

4775 YADKIN RD. 864-0775

2931 OWEN DRIVE 484-6131

5061 YADKIN RD. 867-2130

2902 RAEFORD RD. 485-6145

203 W. 2ND STREET LUMBERTON, NC 738-8527

2575 HOPE MILLS RD. 425-0035

5540 MURCHISON RD. 822-3499

We Honor Bridgestone, Firestone, Dayton And Road King Charge Cards.

7 Locations To Serve You Hours: Mon.-Fri. 8 til 6, Sat. 8 til 3