

## Tar Heels' youth is served



By Jason King, Yahoo! Sports Nov 20, 2:53 am EST



NEW YORK – The North Carolina basketball team features six freshmen and sophomores among its top nine players.

Roy Williams likes to remind people of this, because he realizes not every night is going to be like Thursday, when his Tar Heels dominated No. 15 Ohio State for most of the game before staving off a late rally in a 77-73 win at Madison Square Garden.

Other than some late turnovers and a few missed free throws, sixth-ranked North Carolina couldn't have played much better against the Buckeyes. The problem is that Friday night against Syracuse – or, heck, next week against Gardner-Webb – things could take a turn for the worse.

That's what happens with young teams early in the season. Some nights they're great, others, well ... you just don't know what to expect.

It's a situation that can be maddening for fans – especially ones who begin planning their Final Four trips in August. Hopefully, though, Tar Heels supporters will show a little more patience with this group.

Because if anything was obvious on this night, it was that his team is going to be good, very good – maybe even Final Four good, if everything falls into place.

"I can't put a timetable on it," senior Marcus Ginyard said. "But once we start putting everything together consistently, people are going to realize that we're capable of doing a lot of great things."

Playing at the Garden, in front of a national TV audience, North Carolina looked as if it possessed all the pieces necessary to win a second straight NCAA championship. The Tar Heels led Big Ten title contender Ohio State by as many as 19 points midway through the second half. Time after time, Williams' players

came up with crucial steals and big shots to thwart comeback attempts by the Buckeyes.

Despite not having one pure shooter on the roster, North Carolina went 7 of 15 from 3-point range. Ginyard, a defensive specialist, forced Ohio State All-American candidate Evan Turner into 10 turnovers. Larry Drew, the much-maligned point guard who is replacing last year's ACC Player of the Year, Ty Lawson, dished out eight assists.

Overseeing it all from the sideline was the best coach in the business, who has the luxury of rotating four players who are 6-foot-10 or taller as well as 6-foot-9 senior Deon Thompson. Thompson, a three-year starter, led the Tar Heels with 15 points and 12 rebounds.

"As the year goes on, people are going to see that we're not rebuilding," Thompson said. "We're just reloading and adding a few of those bullets that we lost."

Indeed, for awhile it looked as if North Carolina hardly missed Lawson, Tyler Hansbrough and Wayne Ellington, each of whom was selected in the first round of last year's NBA draft.

The most noticeable strength is down low. No team in the country has a frontcourt as talented and deep as North Carolina's. That's why the Tar Heels have so much potential. With nowhere to go inside, teams are forced to take shots from the perimeter, where North Carolina's defense was suffocating for most of Thursday's game.

Ohio State shot just 29 percent in the first half and made only one of its 10 attempts from beyond the arc as North Carolina stormed to a 38-24 lead. The Tar Heels were up by 15 with about three minutes to go before a flurry of 3-pointers by the Buckeyes – they made four in the final two minutes – shaved the deficit to two, 75-73, with 11 seconds remaining.

Luckily, Drew sealed the victory with a pair of late free throws after missing four of his previous six foul shots.

"To have a good year, sometimes you have to win ugly," Williams said after the game.

Ugly?

That victory wasn't ugly. Sure, the last few minutes weren't pretty, but otherwise it was as impressive a performance against a quality opponent that a team has turned in thus far this season.

Ugly, according to some critics, was the team's season-opening victory over Florida International. The Tar Heels won by 16, but they gave up 72 points at

home to a bad team. Last week they beat Valparaiso 88-77, but instead of praising them for the win, college basketball analysts began slapping the “overrated” tag on North Carolina.

It shouldn't be like that.

All schools – even ones with national championship plaques in their trophy case – struggle at times early in the season. No. 1 Kansas beat unranked Memphis by two points on Tuesday while No. 2 Michigan State nearly lost to Gonzaga. Hours before North Carolina took the court on Thursday, No. 5 Villanova needed a 3-pointer in the final seconds for a one-point win over George Mason. Sam Houston State nearly reached the century mark in a 102-92 loss to fourth-ranked Kentucky, which was fresh off a two-point win against Miami (Ohio).

Bottom line: It's going to be a process for the Tar Heels. They're going to make mistakes. There will be gratifying wins like the one they experienced Thursday. But with Kentucky, Texas, Michigan State and Syracuse still on the non-conference slate, there will also be some heart-wrenching losses.

Folks need to accept that and be patient with the youth-laden Tar Heels. Even when Williams won't be.

“If you tell kids that,” Williams said, “they're going to dip to that level. We shouldn't do that. I tell them we're basketball players and that we've played the game our entire lives. That's an excuse that people use.”

For now, it's a legitimate one.

But it won't be in April. By then, the Tar Heels won't need an excuse.