

# R I D D U M S

By WILLIE PAINTER



VC ROGERS

## Stormin' with Norman

After the second game of North Carolina State's 1965 basketball season, legendary head coach Everett Case was forced to retire, a victim of multiple myeloma, which destroys bones while displacing the blood cell that produces marrow. His successor, Press Maravich, took the team to 20-4 overall and 10-3 in the ACC, earning himself conference Coach of the Year honors. Things were looking up; Press had a son, Pete, who averaged 32 points a game at Raleigh's Broughton High School. It appeared that N.C. State was in for a Maravich and Maravich show for the next several years.

Then the unthinkable happened: Pete's grades weren't high enough to get him admitted to State. (I can hear the disbelief from all you Duke and Carolina fans, but it's true. State turned down a marquee player because, academically, he couldn't cut it.) When Press learned his son had been rejected, he did what any self-respecting coach would do: He took himself and his boy to a

school that would take them as a package deal, no matter what Pete's GPA was. At Louisiana State University, Pistol Pete averaged over 44 points a game, although the teams he played on never contended for a championship.

Back in Raleigh, a former player under Everett Case was chosen to be the new coach of the Wolfpack — Norm Sloan. After a four-year stint with the Citadel, Sloan had become head coach at Florida in 1960 and compiled a 85-63 record over the next six years. His first team at State went 7-19 overall and 2-12 in the ACC, but Sloan was building a foundation, recruiting players who had the competitive fire and reverence for fundamentals Sloan had grown up with in his native Indiana.

The '60s were a turbulent decade in all areas, including sports. In 1966, there were no black players on any basketball team in the Atlantic Coast Con-

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ference, but shortly after that Charlie Scott of UNC became the conference's first African-American player in North Carolina. By 1968 Scott was setting scoring records, and the tide could not be turned back. Sloan recruited Al Heartley and Ed Leftwich as the first black N.C. State players in 1969, and they helped give him his first ACC championship over favored South Carolina in 1970.

Back then, the only way to get into the NCAA Tournament was as conference champion, so the final ACC Tournament game was do or die. That game between State and South Carolina was a double-overtime thriller. South Carolina was coached by Frank McGuire, who had previously coached UNC to its first NCAA championship in 1957. His 1970 Gamecocks featured point guard

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John Roche and a go-getter named Bobby Cremins, later head coach at Georgia Tech. There were no big stars on the State team; the captain was forward Vann Williford, an enthusiastic if unspectacular player. If you

ask Cremins today, he will still claim, with palpable bitterness, that Leftwich fouled him and was not called for it when Cremins lost the ball in the crucial final seconds. Such is ACC basketball. It sticks with you.

Before winning the ACC Championship that year, Sloan had been busy recruiting, and was having some luck in the western part of the state. In Newland he wooed a 7'4" prospect named Tommy Bureson. The following year, Sloan went to his home state and recruited Indiana High School All-Star Monte Towe. Only 5'5", Towe made up for his small size with a fierce competitiveness that his coach loved, along with the ability to lead and inspire his teammates on the court.

There was one other recruiting coup that year: David Thompson, who had a 44-inch vertical jump. It was said he had the leg



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power to leap up and retrieve a quarter placed on top of the backboard. Thompson grew up around Shelby and had always dreamed of wearing Carolina Blue, but Sloan won him over by telling him he would only be a small part of Dean Smith's master plan at UNC, while the whole team would be built around him at State. (The fact that the road in front of Thompson's house was paved later that year certainly had nothing to do with his decision, did it?)

With these players in place, plus great support from others like Phil Spence and Moe Rivers, Sloan molded a team that went unbeaten in 1973. But recruiting violations kept the Wolfpack from going to the Dance. In 1974 the Pack won all its ACC games, with only one loss outside the conference. The Maryland Terrapins, coached by Lefty Driesell, were State's opponents in the ACC championship game that year. In a contest considered by many to be the best ever in the conference, State won in double overtime.

UCLA had been the national champion for nine of the last ten years, and the Bruins were odds-on favorites to win it all again, led by future Deadhead Bill Walton. An earlier UCLA player, Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) had been the reason the NCAA instigated a "no dunk" rule. Still in place in '74, the regulation meant that as Thompson did one of his "Skywalker" moves toward the basket while floating several feet above the lane, he could only drop the ball into the net gently. No matter; it was still two points. And in the days before the three-point shot, Thompson averaged 41 points per game. N.C. State beat UCLA in the semifinals in double overtime. The championship game, with State defeating Marquette, was almost anti-climatic.

"In 1974 we believed everything he told us," Towe said recently of Sloan. "At the beginning

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of the year he told us we had the chance to be one of the greatest teams in history.”

As the 1970s moved on, Sloan, with his plaid sport coat and open dislike for icons such as Dean Smith, seemed to be an anachronism. He was never vague about where he stood on matters.

“He was honest to a fault,” said Bureson. Although he disliked the moniker “Stormin’ Norman” early in his career, Sloan eventually admitted he deserved it.

“Boy, was he competitive,” his former Wolfpack teammate Dick

Dickey said of Sloan. “I played against him in high school in Indiana and with him at N.C. State. You saw it as a player and later when he was a coach.”

In the late '70s Sloan started to feel he wasn't appreciated at State. When his former employer Florida made him an offer in 1980 and the Wolfpack wouldn't match it, he left. He enjoyed success in his second stint with the Gators, going to the NCAA tournament three times. However, in 1989 he was fired after an NCAA investigation revealed he had given players money. Always

blunt, Sloan said, “You tell [a recruit's family], ‘I'll take care of your son.’ That doesn't mean you give him spending money every week, but if the kid has a problem, I was going to help him.” He didn't coach again.

He and his wife Joan, who sang the national anthem at every State home game while her husband was coach, retired to the mountains of North Carolina, and in 1994 he was inducted into the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame. He would occasionally come to Raleigh, to the new RBC Center to see his Pack play. On December 9 of this year he died of pulmonary fibrosis at Duke Hospital. He was 77.

“We've lost one of the great warriors,” said Towe.

His legacy is evident not only in his 1974 national championship. Without Thurl Bailey, Sidney Lowe, and Dereck Whittenburg, all Sloan recruits, it's unlikely his successor Jim Valvano would have won the 1983 NCAA crown with the “Cardiac Pack.”

“It is a sad day for me personally and for everyone involved in N.C. State basketball,” said Thompson after hearing of Sloan's death. “He was a father figure for us. He molded us into men. Coach Sloan meant so much to the league. He was one of the greatest coaches in history.” •


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*Willie Painter lives and works in Durham. He enjoys playing and listening to music — and rooting for State.*



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