

Felton has USC basketball headed in the right direction

ANALYSIS

By JEFF NICHOLS
Staff writer

A chartered Continental airliner at Columbia's Metropolitan Airport had not yet gotten off the ground.

Its destination? Providence, R.I. Nothing special about that.

But waiting to take off on that plane last Thursday was a special group of college basketball players and an alumnus who was about to go where no USC team had been in a long while.

It was time for the NCAA Division I Basketball Championship and the opening round of the East Regional.

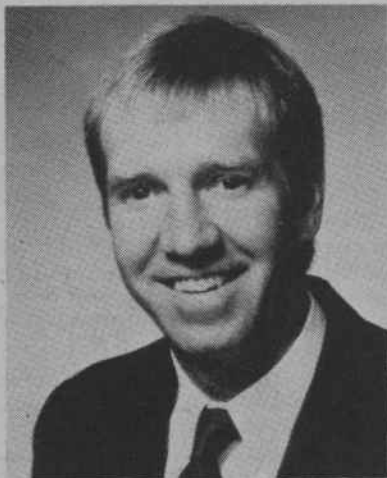
For head coach George Felton, it was a return trip delayed 15 years.

1974 was the last year a USC basketball team made the tournament. Felton was a reserve on that Frank McGuire-coached squad that lost to Furman in a first-round game played at The Palestra in Philadelphia.

Felton never left basketball after graduating from USC the following year. He just moved from one end of the bench to the other.

After serving as an assistant coach at Appalachian State, N.C. A&T, East Carolina and Georgia Tech, he would return to his alma mater in 1986.

While Felton was busy building his reputation as an outstanding recruiter at Georgia Tech, nabbing



George Felton

four straight ACC Rookies of the Year for the Yellow Jackets, USC's basketball program was out of the tournament spotlight — looking to get off what would be a 15-year waiting list.

The seeds for the long wait were actually sown before George Felton left USC. After the 1971 season, the Gamecocks dropped out of the Atlantic Coast Conference. It didn't happen overnight, but eventually the effects of that move began to take hold of a program that had enjoyed a lot of success.

Gone were the recruiting advantages of belonging to such a prestigious conference. Constant media exposure was a thing of the past, and in Columbia, attendance declined.

Since that NCAA-bound '74 team,

the Gamecocks only won 20 or more games once, under Bill Foster in 1982-83.

Tired of being treated like the red-headed stepchild, and feeling hidden in the shadow of the ACC, USC opted to join the Metro Conference in 1983.

Three mediocre seasons later, after Foster was forced to resign, George Felton would be asked to return home.

Thursday, as final preparations for takeoff were being made, could Felton, who was known for his aggressive, New-York style of play, have been thinking back to 1974?

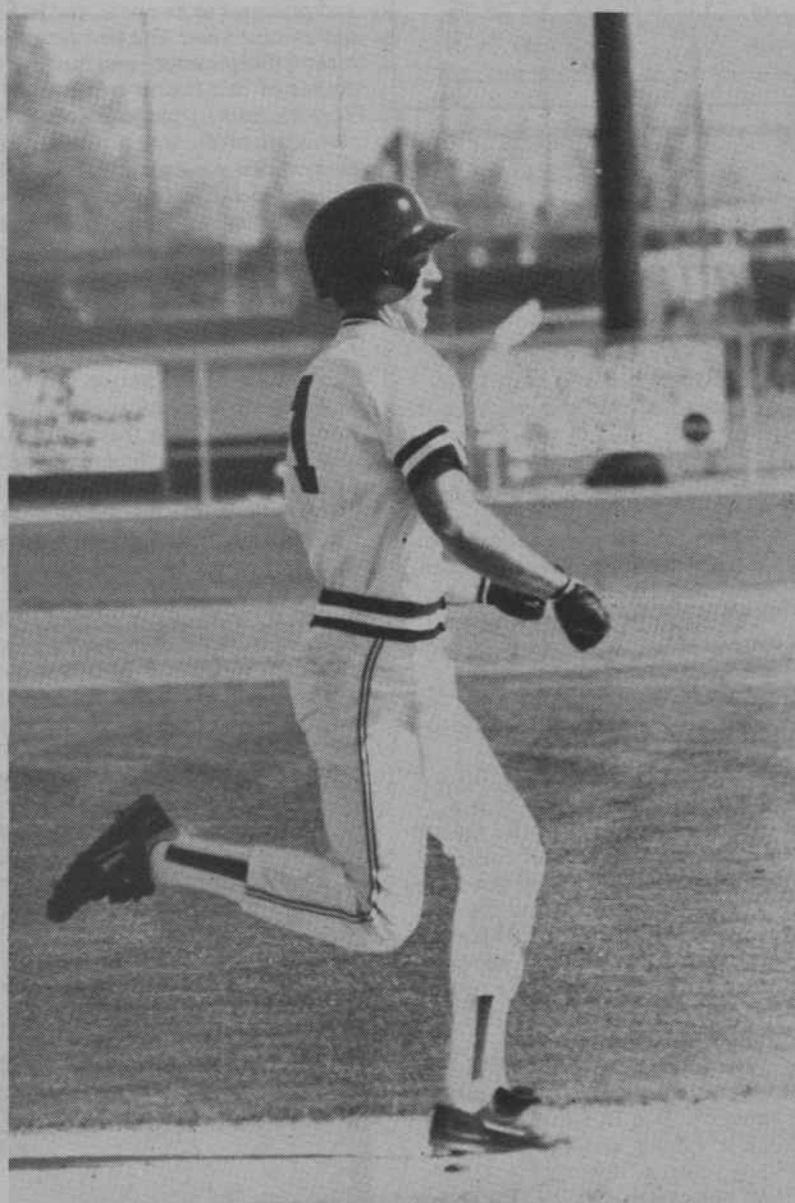
Or maybe he was listening to the USC Pep Band praise scrappy reserve guard Bill Vernau, whose own coaching aspirations may remind Felton of himself 15 years ago.

With the plane still on the ground, the band shouted in unison from the rear — "Here he comes to save the day, Bill Vernau is on his way. . . Bill 'The Big Man' Vernau."

Vernau and the Gamecocks were indeed on their way. Beating a N.C. State team that had been embarrassed only a week earlier in the ACC tournament by eighth-seeded Maryland would be a tall order, but that wasn't at hand yet.

What lay ahead was a 90-minute plane ride to Providence — a 15-year hiatus ended.

A win would be a giant step upward for Felton and USC, but in so many ways they were already soaring before they even left the ground.



TERRY HUNTER/The Gamecock

USC senior co-captain Mark Taylor prepares to slide in Sunday's 5-4 victory over nationally ranked Florida State. The Gamecocks defeated Georgia Southern 13-5 Monday to improve their season mark to 10-7.

Home runs power USC over Eagles

From staff reports

Home runs by Brian Williams, Skeets Thomas and Derrick Mack powered the USC baseball team to its third straight victory Monday night as the Gamecocks defeated Georgia Southern 13-5 at Sarge Frye Field to run their record to 10-7.

USC's Matt Threehouse improved his record to 3-0 with the win, pitching seven innings, scattering five hits and allowing all five Eagle runs, three of them earned. Threehouse walked two and struck out eight. Scott Ryder, 2-2, took the loss for Georgia Southern, now 10-13.

After the Eagles took a 1-0 lead in the top of the first inning, USC scored four runs in its half of the third, three on Williams' home run.

Georgia Southern's Brett Hendley hit a two-run homer in the top of the fourth to pull the Eagles to within a run, but the Gamecocks added three more runs in the fifth on back-to-back roundtrippers by Mack and Thomas to take a 7-3 lead.

USC stretched its lead to 13-3 with a six-run sixth, before Georgia Southern added two seventh-inning runs to close the final margin.

Williams finished with four hits for USC, while Mack had three. Six Gamecocks had two hits apiece.

USC will play host to St. Bonaventure tonight at 7:30 at Sarge Frye Field.



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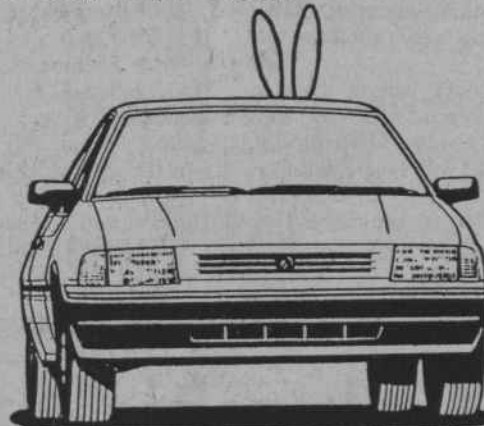


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