

Mathis winds down all-star career

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Clint Mathis. The name is synonymous with the success of the Carolina soccer program. Sadly, the senior All-American from Conyers, Ga., is close to reaching the end of an incredible career at USC.

For those of you who have followed Gamecock soccer over the past four years, perhaps what stands out most about Mathis is his 25 goal, All-American, sophomore season. However, Mathis' contributions have been so much more than his ability to score seemingly impossible goals.

Mathis began his career at the age of three. His family was very soccer oriented, so that created his passion to play.

In high school, Mathis received many honors, including 1993 Gatorade Player of the Year in Georgia, was a member of the US National Team Pool for three years, earned All-State, All-Area, and All-Conference honors his junior and senior seasons, and was selected Soccer Scene All-America his senior year.

Mathis' career led him to Carolina based on the quality of the program and the convenient location.

"I think soccer players in general, the way that they play on the field, in most cases, mirrors their personality, and Clint is a person that has his own style and he has his own style on the field as a player," USC Head Soccer Coach Mark Berson said. "He's a very explosive and a very dynamic player on the field."

Mathis' style happened to be right on target because he arrived, contributed immediately, and by his sophomore year was an All-American.

"That was the type of season where our team was playing great and that's really what allowed me to be able to do that," Mathis said referring to his sophomore season. "I just happened to be at the right place at the right time and everything was going great for us. But the main thing was how the team was playing. It wasn't like I did anything extra to score that many goals. My teammates put me in those situations."

Despite all the success that Mathis has had, it hasn't always been an easy road.

There have been times when he's struggled and times that were frustrating. One of those times was following his sophomore season. The Gamecocks were in the NCAA tournament when tragedy struck.

Mathis was on the field and suddenly blew out his left knee. It was an injury that required surgery, and for the next season, Mathis had to wear a knee brace.

"There was a long period of last year where he really didn't feel like he should be wearing his brace, that he was tired of it," Berson said. "He was just kind of frustrated with life and soccer and everything and I think he emerged from that experience as a more dedicated player, as a more enthusiastic participant in everything."

"That was definitely a hard time. Sophomore year, the team was doing so well, and then all of a sudden, in the tournament that happens, and I no longer can play for about six months, and that's real hard because I've never, ever been out that long from soccer," Mathis said.

"But, I'm glad I experienced it, cause I think it made me realize that 'hey it could end, it's not always going to be there.' I think it actually helped me out. I came back and I actually think I'm playing better now, than I did before."

Mathis worked hard to regain his form and actually emerged stronger than ever. After his incredible sophomore season, he became a marked man in every match. The pressure could get to some players, but Mathis didn't let it bother him.

"I really don't look at it as being any pressure situation towards me because I only can do what I can and I don't think coach, or anybody like that, expects anything more than I can do," Mathis said.

"He's definitely a first class soccer player. He's definitely a few levels above a lot of players," senior Robbie Pait said. "When you have someone out there playing at his ability, it makes their play pick up a great deal as well."

This ability enabled Mathis to be selected to the World University Games. Mathis played this summer in a game against Italy, in which approximately 21,000 people watched him.

When Mathis came back for his senior season, he discussed moving to more of a defensive role. This would seem absurd to anyone who knows of his offensive capabilities, however Mathis' attitude was one of doing what's best for the team.

"He was very very open, and very very ready to do whatever we asked from a team standpoint, and I think that was a really important thing this year, was that Clint never batted an eyelash when we said Clint we need you to organize the mid-field, we need you to solidify things, we need you to win balls and distribute them and come forward," Berson said. "He never said 'hey you know I scored 25 goals as a sophomore, I should be up front.' He never once said anything except 'I want to do whatever it takes for the team to be successful.'"

"I didn't mind because at that time, that's what the team needed, and so it didn't bother me one bit to go back there," Mathis said. "I actually like it a lot."

Mathis is now heading into the NCAA Tournament. This experience will be bitter-sweet however, due to Mathis' departure from the South Carolina soccer program.

Mathis' career has been much more than scoring goals. He has developed friendships that will last a lifetime.

"He's a really special type of player. Ever since I've been here, he's just been a great friend," sophomore Hans Whetstone said. "He's just a nice guy."

"As a person, he's definitely my best friend here at school and so I like everything about him," Pait said.

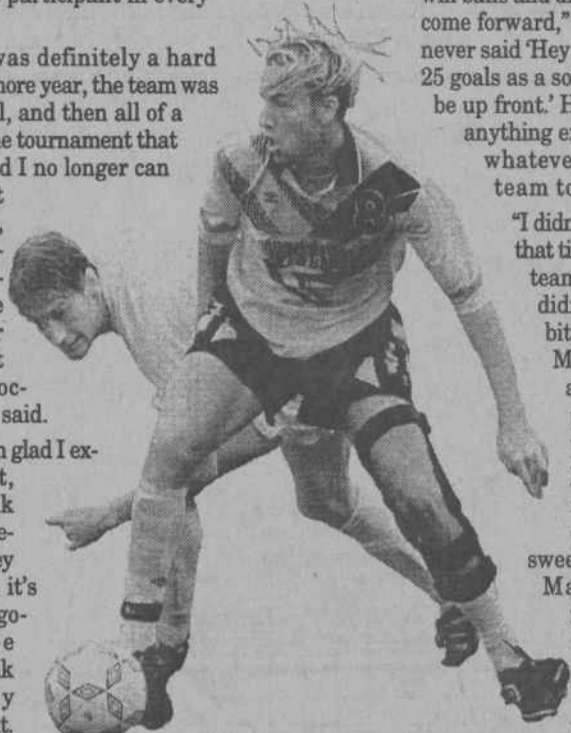
Mathis will miss Carolina, but according to Berson, will definitely continue at the next level.

Mathis has learned many things in his career at Carolina. The most important being life lessons.

"The main thing that I've learned through my four years is that things are going to happen and you just have to let them be because they happen for a reason," Mathis said.

"I've changed a lot from my freshman year. I used to always worry about things and how things were going to turn out. Now, I've learned just not to worry about it, just let things happen," Mathis said.

As Mathis' senior year winds down, his accomplishments stand tall, but his personality, selflessness and attitude will always remain.



Highlights, lowlights of USC-clemson rivalry

ACHIM HUNT Microphone Boy

Being the young age of 20 years old, my dad especially has told me how limited my knowledge of how this Carolina athletics thing works. He says I'm too young to remember some of the greatest moments of Carolina sports history, and more importantly some of the worst.

He says the loss to Coppin State in basketball or the softball team's bad luck out in Oklahoma City last May were all signs of the dreaded "Chicken Curse."

For those of you out there not acquainted with the "Chicken Curse" I'll take just a minute to explain.

In the early 1900s when USC was just establishing its athletic program, former South Carolina Governor "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman wanted USC to start teaching agriculture and military skills to its students. When USC wouldn't do it, he took his idea to clemson and as a final act declared a curse on the newly named "Fighting Gamecocks" of USC.

He cursed our school to a life of mediocrity in athletics, and also to always be second best to clemson. And clemson does hold a 21-game lead in the all-time series heading into Saturday's game with the Tigers.

But, even though the Gamecocks are 21 games behind the Tigers, and have suffered through the dreads of the "Chicken Curse," there have been several good moments and bad moments in the rivalry.

And since my dad says my knowledge of the rivalry is limited, which it is to an extent, the only moments I'll recall are ones I experienced in person.

To get them out the way, a few of the bad moments:

1. The worst game I ever saw in the rivalry was the 1989 clemson game in Columbia when senior quarterback Todd Ellis was out of the game with a broken leg. The Gamecocks could muster absolutely nothing in the game offensively behind the quarterbacking of defensive back-turned-QB Dickie Demais.

And on top of the poor offensive showing, the Gamecock defense was run all over by future NFL star Terry Allen. The Tigers won that game on national TV in Sparky Woods' clemson rivalry debut 45-0.

2. The second moment happened my freshman year in Columbia also, when after three quarters the Gamecocks and the Tigers were tied at 17. But, Emory Smith and Raymond Preister ran wild for the Tigers in the fourth quarter, and the Tigers won going away 38-17.

3. The other final bad moment I've had to sit through is the 1986 game, when head coaches Joe Morrison and Danny Ford led their teams into one of the hardest fought football games I've

ever seen. The teams were so similar they played to a 21-21 tie.

Now, I don't have a sister, but the feeling I had after that game would be the same feeling I would have if I ever kissed her.

But, now some good moments I remember in the Carolina/clemson rivalry:

1. My most fond memory would have to be a tie between the 1987 game and the 1994 edition. The 1987 game was a night game at Williams-Brice and was nationally televised. Carolina was headed for the Gator Bowl, clemson for the Citrus.

The game was close for the first half, but the Gamecocks, behind the passing combination of Todd Ellis and Sterling Sharpe, took control of the game in the third quarter. Then in the fourth, defensive back Brad Edwards took an interception back for a touchdown to seal the 20-7 win.

When Edwards was running that ball back to the end zone, Williams-Brice was as loud as I've ever heard it. Then, as the game ended, the students stormed the field and tore down the goal posts. That's the only game I can remember Carolina fans ever tearing down the goal posts.

The 1994 game was Head Coach Brad Scott's first at the helm of the Gamecocks and featured the second-half kickoff return when Brandon Bennett caught the ball and started to run up the field before he stopped and threw the ball all the way across the field to Reggie Richardson, who raced all the way to the clemson six-yard line.

The Gamecocks were never again challenged in the game, and they won going away 33-7.

2. Last year's game in clemson was great as well. After clemson took a four-point lead late in the fourth quarter, the Gamecocks took charge and scored two quick touchdowns by Troy Hambrick.

The Gamecocks led 34-17, and the fans were already starting to use their bragging rights for the next year. But, Nealson Greene marched the Tigers down the field not once, not twice, but three times in the last five minutes of the game to bring the Tigers to within three points at 34-31.

But, clemson kicker Matt Padgett's field goal attempt sailed wide left as time expired, and the Gamecocks hung on for a 34-31 victory in clemson on ESPN2.

This year's game will have the same starting time of 6 p.m. and the same national television coverage by ESPN2 as last year's game against the Tigers. If this year's game is as similar on the field, then Carolina fans will be in for a great treat this weekend, and I'll have one more game to add to my article next year.

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