

Spring back into action

Whiteside healthy, Boyd back
as Spurrier's team begins training

Tom Benning
STAFF WRITER

It was a short out route to the right side. Quarterback Blake Mitchell got the ball to Noah Whiteside, and the receiver turned up the field for a big gain. It was no big deal on the second day of spring practice, except for one thing — Whiteside felt no pain.

"My ankle is just feeling real good," the rising senior said. "I'm feeling a lot better than last season. The injury had me down a little bit."

Last season, Whiteside was supposed to be a key cog in the Cock 'n Fire offense, and in USC's first game against Central Florida, he had three catches for 76 yards and a touchdown. However, a nagging ankle injury severely limited Whiteside, and he finished the season with only seven catches for 131 yards.

Already, USC head coach Steve Spurrier was seeing a difference in his wide receiver.

"He's much improved," Spurrier said. "He's 100 percent well now. For the first time, he's cutting and running like he did last year at this time. He's ready to go."

Other members of USC's receiving corps also had strong performances during the practice.

"We don't have a lot of receivers right now, but the ones out here are working hard," Spurrier said. "Freddie Brown made some catches today. Kenny McKinley had the day, though."

In both the passing

skeleton drill and the limited scrimmage, McKinley routinely got open and seemed to establish himself as the No. 2 receiver behind All-American Sidney Rice. After the practice, McKinley expressed his excitement about the opportunity to continue to play alongside Rice.

"It's fun because we know Sidney is going to do his thing," he said. "When teams start getting on him, there is going to be more pressure on us to come out and show up. I think all of us backup receivers need to step our game up to help everybody else."

Rice has received a lot of attention after his record-breaking freshman season, including an appearance in the "Next" issue of "ESPN The Magazine." When asked if the receivers teased Rice about his celebrity status, McKinley laughed and shook his head.

"Naw, that's my boy; that's my big brother," he said. "He helps me out in everything I do, so when he does good stuff, look out for us."

Notes

1. While Mitchell was clearly the No. 1 QB, Tommy Beecher and Cade Thompson also got numerous opportunities under center. McKinley gave his analysis: "All of those boys are looking good. They're all doing some competing out there. I tip my hat off to all of them."

2. After losing a lot of linemen and linebackers

SPRING ● 15

NCAA pool tips get you at least 2nd

Bank on UNC, Duke,
Gonzaga in tourney;
Air Force lacks power

I know my way around an NCAA bracket like my Mom knows her way around Ann Taylor Loft. It's almost like a sixth sense.



JAKE
BROOM
Third-year
political
science
student

If you make smart picks and heed these simple suggestions, maybe you can be like me and come in second in the office pool to the girl who made her picks based on uniform colors and predicted West Virginia's tournament run last year because Mike Gansey "has a pretty smile," and Kevin Pittsnogle "has a neat last name." Yes, I am still bitter, but let's move on.

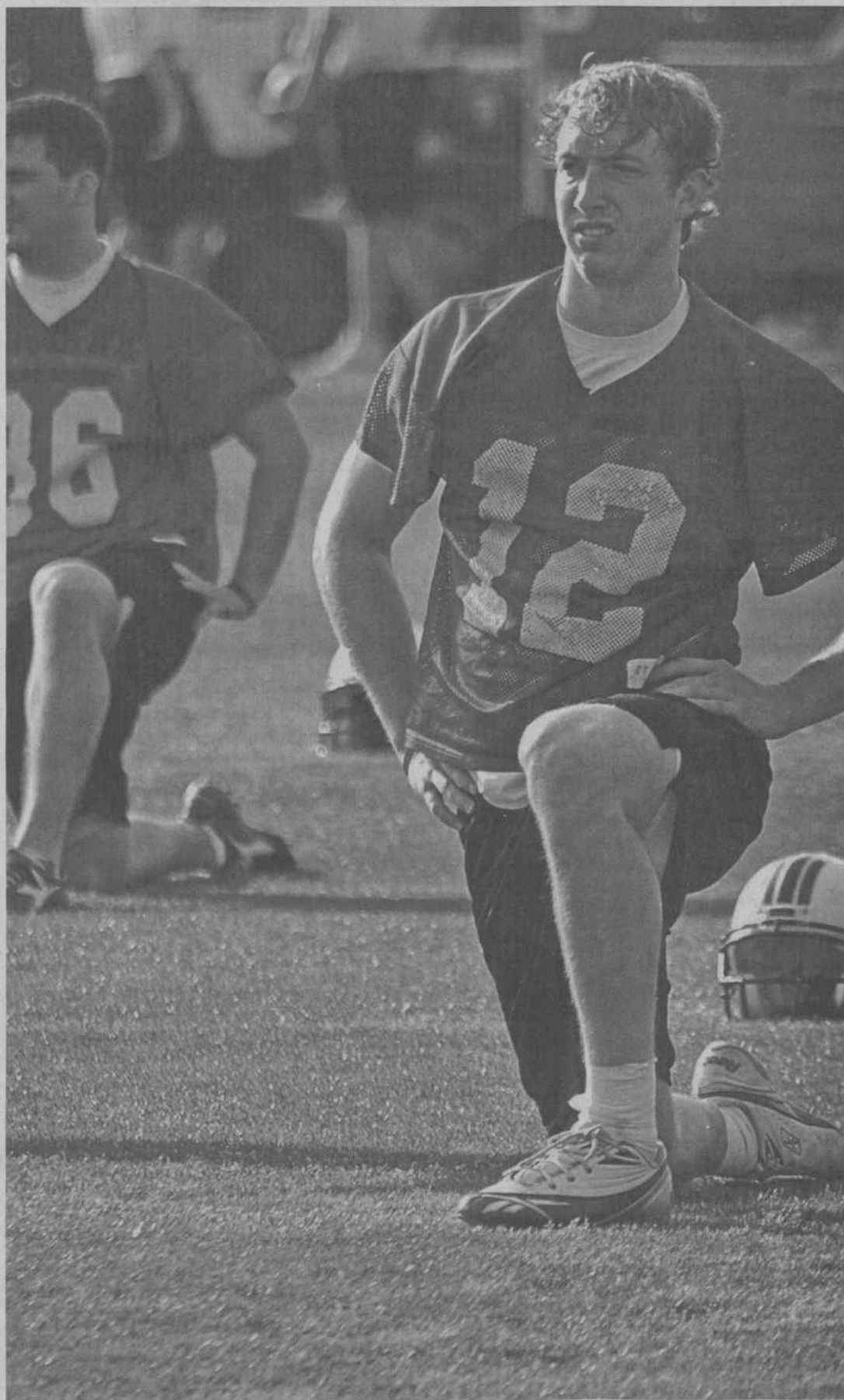
I don't care how goofy they look, never underestimate North Carolina's Tyler Hansbrough and Wes Miller. Forget the fact that Miller is listed at 5-foot-11, and that measurement was taken before he decided to become a hunchback; the guy is hitting 3-pointers with roughly the same accuracy as the birds over the Gervais Street bridge long-distance pooping on the hood of my car. Ignore the fact that the mouth-breathing Hansbrough plays entire games with the "No, really, I could throw up at any moment" face. If these two guys both have a good night at the same time, North Carolina can beat any team in the tournament.

Duke's Josh McRoberts is slowly morphing into Chris "The Birdman" Andersen right before our eyes. His shooting percentage climbs about five points every time he plays because all he does is dunk on people. I keep waiting for him to dunk on somebody, flap his hands like wings and give the patented "watch the Birdman fly!" routine to the camera. I'm not even sure if Coach K would be angry. If he continues to contribute the way that he did in the ACC Tournament, Duke will be in the Final Four easily.

Even Tennessee doesn't think Tennessee should be a No. 2 seed. During the selection show, there was a great shot of Tennessee Coach Bruce Pearl sitting there with a fantastic "Wait, seriously? Are you sure this isn't the women's bracket I'm looking at here? We're a No. 2 seed? Really?" glow about him.

The Volunteers will likely struggle with Winthrop, and if they make it to the Sweet 16 there is a potential Tyler Hansbrough versus Major Wingate matchup in the making. I think this tells you all you need to know

BROOM ● 15



Juan Blas / THE GAMECOCK

USC quarterback Blake Mitchell stretches before drills Tuesday. Mitchell enters spring practice first on the depth chart and has a healthy Noah Whiteside to throw to.

Gamecocks ready to defend NIT title



Katy Blalock / THE GAMECOCK

USC forward Renaldo Balkman and the Gamecocks will defend their 2005 NIT title today as the No. 3 seed.

Western Kentucky visits Columbia
as seniors try to leave on high note

Matt Moore
THE GAMECOCK

USC coach Dave Odom did not come into this season looking to defend the National Invitational Tournament title. Now, it is his one and only goal for his basketball team.

Eight players remain from last year's NIT-championship team, and the entire squad experienced a near miss in this season's Southeastern Conference Tournament. They won't get to use their experience in the NCAA Tournament, but becoming NIT champion is no small task.

"When you put down goals that you have, and things that you want to do, and things that you want to accomplish, [going to the NIT] was not something that we put down and said we're going to get this done," Odom said Monday morning. "Our job right now is to do well with what we have available to us, and that is what we're going to do."

Odom said he will look to the seniors to get motivated

for another run, and this shouldn't be difficult for senior guard Tarence Kinsey.

Kinsey hit the game-winning shot at the buzzer of last year's NIT championship game, and he has become a vocal and statistical leader for this year's team. Kinsey finished eighth in the SEC, averaging 15.3 ppg — a team high. He also became one of the SEC's best free throw shooters by improving last season's 65.5 percent to a team leading 66.7 percent.

"It is easy to say that you've been there and you've done that, but if you're a senior that is never going to play college basketball at the university again, that takes up a different connotation," Odom said. "If they were to come back to me and say coach I'm just too tired, I can't do it, I don't want to go back to Madison Square Garden again, then I've got a different problem. I can't fathom that."

Guard Rocky Trice and center Antoine Tisby will join Kinsey in this final run as senior leaders. Trice averages 6.9 ppg this year

and is second on the team in field goal percentage at 51.2 percent. Tisby averages 5.3 ppg and 2.8 rpg.

"They're all three different, but they all three have one thing in common and that is they're seniors," Odom said. "Their college careers are all but over, and extending that one more day, one more game, I believe, is important to each one of them."

The Gamecocks (18-15) drew a No. 3 seed on Selection Sunday that pits them against No. 6-seed Western Kentucky (23-7).

USC has won three of its four meetings with the Hilltoppers and won the only meeting in Columbia, in 1979.

Senior guard Anthony Winchester and sophomore forward Courtney Lee lead Western Kentucky. Winchester averages 18.5 ppg along with 5.3 rpg. He was also selected to the Mid-Major All-America team. Courtney averages 17.4 ppg, 6.3 rpg and finished third in the Sun Belt Conference with 2.6 steals per game.

Tonight's game tips off at 7 p.m. at the Colonial Center.

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecocksports@gwm.sc.edu