Basketball - Part iii: Atlantic Coast Conference **[1]**

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Basketball

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Part iii: The Atlantic Coast Conference Takes Center Stage

In 1953 North Carolina's Big Four left the unwieldy Southern Conference to become charter members of the new Atlantic Coast Conference [7] (ACC) with three other teams; an eighth team was added later that same year. While the main impetus for the shift in conference alignment was to group the best football programs from the Southern Conference in a new league, in the following decades the ACC became known instead as the premier college basketball conference in the country. With the start of the new conference looming, UNC [8] determined it could no longer abide the basketball dominance of Case's North Carolina State [9] teams. Case [10] had successfully established a pipeline that brought the best talent from around the nation (and particularly from his home state of Indiana) to Raleigh, including players such as Norm Sloan [11] and Vic Bubas [12], who went on to become prominent coaches at North Carolina State and Duke [13], respectively. UNC responded in 1953 by hiring a coach who could establish a talent pipeline of his own: New York City's Frank McGuire, who left a successful program at St. John's University to lead the Tar Heels.

McGuire, with his "underground railroad" of New York area talent, took only a few years to build a program that rivaled Case's. Case's and McGuire's teams regularly played close contests on the court, and the two coaches extended the rivalry by taking sometimes pointed jabs at one another in comments to reporters. Local sportswriters thrived on the appearance of hostility between the two outspoken men, building them into personalities that rivaled other prominent sports figures of the day. The teams traded wins throughout the 1950s, with the underdog in each meeting routinely upsetting the higher-ranked team. But in 1957 McGuire achieved the ultimate success. Led by star forward and Bronx native Lennie Rosenbluth-a player Case recruited but decided not to sign-McGuire's Tar Heels finished an incredible 32-0 to win the first NCAA championship for a basketball program in the state, besting a Wilt Chamberlain-led Kansas team 54-53 in a final game that featured three overtime periods. Rosenbluth went on to earn first-team All-American honors and was named Helms Foundation National Player of the Year.

UNC's championship was a watershed for basketball in North Carolina for many reasons, but perhaps the most significant is that it helped cement ties between the sport and television broadcasting in the state. In 1955 public television station UNC-TV made a UNC-Wake Forest [14] basketball game its first experimental broadcast, shown on delay from Woollen Gymnasium in Chapel Hill. McGuire supported the experiment, which was also encouraged by Philadelphia-based sports television pioneer C. D. Chesley. When UNC earned its berth in the 1957 Final Four, Chesley returned to his friend McGuire for support as he quickly assembled a small network of fledgling television stations in North Carolina to broadcast the games from Kansas City. The broadcasts were an enormous success in the state, turning the UNC coaches and players into media stars. Among those who watched the broadcasts were executives from Pilot Life Insurance in Greensboro, who quickly arranged to sponsor a series of 10 ACC games to be televised the following season over the same small network. The network grew quickly in subsequent years to cover much of the state and region, which further increased the league's local media exposure and helped expand its popularity.

Recruitment of out-of-state players increased during this period, further improving the quality of the game and the national reputation of North Carolina basketball. Bones McKinney, who became the head coach at Wake Forest in 1957, brought two-time All-American Len Chappell to his program and led the Demon Deacons to ACC titles in 1961 and 1962 as well as the 1962 Final Four. From 1969 to 1971 McKinney also coached the state's first professional franchise, the Carolina Cougars of the American Basketball Association (ABA). In 1959 Duke University [13] hired former North Carolina State player and assistant coach Vic Bubas to become the program's head coach. Bubas recruited players such as Art Heyman, Jeff Mullins, and Bob Verga to Durham, and they rewarded their coach with three trips to the NCAA Final Four in four years from 1962 to 1966. But while Duke and Wake Forest surged, the programs at North Carolina State and UNC suffered a series of major scandals that resulted in NCAA sanctions. Case weathered the storms until 1964, when poor health forced him to resign only two games into the season. When Case left North Carolina State, McGuire had already been gone from the ACC for three years. In 1961, after he saw his program placed on NCAA probation for offering illegal benefits to recruits, McGuire left UNC for a position as head coach of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Philadelphia Warriors. By all accounts, supporters of the UNC program were eager to see McGuire leave, but few would have predicted the astounding success of their next coach, Dean Smith.

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