

Ex-Players, Fans Pay Respects To UNC Coach

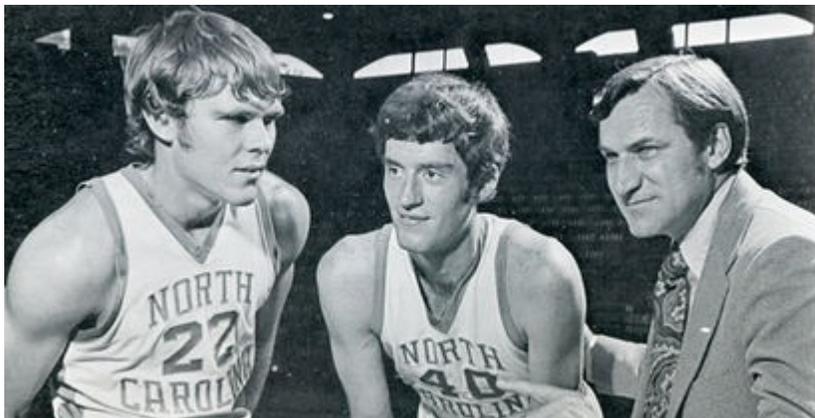
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By Aaron Beard

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CHAPEL HILL, N.C. - North Carolina has said its final farewell to Dean Smith.



Jamestown native Donn Johnston, center, is seen with teammate George Karl (22) and North Carolina coach Dean Smith in a photo taken for the Tar Heels 1972-73 media guide. Johnston, a 1969 Jamestown High School graduate, attended Smith's public memorial in Chapel Hill, N.C. on Sunday.

Photo courtesy of the University of North Carolina

The school offered one more tribute to the late Hall of Famer on Sunday, holding a public memorial service that gave thousands of fans, former players and coaching colleagues a chance to savor memories of a coach known for oncourt successes and innovations as well as off-court stances on civil-rights issues.

By all accounts, the coach would've been embarrassed by all the attention.

"If he could've anticipated this gathering today, I think there's a good chance he might've said, 'Don't do it,'" Rev. Robert Seymour, Smith's pastor, told the crowd. "But this gathering was not for Dean. This gathering was for us. He didn't need it, but we needed it."

Smith died two weeks ago at the age of 83. The family had held a private service last week, one attended by prominent names like Michael Jordan and Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski.

The school estimated between 9,000 and 10,000 attended Sunday's program lasting more than two hours in the campus arena bearing Smith's name. It capped a slow goodbye that had included pregame moments of silence at venues where the Tar Heels weren't even playing, tributes from opponents in games they were and even UNC running Smith's famed "Four Corners" offense to open Saturday's game against Georgia Tech.

Smith's pupil, current Tar Heels coach Roy Williams, said he hoped Sunday would bring closure to the

mourning but not the memories.

"Everybody has negatives, everybody has pluses," Williams said. "Coach Smith had more pluses than anybody I've ever known."

Williams then had the crowd point upward, a nod to Smith's "point to the passer" tradition of acknowledging the player who set up a basket.

Speakers told stories about how Smith fought having the Smith Center named after him, how he took his team to practice at prisons as a humane gesture to inmates, even how he sent handwritten notes to letterwinners after the birth of their children long after they had ever played for him.

"He coached you to be a better basketball player for four years," former 1970s walk-on Mickey Bell said. "He coached you to be a man for a lifetime."

Smith had kept a low profile in recent years amid health issues that had affected his memory. But his presence is still felt strongly around the program and attracted lines stretching around the arena more than an hour before fans could enter - a scene former Smith player Serge Zwickler documented with photos before entering the building.

Fans were also able to sign guest books with their memories of Smith once inside, books that will be presented to Smith's family.

Megan Porter, 24, drove in from West Virginia for the weekend and waited in line about 90 minutes to attend with her mother, sister and 5-year-old daughter Payton.

Gary Mattocks, 31, of Raleigh, stopped to write about the memory of watching Smith's 1993 team win the NCAA championship and said it would have felt "disrespectful" if he hadn't come.

"I think for most everyone it's not about seeing this on television, we all have some kind of special reason deep inside of us (to attend)," said Greg Bullard, 39, a lawyer and UNC graduate who drove from Lumberton. "Dean is Carolina."

Other speakers included former players Phil Ford, Brad Daugherty and Antawn Jamison, who played on Smith's final team before his October 1997 retirement as the winningest coach in men's Division I history with 879 victories.

The service attracted former UNC players and coaches such as Larry Brown, Kenny Smith, J.R. Reid and Jamestown native Donn Johnston, as well as longtime Smith assistant and successor Bill Guthridge.

Other notable attendees included: Atlantic Coast Conference commissioner and former UNC athletic director John Swofford; former Texas and UNC football coach Mack Brown; North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory and U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican.

Former Georgetown coach John Thompson, an assistant to Smith on the gold medal-winning 1976 U.S. Olympic team, was to speak but was unable to attend due to illness. His son, current Hoyas coach John Thompson III, attended in his place.