

Buffin moves up — and on to glory

By DAVID J. KUPSTAS

Staff Writer

If you ask Marc Buffin, he'll tell you that he often knows before the game if he will have a bad day on the soccer field.

If you ask men's head soccer coach Elmar Bolowich, he'll tell you that Marc Buffin rarely has bad days.

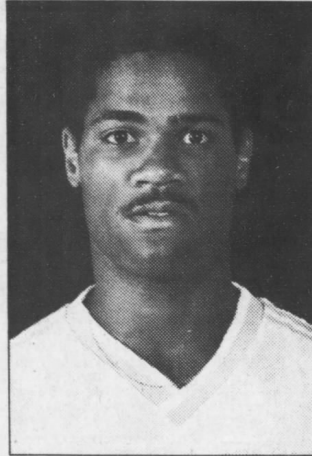
"He's a very consistent player," Bolowich said of the UNC co-captain. "There are hardly any games where you can say Marc Buffin had a horrible game. He had that in his freshman and sophomore years, but now he's a player that others really look for to play well."

Buffin, a 6-foot-1, 185-pound senior from Dallas, Texas, said he and Bolowich have differing definitions of what a good performance entails. While Bolowich expects Buffin to play solid defense and help out on offense whenever possible, Buffin wants to do more. He isn't satisfied unless he moves up and creates scoring opportunities.

So Buffin was thrilled to learn last spring that he would get a chance to move from the backfield to midfield this season. He played midfield alongside Chad Ashton in last spring's scrimmage games and continued to play there in the preseason and early this fall.

"I thought it would help our overall attack play to have Buffin in the midfield because he can distribute and play the ball quickly," Bolowich said. "He can support, he has a shot and he is good in the air. All these contribute to scoring."

Buffin responded to his new role right away in an early season game against Clemson. He moved up to midfield at the beginning of the second half and scored both goals as the Tar Heels rallied past the Tigers 2-1. He has netted three more goals since then to bring his career total to 11.



Marc Buffin

"It took a lot of maturity for me to get into this position," Buffin said. "Last year, they tried to play me some in the middle and it didn't really work out. I wasn't able to hold the ball in the middle."

Bolowich was comfortable enough with his starting backfield before the season to move Buffin from wing defender to midfielder full-time. The defense was shaky on occasion early in the year, however, so Bolowich moved senior Allen Higgins to sweeper and put Buffin back in the backfield as a central defender.

Buffin's position allows him to leave the backfield and help out on offense, especially in situations like the Clemson game, when the Tar Heels get behind by a goal or two. This dual role is similar to that of former UNC star Dave Smyth. Smyth, a Tar Heel from 1984-87, was

known for scoring crucial goals in late-game situations after moving up from the sweeper position.

"A person I really looked up to was Dave Smyth," said Buffin, who was a sophomore during Smyth's senior year. "Dave was one of the best leaders I've played with in any sport. When the game was on the line, it was Dave that sort of took it off the line and said 'This one's ours to win.'"

Buffin played high school soccer at Greenhill Prep in Dallas, where he was also a standout quarterback and safety on the football team. He chose UNC over George Mason and several small schools after visiting Chapel Hill on a recruiting trip.

"It was just a feeling that you know you belong here," the speech communications major said. "I knew I would enjoy myself and work to stay here. I looked into some other schools, but only UNC was going to hold my interest."

Because Buffin had to divide time between two sports in high school, he wasn't able to give his full attention to either one. Buffin thinks that playing soccer almost year-round in college has helped him improve steadily since his freshman year.

He started 16 of the 20 games he appeared in his freshman year. Since then, Buffin has missed only one start, a mandatory one-game sitout following a red card against Central Florida last year. His receiving a red card goes against his image of a quiet, likeable person. However, Buffin doesn't think he deserved a red card for his foul, simply grabbing a player's shirt to prevent an easy goal.

"It was ridiculous," said Buffin. "They kicked me out of the stadium — told me I couldn't sit on the bench. I thought it was pretty strange."

Bolowich doesn't wish Buffin would get a red card every game, but he would like to see him become a little more aggressive. Buffin's objective as a wing defender was to not let the striker get by him. He can now take more chances as a midfielder and open defender since he doesn't have to be concerned with marking a man.

"He needs to be more physically aggressive," Bolowich said. "He tries to compensate with athletic abilities. His athletic abilities combined with a good portion of aggressiveness would make him more of an impact player on defense."

Buffin's non-aggressive nature isn't worrying Bolowich too much, however.

"That's just his personality. You can't mold every player for what you want to do," Bolowich said. "He suits the team very well. He's a player that the other players can rely on."

Buffin has played a large role in the Tar Heel's post-season successes too. In 1987, Buffin scored the winning goal during UNC's 2-0 win over Duke in the NCAA first round. That win over Duke was UNC's first-ever NCAA tournament victory. The Tar Heels eventually lost at Clemson in the final four that year and at South Carolina in the second round in 1988. Buffin said he thinks the Tar Heels could go far in both the ACC and NCAA tournaments this season.

A possible obstacle in both tournaments would be No. 1-ranked Virginia, which scored twice in the last five minutes to beat UNC 3-0 already this season. Buffin said UNC would give the Cavaliers fits in a rematch because of the Tar Heels' physical, emotional style of play.

"We could probably beat anyone in the nation if we just played 90 minutes," Buffin said.

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