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Four Corners: How Unc, NC State, Duke, And Wake Forest Made North Carolina The Crossroads Of The Basketball Universe



Synopsis

Deep in the heart of tobacco country, the Tar Heel State brings out the best of college basketball: Michael Jordan, James Worthy, and Dean Smith; Grant Hill, Christian Laettner, and Mike Krzyzewski; Billy Packer, Tim Duncan, and Bones McKinney; David Thompson, Lorenzo Charles, and Jim Valvano. What these men have in common -- besides being legends in the world of college hoops -- is that they are all part of Big Four basketball in the state of North Carolina. For the last fifty years the Big Four -- North Carolina, Duke, Wake Forest, and North Carolina State -- have defined greatness on the hardwood courts. Nowhere else in America are there four schools with such rich basketball history and tradition located so close to one another. The four grew up within a thirty -- four -- mile radius of one another, and to this day, North Carolina, N.C. State, and Duke are only a half hour's drive apart. (Wake Forest, which had been located nineteen miles west of Duke University and sixteen miles north of North Carolina State, received a hefty gift from the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in 1956 to move to Winston -- Salem, 110 miles due west.) In Four Corners, Winston-Salem Journal sportswriter Joe Menzer chronicles the storied histories, timeless traditions, and fierce rivalries that have placed these four basketball -- crazed schools among the best college programs in the nation. In North Carolina, college basketball is not a matter of life and death; it's much more important than that. It isn't just that these teams are near one another geographically or that they're very good every year. It's the way the fans embrace their team and hate the other three schools that makes the rivalries so dynamic. Newcomers to the region find themselves forced to choose from among the four. You're either a Wolfpack fan, a Blue Devils fan, a Demon Deacons fan, or a Tar Heels fan -- and if you're not a Tar Heels fan, then you're an automatic member of one of the largest organizations in the state no matter what team you root for: the ABC gang -- Anybody But Carolina. Menzer traces the history of the greatest concentration of talent, success, and venom in all of college sports, He tells the stories of how these four schools established themselves in an era dominated by big-city schools from New York or California, of the ebb and flow of success that each of these schools has experienced throughout the years, of the point-shaving scandals and recruiting violations that periodically rocked the rivalries between the schools, of the numerous ACC and national championships these teams have won, and of the unforgettable personalities who led the programs and dominated the sport. From the early days of N.C. State's Everett Case and Wake Forest's Bones McKinney to the retirement of North Carolina's Dean Smith, from North Carolina's triple-overtime victory over Wilt Chamberlain's Kansas team in the 1957 NCAA Finals to Christian Laettner's miraculous buzzer beater against Kentucky in the 1992 Eastern Regional final, Menzer presents the sprawling story of the Big Four in an exciting and

dramatic fashion. The first book to chronicle the entire history of life in that area of hoops heaven known as Tobacco Road, Four Corners brings back all the memories that have made basketball in the Tar Heel State the force it is today.

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Customer Reviews

If you want to major in Carolina basketball, this is certainly the primary text. Breezily written, well researched, and rich with anecdotes, Four Corners solidly surveys a remarkable sporting phenomenon: the concentrated quartet of hoop dreamers--UNC, NC State, Duke, and Wake Forest--that dominates the ACC, and, for that matter, the NCAA tournament. Menzer, a sportswriter for the Winston-Salem Journal, tips off in the pre-ACC era of Coach Everett Case at State, and then looks at the teams and programs molded over time by such outsized presences as Frank McGuire, Dean Smith, Jim Valvano, Bones McKinney, and Mike Krzyzewski. "People can talk all they want about the Big Ten," says Duke's charismatic Coach K. "About Michigan and Ohio State and Indiana and Kentucky or whatever, but there's no way that compares. They're in different states. Here, we share the same dry cleaners." Four Corners carefully examines what comes out in the wash and, in the process, airs some pretty good dirty laundry. --Jeff Silverman

People in North Carolina have long been convinced that nothing else in sports even approaches the excitement of college hoops in their state. In this methodical account of the storied basketball history of the Big Four schools listed in the subtitle, Menzer, a sportswriter for the Winston-Salem Journal, details more than 50 years of coaches, competitors and roundball culture. He looks at modern

legends such as recently retired UNC coach Dean Smith, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski and Michael Jordan, whose high school principal encouraged him to attend the Air Force Academy instead of North Carolina so he would have a job after college. But tales of the schools' early histories provide the greatest rewards. Everett Case, the innovative N.C. State coach of the 1950s, was nicknamed the Old Gray Fox and was the first to make a spectacle of pregame introductions and to install an applause meter at his home court. His rival was the dapper UNC coach Frank McGuire, whose "underground railroad" of top recruits from his hometown of New York culminated in an undefeated national championship season in 1957. But as the programs grew, so did the pressure. Bones McKinney, a lanky Wake Forest coach who brought his team to the NCAA Final Four in 1962, gulped a case of Pepsi and, eventually, a handful of barbiturates daily just to try to endure the pressure. For all Menzer's exhaustive reporting, however, the book lacks the powerful writing needed to let the reader feel what is being described. Much like the stalling offense devised by Dean Smith from which the book takes its name, *Four Corners* is effective but less than thrilling.

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UNC-CH, NC State, Duke, and Wake Forest, the titular 'four corners' of ACC basketball, have won 50 of 58 (and 17 of the first 18) ACC tournament championships. North Carolina's spot at the center of college basketball universe was driven by the rivalry between the four schools. Both storied venues, NC State's Reynolds Coliseum was modeled on Duke's Cameron Indoor Stadium. When legendary Indiana high school coach Everett Case arrived to coach the Wolfpack, he looked at the bare girders that had sat since WWII broke and declared, "It needs to be bigger." Duke would respond to the Wolfpack's dominance by hiring a Case disciple, Vic Bubas, to put them on the map. Billy Packer went to Wake Forest in retaliation for Duke waffling on a scholarship offer. Beating out UNC-CH for David Thompson cost NC State a year's probation. Basketball really hit the big-time in North Carolina with the wild, wild west days of Everett Case (NC State) and Frank McGuire (UNC-CH). They opened up pipelines from Indiana and New York City, respectively, to bring some of the best talent in the nation to North Carolina. Case also worked tirelessly to promote the sport within the state (it worked--NC produces some of the best home-grown talent in the nation today). They, along with a colorful whiskey drinking Baptist preacher named Bones McKinney at Wake Forest, built teams that could play with anyone in the country. UNC-CH toppled Kansas and Wilt Chamberlain in the 1957 national championship game. NC State toppled UCLA and Bill Walton in the 1974 Final Four before going on to win their first national championship. It was a rough-and-tumble time: NCAA rules were bent and differences on the court were sometimes settled

by blows. The section surveying the early years of the Big Four is by far the best. Menzer has a storyteller's flair and plenty of stories to tell. But the later sections may give a hint why those stories were so good. *Four Corners* is by no means a work of journalism. Menzer is here to tell good stories, not get it right. He repeats a number of apocryphal anecdotes of NC State coach Jim Valvano, a legendary raconteur, as if true. He quotes Charles Shackelford as saying he was "amphibious" (Shackelford never said that; it was another one of Valvano's apocryphal anecdotes and V didn't even make up the joke). He says Peter Golenbock's piece of yellow journalism, *Personal Fouls*, was "quickly" picked up another publisher after Simon & Schuster dropped it under threat of lawsuit by NC State (it was actually only picked up by another publisher after the Raleigh News & Observer printed Golenbock's most salacious claims as if they were true). Menzer's desire as a local sportswriter to keep in the good graces of the reigning powers in the state may have influenced him as well. Describing the infamous Final Four incident, he says Duke player Christian Laettner "tapped" a Kentucky player (unfortunately for Menzer, YouTube is now available to show just how ridiculous his use of that term is). He fully buys into UNC-CH coach Dean Smith's "aw shucks, Old Well and education" routine (Menzer characterizes Smith disclosing information on the SAT scores of two Duke players, likely in violation of federal law, as Smith just "trying to do what he thought was right"). He describes the Cameron crazies as "creative" (they've brought us such creative cat-calls as "you suck"). But all-in-all, *Four Corners* captures the heart of Big Four and ACC basketball: outsize personalities, high-flying athletes, terrible officiating, a center of gravity firmly in the state of North Carolina, and a view of history rooted as much in legend as fact.

Four Corners is a thorough history of basketball in North Carolina--a very interesting subject for basketball fans everywhere (it is home to more dominant programs than any other state in the country)--but unfortunately Menzer's book is like the four corners defense in that it really slows things down. He is not a particularly good writer and his anecdotes often fall flat because he does a poor job of explaining the story. Another problem is that he relies on very few sources, so his book is terribly biased and its stories are limited. For instance, Menzer relies on Billy Packer to essentially tell Wake Forest's story. While Packer is amusing, he is arrogant and is only one person so Wake's history is not three dimensional at all and really doesn't seem particularly interesting. Despite these flaws, which would prevent me from recommending this book to anyone who doesn't love college basketball and particularly the Carolina schools, this book is a good companion for a fan and will give them some interesting historical context that will allow them to appreciate their team that much more. Also, it will provide some nice trivia for those who like to bring up obscure facts during

arguments about who is the best player, team, coach, etc. in the history of these programs.

To many fans of college basketball, the ACC can be defined most seasons by what happens within the confines of the state of North Carolina. With four teams growing up within 50 miles of each other, and each one featuring a host of truly unique and competitive individuals as their coaches, the North Carolina teams have continually dominated the scene in college basketball for the past 50 years. The book follows the story of Duke, North Carolina, NC State, and Wake Forest from their days in the Southern Conference to the formation of the ACC, right up until today. Each era is defined by the men who coached and played for each of these teams throughout the years. The book provides an excellent history lesson on what has become the center of power in the most competitive conference in college basketball. I have been a fan of ACC basketball for the last ten years and this book helped me to learn the history of the most storied teams within the league. If you are a fan of NCAA basketball, this is an excellent book and should be highly recommended.

There is nothing like ACC basketball. For those of us who moved to Tobacco Rd and weren't raised here, Joe Menzer's book is a must. I hadn't known much about the history of this, the premiere league in college hoops, and this well researched book with an abundance of anecdotes really helped me have an appreciation of it. As great as the players have been in the ACC, what struck me in reading Four Corners is how much the coaches have always played perhaps the dominant role in the conference. From the colorful characters like McGuire, Case, and McKinney to the intensity of Smith and Krzyzewski no other conference can match the ACC. If you are a fan of any or all of the Big Four schools you owe it to yourself to read Joe Menzer's Four Corners.

Does either the Winston-Salem Journal or Simon & Schuster have a copy editor? Does anyone know grammar at either place? Dozens and dozens of times, the author writes things such as "Duke continued their run" Noun and verb agreement, anyone? Then Joe Menzer has Johnny Green playing for Michigan State University on page 58 (yup) and for University of Michigan on page 139 (nope). About the same thing as writing Michael Jordan played for N.C. State. The book has some interesting stuff on the early ACC history, but overall John Feinstein has covered much of the material far better in a couple of his books. For ACC diehards in North Carolina only.

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