

Rion Brown (6-6, 195, So.). A smooth, smooth operator, Brown made more threes per possession than any returning Hurricane but Grant. He's not lightning fast, but he's a fine athlete who can get into the lane better than he demonstrated as a freshman. He's a tough, smart on-ball defender.

DeQuan Jones (6-8, 220, Sr.). Over the summer Yahoo! Sports alleged that one of Jones's family members demanded \$10,000 from Hurricane booster Nevin Shapiro in exchange for DeQuan's commitment to Miami, but Jones is still fully eligible since the NCAA investigation has yet to verify the claim. On the floor Jones is still mostly just a monster athlete. If he could improve his finishing or his mid-range jumper, he could be a real weapon for this team.

Kenny Kadji (6-11, 250, So.). A transfer from Florida, Kadji hasn't seen much action since the 2009 season. He's a dangerous shot-blocker and will be good for a few putbacks a game. He and Gamble are the best big men available with Johnson out, but it's easy to imagine a lineup with Jones at the 4 and Gamble at the 5 being Miami's most effective.

Julian Gamble (6-10, 265, Sr.). Gamble is a big man who knows his limitations. He won't try to do too much offensively (he hit 60 percent of his shots as a role player in 2011), but he's a load on the defensive end.

Bishop Daniels (6-3, 175, Fr.). Daniels is a 2-guard cut from the same cloth as Grant and Scott. He'll probably never shoot like Grant, but he is a jaw-dropping athlete who will be great for energy off the bench.

He's very much a high-volume shooter, and, if he can't learn to play a role his playing time could suffer.

Trey McKinney Jones (6-5, 215, Jr.). Newly eligible after transferring in from UMKC, McKinney Jones was a secondary option for a bad Kangaroos team in 2010. He made an impressive (for a guard) 51 percent of his two-point attempts, which means that he's almost certainly capable of contributing in the ACC. I'd be surprised to see too much of him, since that would mean taking time from Adams, Brown, Jones, and Daniels.

Erik Swoope (6-6, 230, So.). Swoope's probably behind McKinney Jones on the depth chart, but he was reasonably effective in very limited time last year.

Raphael Akpejori (6-10, 230, So.). Akpejori was a nonfactor last season, but could see time due to Miami's lack of frontcourt depth without Johnson.

Prospectus says: Miami has more proven offensive talent than anyone in the conference outside of North Carolina. Grant, Scott, and Johnson all have arguments as three of the top 10 players in the ACC. Laranaga's typically been a good defensive coach, and, if he can get his new players to take pride in his defensive style the Hurricanes could be very, very good. That said, I have consistently over-projected Miami since the Guillermo Diaz days, and coaching high-major guys uses different muscles than those needed for mid-major kids. A healthy Reggie Johnson and an improved defense would probably be enough to push Miami into the NCAA tournament.

North Carolina

2011: 29-8 (14-2 ACC), Lost to Kentucky 76-69, Elite Eight

In-conference offense: 1.05 points per possession (4th)

In-conference defense: 0.94 points allowed per possession (2nd)

What North Carolina did well: *Bounce back.*

As November became December, North Carolina was 4-3 and Harrison Barnes was remarkably human. Larry Drew was running the offense and looking shaky. Shots weren't falling. You'll have a tough time finding someone who thinks North Carolina was better than Duke last year -- especially healthy Duke

-- but the Tar Heels did win the ACC regular season crown, and they did advance farther in the NCAA's than the Blue Devils. That's not something many would have predicted in January.

What we learned in 2011: *Don't write off a struggling freshman.*

Harrison Barnes didn't look like a superstar when he first stepped onto the floor for North Carolina last fall. In all honesty, he looked like he was unsure about whether to believe his own hype. Barnes settled for jumpers that just weren't falling. He shot 3-13 from the floor in the 20-point loss to Georgia Tech that inspired the change from Larry Drew to Kendall Marshall as starting point guard, and his resume also included an 0-12 in a loss against Minnesota, a 3-12 in a tight win over Charleston, a 2-9 in an Illinois loss, and a 3-11 in a blowout over Evansville. I tend to believe that the two events were largely unrelated, but Barnes did blow up right after Marshall took over, despite more games and much improved competition. Give kids a little time to settle in before you write them off as overrated. If Anthony Davis looks human and has some struggles for Kentucky early this season, it's totally possible that a little confidence infusion would make a world of difference.

What's in store for 2012: In case you haven't heard, this team is loaded. There's an argument to be made that they have the best offensive player, the best defensive player, and the best passer in the country. They have three legitimate All-America candidates, and three more legitimate All-ACC candidates. If the No. 6 incoming freshman in the country doesn't start for them, I won't so much as blink. The Heels were regular season ACC champions last year, return everyone except third big Justin Knox and (maybe) the injured Leslie McDonald, and add two McDonald's All-Americans. They are, until further notice, the best team in the country.

Meet the Tar Heels

Harrison Barnes (6-8, 215, So.). In the section above, I mentioned the possibility that the Tar Heels have the best offensive player in the country. In a pinch I think I'd still take Jared Sullinger, but Barnes was pretty fantastic once he got rolling. He's a warrior, an athlete, a scorer, a shooter, a passer, a leader, and a tough defender. As Roy Williams said of Barnes after his shaky first game, "If I'm worried about Harrison Barnes, man, I'm a lucky guy." Anyone who leaves him off their first team preseason All-America ballot knows something I don't.

John Henson (6-11, 220, Jr.). While I'd take Sullinger (and only Sullinger) over Barnes offensively, I do think that Henson is the best defensive player in the country.

Henson's block rate last year actually ranked behind conference mates Ty Walker of Wake Forest and Bernard James of Florida State, but that's not because those guys are better shot-blockers. It's because opposing players are so aware of Henson that they pull up where they think he has no chance of swatting them, and yet he still gets to some of them. Nobody in the country changes shots over a larger area than Henson. As for offense all he has to do is make a reasonable amount of free throws (would 65 percent be asking too much?), and he's immediately elite. If he added another move in the post, he'd probably be elite anyway. Henson's also a great rebounder on both ends.

Tyler Zeller (7-0, 250, Sr.). The number of teams that would list Zeller as their third player is very small. Vanderbilt probably, Kentucky maybe, Connecticut as a long shot. Zeller may have more ways to get the ball from the block to the net than anybody in college basketball. He's smart with the ball, he makes his shots, and he gets to the line, where he shot 76 percent last year. He could probably be a better second defender for Henson in the post, and he could probably be a better defensive rebounder, but he's still good in both areas. The last time there were three players from the same school on the All-ACC first team was in 2002, when Duke provided Mike Dunleavy, Jason Williams, and Carlos Boozer. Something will have to change to stop North Carolina from landing three on the squad this year.

Kendall Marshall (6-4, 195, So.). I've been over this before, but I'm not quite as on board the Kendall Marshall train as everyone else seems to be. Marshall's a very good passer. Agreed, but I'm not sure I buy that he was the catalyst for the dramatic improvement in Barnes's game. And once you look at him without those glasses, there are an awful lot of issues. First, he turns the ball over a lot, to the tune of a 30 percent turnover rate in 2011. The biggest concern for me with the turnovers is that a lot of Marshall's game is predicated on seeing angles nobody else can see. His attempts to hit those angles are responsible for both his great passing ability and his high turnover rate. When those looks find their targets, they lead to easy baskets, but too often they don't. If you rein in Marshall's turnovers, you're left with a steadier (and less creative) guard, but still one who doesn't shoot particularly well, who isn't quick enough to beat most ACC point guards off the dribble, and who has some

serious defensive issues. Don't get me wrong. I think Marshall is a very good basketball player. But I think the national excitement will be tempered when everybody starts to pick his game apart.

P.J. Hairston (6-6, 220, Fr.). There's a chance that Hairston doesn't start, but he's too good not to be extremely valuable in whatever time he gets. He's a college-ready wing with strength, quickness, and a sweet shooting stroke. Everyone's biggest concern about North Carolina is their outside shooting, and Hairston will certainly help out in that regard. If he's ready defensively, then he should be the Heels' best option at 2-guard.

James Michael McAdoo (6-9, 220, Fr.). McAdoo should be better than Hairston eventually, although I'm not sure he'll be better this year. He could struggled for playing time, and he'd have to fight Henson and Zeller for minutes rather than Strickland and Bullock. Henson, Zeller, McAdoo, Barnes, and Marshall is a pretty terrifying lineup, but the Tar Heels' most talented bench players would then all be guards, and McAdoo may have trouble adjusting to defense at the 3. That said, McAdoo is highly skilled with the ball and a very capable rebounder and interior defender.

Dexter Strickland (6-3, 180, Jr.). Strickland certainly couldn't be considered a "hole" in the Tar Heels' lineup last year, but this influx of freshmen could push him to a rotation role. Very much a slasher, Strickland needs to improve his jump shot or take a larger role in the offense to deserve to start again.

Reggie Bullock (6-7, 205, So.). As one of the premier shooters in the Class of 2010, Bullock's percentages of 47/30/57 were surprisingly low to many observ-

ers. Lost in the small-sample questioning of Bullock's shot, however, was his remarkably low small-sample turnover rate, which (at 9 percent) would have rated in the national top 10 were he able to maintain it for the full season. In all likelihood, both his turnover rate and his shooting percentages would have risen given more time. Knee problems and lack of playing time meant he never quite got rolling, but don't be surprised if Bullock's the Heels' fourth-best player in March.

Leslie McDonald (6-5, 210, Jr.). McDonald tore an ACL in mid-July, and the consensus seems to be that he will be forced to redshirt. Nobody seems to be willing to write that in stone just yet, though, and so he must be mentioned here. In 2010, McDonald was the Heels' best outside shooter, but, even healthy, I'm not sure he'd be taking too many minutes from the four wings listed above him here.

Justin Watts (6-5, 210, Sr.), Desmond Hubert (6-10, 205, Fr.), and Jackson Simmons (6-7, 205, Fr.) should all be deep bench players this season. Another backcourt injury could force Watts into action, while a frontcourt injury would push minutes to Hubert and Simmons.

Prospectus says: At this point a reasonable person could probably come up with arguments for Kentucky, Ohio State, and Connecticut being better teams than North Carolina. At this point, I would have to argue that that reasonable person is wrong. Guys like Hairston and Bullock, who would normally get glowing "potential breakout candidate" breakdowns from me, are almost afterthoughts here. Barnes could make a Player of the Year push. Honestly, my biggest concern here would be Marshall, and nobody else seems to be concerned about him. Anything less than an ACC title would be a disappointment.

North Carolina State

2011: 15-16 (5-11 ACC), Lost to Maryland 75-67, ACC tournament first round

In-conference offense: 1.03 points per possession (7th)

In-conference defense: 1.10 points allowed per possession (11th)

What NC State did well: *Put talent on the floor:*

In terms of pure ceiling, it's tough to find a 2011 team that matched NC State's C.J. Leslie, Ryan Harrow, Lorenzo Brown, Tracy Smith, and Rich-

ard Howell. Former head coach Sidney Lowe was nothing if not an excellent recruiter, and if his teams had ever gelled, they would have been something to watch.