

AP file photo

Former North Carolina star Tyler Hansbrough grabs a rebound for the NBA's Indiana Pacers last year. Known for his toughness in college, a mysterious ear infection/concussion forced the ACC's all-time leading scorer to miss most of his rookie season. Some close to Hansbrough say it has shaken his confidence, as well.

# Is he still PSYCHO T?

A mysterious ear infection/concussion kept former UNC star Tyler Hansbrough off the floor for most of his rookie season with Indiana. The question now – can he return to old form?

**T** Tyler Hansbrough had barely been back in Chapel Hill a week when he stopped into Whole Foods last month to grab a bite to eat. While making the rounds, a random customer approached.

"Hey, I recognize you," the guy said. "You play basketball."

Familiar with the routine, Hansbrough politely nodded.

"You're from Duke," the customer continued. "Kyle Singler, right?"

Nope.

"Yeah, you're Kyle," the kid persisted. "Kyle Singler."

"I'm not Kyle," Hansbrough asserted.

Had it been a joke, he might have been more amused.

But less than a week later, Hansbrough was back in Whole Foods when another patron walked up, this time mistaking the former college basketball National Player of the Year for Travis Wear. Or was it David?

"I thought you and your twin brother were moving back to California?" the stranger wondered aloud.

"I just laughed," Hansbrough said. "What else are you going to do?"

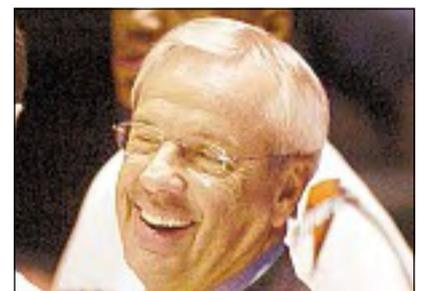


**Dan Wiederer**

Suffice it to say most knowledgeable college hoops fans would still recognize Tyler Hansbrough, the ACC's all-time leading scorer plus a four-time All-American and a jersey-in-the-rafters national champion at North Carolina. But last month's grocery store encounters were symbolic nonetheless for a Tar Heel legend whose changeover from college megastar to sometimes unidentifiable stranger happened quicker than anyone would have imagined.

Barely a year after graduating from UNC, departing as an icon and becoming a

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**Roy Williams**

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# Tyler

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lottery pick with the Indiana Pacers, Hansbrough finds himself fighting for his future, dazed by health problems that shook his psyche, disrupted his physical preparation routines and steepened his climb to NBA relevance.

Once worshipped as a relentless competitor who refused to take a day off, Hansbrough has instead spent much of the last six months in basketball purgatory, dealing with an oddly slow recovery from an inner-ear infection that was exacerbated by a concussion which was then worsened by the ear infection.

He has visited at least three specialists across the country, each trying their best to identify what's going on inside his head. But for a while, the unrestrained aggression that made Tyler Hansbrough Tyler Hansbrough was replaced by extreme caution.

Hansbrough played his final game as an NBA rookie Jan. 16. He won't join the assembled Pacers squad in the Orlando Pro Summer League. And he hasn't even been given the green light to return to

pick-up action yet.

So when the eager power forward says he has no worries about returning to 100 percent soon and insists he'll be ready for the start of next season a hint of skepticism creeps in.

How can he know for sure?

## A different world

It's not only salad bar strangers who have had trouble recognizing Hansbrough this summer. Jonas Sahratian, North Carolina's strength and conditioning coach, said Hansbrough's return to Chapel Hill for offseason training was initially far more bizarre than he would have ever imagined.

To Sahratian, Hansbrough seemed unexpectedly quiet and irritable in his first couple weeks back, a touch too anxious during the most casual interactions.

"There was a day that first week where I was sitting there like, 'Who the hell are you?'" Sahratian said. "It was honestly like we had never met before. He just seemed so worried about aggravating what was bothering him, so nervous about regressing."

One morning, Sahratian asked Hansbrough and former UNC star Sean May to do a hip mobility exercise in which the

players had to step over and around hurdles in complex patterns. Within a few minutes, fearing he might get dizzy, Hansbrough stopped and told May he couldn't finish.

May stopped in Sahratian's office later that day in a state of shock.

"Sean tells me, 'Yo J, man, I've never heard Tyler say 'I can't' before,'" Sahratian said.

The diagnosis of Hansbrough's condition remains hazy. When he was first sidelined just after Christmas, his ailment was labeled an inner-ear infection with frequent dizziness the most troubling symptom.

Then at the end of the season, after Hansbrough had missed Indiana's final 42 games with no one able to comprehend such a prolonged absence, the Pacers delivered a statement.

"Tyler Hansbrough is under the care of local and national medical experts regarding his condition that includes an inner ear infection and a concussion," it read. "Doctors will monitor Tyler on a regular basis and they expect him to make a full recovery. Due to medical privacy laws, the Pacers and Tyler will have no further statement."

Hansbrough has stuck to that gag order, unwilling to

share many details of his condition.

North Carolina coach Roy Williams said the early parts of Hansbrough's slide included bouts of vertigo, something the Hall of Fame coach is far too familiar with. Williams did his best to relay advice to Hansbrough and his dad, Gene. But the Tar Heels coach also knows how hard something like this can be to identify and keep under control.

"It's scary," Williams said. "I don't know that these specialists know what all is going on. We all want to believe Tyler's going to be fine and that he's going to play. But this was a hard, hard year for him. Here was a kid who through his whole life had barely missed any time. Here was a kid who had won every place he'd ever played. And now as a rookie, he has health problems, he's not playing and they're losing."

## Mind bender

Take basketball and training away from Hansbrough and you can imagine the psychological torture chamber that opened, so much unfamiliar free time to fret and agonize about the future.

So now this summer, in the Smith Center weight room in which Hansbrough sculpted himself into

college basketball's most assertive star, a new project is under way.

"One of my biggest goals this summer," Sahratian said, "has been trying to get Tyler to loosen up, to get him to come out of his shell."

Hansbrough? Needing to come out of his shell? In the weight room? Now that's a task no one inside the Tar Heel program would have ever fathomed.

On the wall of Sahratian's weight room office hangs a poster of a UNC-era Hansbrough dunking, the big man scowling as he throws down. The caption of the image requires just one word: "FEROCITY."

Yet for chunks of time earlier this summer, Sahratian admits he's wondered where all that intensity was hiding.

On some days, Psycho T seemed more like Timid T, desperate to figure out his new limits yet sometimes unwilling to push them.

Now as Hansbrough's stamina and strength gradually return, Sahratian fights a new battle, occasionally needing to convince the big man to press on through minor discomfort, trying to re-install the confidence and grit that meant so much to his success.

Still, if ever there is a place for Hansbrough to

get his mind right again it's at UNC, where the good vibrations are everywhere. Hansbrough has such respect and loyalty to Sahratian and most important of all, an unwavering trust in his training vision, he knows this summer regimen will be invaluable to his comeback.

Little by little, Hansbrough has shown encouraging signs of progress. He's already joking about how much of a mess he was when he arrived back in Chapel Hill in late-May and boasting about how good he's feeling now.

Two weeks ago, after finishing a set toward the end of one particularly grueling workout, Hansbrough puffed his chest and growled.

"Old School T-Hans is back!" he declared.

UNC fans sure hope so, the Pacers probably even more so. But until Hansbrough is back in action, some doubt will remain.

One thing's for certain. As Hansbrough's physical health improves, his ability to convince himself that "Old School T-Hans is back" might be the biggest step he takes all summer.

*Staff writer Dan Wiederer can be reached at [wiederer@fayobserver.com](mailto:wiederer@fayobserver.com) or 486-3536.*