

# SEPTEMBER SHOWDOWN

By Francis Kinlaw

Few season-opening contests in the history of Atlantic Coast Conference football inspire more memories than a game played on the afternoon of September 19, 1959 between the North Carolina Tar Heels and the Clemson Tigers. Under the tall pine trees that surround scenic Kenan Stadium in Chapel Hill, the teams put on a show featuring sentiment over the death of a great coach, excitement generated by the dawn of a new coaching era, competitive efforts by players on both squads, and a determined yet futile comeback by the home team.

The visitors from Clemson traveled north with expectations as high as the clear, blue sky: the Tigers had captured the ACC's football championship in 1958 and had given top-ranked Louisiana State a serious scare in the Sugar Bowl before losing, 7-0. The tussle with UNC would place the two preseason favorites for the conference title on the same field, since a protracted rebuilding effort in Chapel Hill had apparently raised Carolina's program to a high level.

Many of the emotions surrounding the 1959 opener were linked to the engineer of UNC's rebuilding process. Legendary coach Jim Tatum had returned to his alma mater in 1956 after a successful stint (and a national championship) at the University of Maryland. But seven weeks before the Clemson game, and only days after contracting a rare virus, the charismatic "Sunny Jim" died unexpectedly at the age of 46. The position of UNC head coach had been assumed by a 39-year-old Jim Hickey, a Tatum assistant with a calm demeanor and a smoking habit. The tension surrounding his debut and his tilt against Clemson would severely test Hickey's ability to remain calm, and cause him to consume several packs of cigarettes in the course of the afternoon.

Following a moment of silence in memory of Tatum and colorful pregame festivities, the Hickey era at North Carolina began before a capacity crowd of 43,000 that included a large contingent of Clemson supporters. Those orange-clad fans were concerned about an injury to quarterback Harvey White which had kept the Tigers' star out of contact drills for two weeks, and they realized that a subpar performance on White's part might be decisive in a close game.

Even before White's first snap from center, however, a wave of momentum swept toward the visitor's sideline Carolina's Milam Wall fumbled the opening kickoff and Gary Barnes of Clemson fell on the ball. After the Tigers moved the ball to the shadow of UNC's goal line in seven plays (a run of 19 yards by George Usry and a 14-yard scamper by Bill Mathis were the keys), White faked a handoff and dove two yards over left tackle for the game's initial touchdown. Lowndes Shingler's kick for the extra point was unsuccessful.

Clemson remained dominant throughout the first quarter by running wide around UNC's ends. The Tigers controlled the ball for twenty offensive plays in that opening stanza, with 18 of the twenty snaps occurring in Carolina territory. The Tar Heels, in contrast, never progressed beyond their own 42-yard line. Late in the period, impressive runs by Bob Chatlin and Bob Morgan of Clemson's second unit were instrumental in a ten-play, 43-yard scoring drive; Doug Cline covering the final yard with a leap over left guard White then added to Carolina's pain by passing to Mathis for a two-point conversion to make it 14-0.

With Carolina stymied on its next two offensive series, Clemson right guard Dave Lynn blocked Jack Cummings' punt on the UNC 20 and advanced the ball to the eight yard line before the Carolina kicker (and quarterback) could tackle him from behind. But, just as the Tigers were

threatening to turn this supposed “battle of ACC titans” into a rout through the use of a powerful rushing attack, they inexplicably opted to throw the ball on four consecutive downs. Those passing plays resulted in a net loss of eight yards, and Carolina regained the ball on its own 16 yard line. Lo and behold, the Tar Heels were still in the game!

Carolina again failed to put a dent in Clemson’s defensive line, but Bob Elliott recovered Usry’s fumble of the ensuing punt on the Clemson 35. Sparked by that turn of good fortune, the dormant Tar Heel offense suddenly awakened as Cummings threw a screen pass to end John Schroeder for a 24-yard gain to the Clemson seven. Two plays later, with time about to expire in the first half, fullback Don Klochak went over from the three to cut the deficit to 14-6. An attempt for a two-point conversion failed when a pass fell incomplete.

Clemson had clearly dominated the first half—longtime coach Frank Howard would later say that the initial period was “the best first quarter one of my teams has ever played”—but the Tigers from the South Carolina school knew that their margin of eight points could have been a 21-point advantage. The third quarter did not begin well for the Tar Heels, as Clemson received the second half kickoff and employed its reliable ground game to go 68 yards in 17 plays. Cline, Usry (who delivered a 12-yard run on a third-and-eleven situation), and Mathis carried the ball during this steady drive, which featured several third down conversions. Carolina’s defense grew increasingly stubborn as the Tigers approached the end zone, but Mathis finally took the ball in from the two-yard line on fourth down to make the score 20-6. A try for two points then failed.

Although Clemson had controlled the action for much of the third quarter, Carolina surged again with an 11-play, 83-yard drive as the final period began. Halfback Wade Smith kept this critical sequence alive by grabbing a Cummings lateral at shoestring level and picking up vital yardage, and then later found an opening on a 19-yard passing play which advanced the ball to the Clemson four yard line. Milam Wall closed the gap to 20-12 by covering the necessary yards behind blocks from linemen Don Stallings and Bob Shupin. Even though Cummings’ pass for two points misfired, the possibility of a Carolina victory remained. Within minutes, the Tar

Heels’ offense was rolling again. End Al Goldstein and Smith caught passes from Cummings, and Carolina registered a first down on the Clemson 17. Then Klochak picked up five yards, and Wall pushed ahead for three more. But Wall was stopped cold on a third down-and-two situation deep in Tigers territory, and left guard Larry Wagner then trapped Cummings on fourth down with only 3:28 left in the game.

But the dashed hopes of those wearing blue were promptly revived. UNC’s defense held, and Clemson reluctantly punted to the Tar Heel 44 with only 2:31 to play. Carolina had one last chance, and more than enough time to put together a desperate six-play drive. Two passes—Cummings to Goldstein for 11 yards and to Smith for 22—caused Tar Heel voices to rise, and then, with only 1:20 on the clock, Cummings found Wall open near the 24 yard line on the left side of

the field. The junior halfback who had relinquished the ball on the game's opening kickoff, redeemed himself by outrunning Usry to paydirt to make it 20-18.

The result of this important conference game--and perhaps the ACC championship--hung in the balance as left end Jim Rice ran onto the field from the UNC sideline with a play designed to produce two points and a tie. But defense ruled at this most crucial of moments: Cummings took the snap at the three yard line and passed to Elliott at the two, but the sophomore fullback was unable to elude defensive back Shingler and linebacker Paul Snyder. The Tigers then retained possession of the ball until the clock ran out, and did indeed use their hard-earned victory as a springboard to another ACC football title. The Tar Heels finished the season in second place by a single game, thus validating the considerable hype that had circulated for months prior to their clash with the team from the Palmetto State.

Following this emotional and exhausting game, Hickey told the press that his UNC team had played well during its comeback and that he was by no means disheartened by its overall performance. The new coach's acceptance of such a bitter defeat was undoubtedly influenced by his recognition that the level of the competition achieved by both squads had been truly first-rate. And realizing the exceptional quality of the contest, even the most ardent of Tar Heel fans departed the stadium that afternoon with a renewed appreciation for the traditions and entertainment value of college football.