

Dewitt's long journey back to UNC

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Too many stories that begin like this one end in failure.

Hotshot kid goes to college to play for big-time athletics program. But that kid doesn't play by the rules. Everything always came too easy.

There's friction with coaches, trouble with teammates, violations of team policy.

These stories end in suspensions. Or transfers. Academic sanctions.

These stories are about wasted talent and missed opportunity.

But not Christina Dewitt's. Dewitt's story is about rebounding.

A tough transition

When she arrived at the University of North Carolina, Christina Dewitt was full of promise. Tall, long and athletic, she fit the mold of a valuable interior player.

Physically, Dewitt always was ahead of her peers. The first hint came in her Myrtle Beach, S.C., preschool, when then-4-year-old Dewitt went missing during nap-time.

"Christina was down at the gym, and she was shooting the ball up and hitting the rim," Dewitt's mom, Debbie, said. "They had the little Fisher Price ones, and she would slam dunk those, but she wanted to make the ball go in the big hoop."

Dewitt developed rapidly in the basketball department, and she was spotted by UNC coach Sylvia Hatchell in eighth grade. But when Dewitt arrived in Chapel Hill, it was evident that her emotional development had not been keeping pace.

"She was struggling with just a lot of things about being at college," Hatchell said. "I could see the potential; I could see the good kid in her, but she just needed some maturity."

What followed was a decline that had led many to a worse end.

Dewitt was late for practices, struggled with her schoolwork, got into a financial hole and fostered a

team dynamic teammate Rashanda McCants called "dysfunctional."

Dewitt decided she was ready for a change. She sat down with her coaches and parents and made what she called a "lifetime decision": to take the 2007-08 year off.

To fill that time — and make some money — Dewitt would join the National Guard. Maybe the armed forces could instill that discipline and maturity she had been missing.

"It was really tough, because I wanted to help the team win a national championship that year," Dewitt said. "But also I had to take care of myself."

Basic training

While Dewitt went absent on the Chapel Hill radar and the Tar Heels cruised to another ACC title, many fans forgot her name. But during that year, she underwent the transformation that now has her ready to contribute in the NCAA Tournament.

Dewitt went to boot camp at Fort Jackson in Columbia, S.C., and then continued training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., all the while earning a paycheck.

"She said she was throwing grenades and crawling under stuff, kind of like you see in the movies," said McCants, who kept in touch.

Even for a gifted athlete, the National Guard was a lot to handle. There was the tough training and the no-nonsense drill sergeants. And, worst of all, there was the two-month ban on cell phones.

"Every day I just prayed," she said. "Different stuff comes up in the Army. I just kept feeling like I had to stay motivated for the whole process. If you don't stay motivated, you can't make it."

She made it. And the Dewitt that emerged from the Army was not the same one that signed up for it.

"I cried for four days after she graduated from basic training," Debbie said. "To see the confidence that I thought she was lacking and the maturity — she had to find that for herself. That's what all of this



Christina Dewitt took a year off and joined the National Guard. Now she's back and in the NCAA Tournament with the Tar Heels.

was about, was finding Christina."

Back where she began

Nobody is more active after a North Carolina-made basket these days than Christina Dewitt. The same player who stirred up trouble two years ago now runs up and down the bench, giving a double high-five to anyone with two hands to offer.

Ever since returning to the Tar Heels, Dewitt has taken on the role of motivator. Having been through the lows of basic training, she won't let her teammates despair.

"I say, 'Y'all keep your head up — everybody loses sometimes,'" Dewitt said. "'Just stay motivated because if you get down, you'll never pick yourself back up.'"

Her teammates and coaches have seen a marked difference in her approach, too.

"It's like night and day," Hatchell said. "She's on time, does what she's supposed to do. I don't have to check on her 24 hours a day."

In their correspondence, McCants emphasized that the Tar Heels had done a lot of growing without Dewitt and that she needed to tread carefully to get back in their favor.

But it turned out that Dewitt had done a lot of growing, too. And she worked throughout the year to earn back the Tar Heels' trust.

"You can kind of see where she would have made a joke at an inappropriate time, and nowadays, she won't," McCants said. "She'll sit quiet. And then later, she's still that same joking person that she was before."

With all the off-the-court issues out of the way, Dewitt can focus on the thing she loves: rebounding. On a UNC team desperate for a dedicated rebounder, Dewitt prides herself on her ability to come off the bench and clean up the glass.

In her average 10 minutes per game, Dewitt has grabbed at least five rebounds eight times, including a 10-point, 11-rebound double-double against Georgia Tech on Feb. 15.

"That's what I like to do," she said. "I like to rebound."

In a sense, that's what she's been doing all along. Where many might have continued the downward spiral that can waste away a natural talent, Dewitt found a way to rebound.

In the real world, they just don't keep statistics for it.