

BIG IS NOT ENOUGH

The Geff Crompton Story

By James Reston, Jr.

He was the most gigantic man I ever saw. Not that 6'11 was especially unique along Tobacco Row in the 1970s. The other big men for whom the coaches combed the high schools and playgrounds of America, were conspicuous enough, and, like so many other little people, I had gaped at them as well: Mitch Kupchak, 6'9", Tom LaGarde, 6'10", and the visitors, Tree Rollins, 7'2" from Clemson, Glenn Sudhop, 7'1" form North Carolina State, and several years ago, Tommy Burleson, 7'4" from NC State. But most of the big men were thin and lithe in those days and moved with light steps around the campus seemingly indifferent to their height, often amidst a gaggle of kids half their size. Most of them seemed to me to have been pulled at both ends by supernatural forceps, leaving them with spindly ankles and calves, and almost no shoulders at all, and they loped down the court with hobby-horse gyrations.

But Geff Crompton was different. His lateral girth matched his vertical height: Atlantean shoulders, a massive midriff, great log-like thighs on which he walked pigeon-toed. His hulk could darken any corridor in the gymnasium, as he walked down it, head bowed, exhausted, in pain, after a grueling workout to lose a few more pounds. He weighed 325 pounds when he arrived at Carolina as a freshman.

And weight was his Atlas-burden. The talk around town, amongst the basketball fanatics of Chapel Hill, never abated: if Crompton could only lose 40 pounds, he would be a sensation, as he had been in high school, where the differential between his size and that of his opponents was calculated by multiplication rather than addition. But in college he had to do more than just

stand there. He could be a star, the fans jabbered, maybe even, with his quickness and sure hands, a superstar. His feather touch on offense, his comfort in the big man's role as intimidator was needed on the Carolina team -- to spell the great center Kupchak and take over when Mitch got into foul trouble. But at 300 pounds, Crompton's problem was that he was good for only four minutes at a time -- his endurance gave out after that. For those few minutes, however, he was equal to any in the league. It was not only that after four minutes Geff had trouble getting up and down the court quickly enough, but with so much weight, he had terrible pain in his ankles and knees, and he was easily injured.

Geff knew all this. Day after day, he lumbered around the track to make his mile, and when he had made it, he would push himself that extra half mile. It was painful to watch. When they timed him in the mile run, in October 1976, it took him 9 minutes and 23 seconds, compared to five ½ minutes for the other big men. But his coach, Dean Smith, wanted to be positive. He would point to Crompton's quickness in the short distance: 4.8 seconds in the 40 yards dash. Geff had the best technical advice in the science of getting down to a comfortable playing weight, and the doctors said there was no genetic bar. He had tried Weight Watchers his freshman year at Carolina, when he was being seasoned on the junior varsity and scored nearly 20 points a game. And he had lost 30 pounds, bringing him down to 266 pounds, the lightest he had been since his sophomore year in high school. The summer after his freshman year, he went into the hospital under the care of the team physician for three weeks, drinking only Diet Pepsis, keeping his diet to 1800 calories a day, consulting with a dietician. Under that strict regimen, he lost another 15 pounds, but it was a Herculean struggle.

Then came the beginning of the 1975-76 season, a magnificent season for Carolina, after the drought of the David Thompson era at N.C. State. The Tar Heels took control of the ACC

with an 11-1 record in the regular season. Mitch Kupchak, the courageous Pole who came off back surgery to have a superb season, made All American, was voted most valuable in the ACC, and went on to play in the Olympics along with three other Carolina teammates. In June, the Washington Bullets drafted Mitch in the first round.

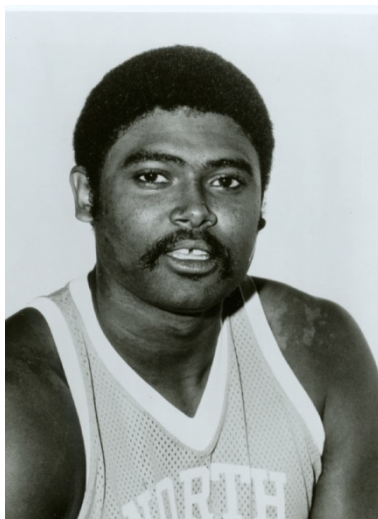
But who would spell Kupchak? In November and December 1975, to nearly everyone's surprise, it became Geff Crompton. In the first seven Carolina games, Crompton played in short and sometimes brilliant spurts. His sure coordination, quickness and good hands – the three chief values that distinguish one seven footer from another – were evident, and when he would enter the game, the crowd loved it, shouting encouragement for “Goliath” or “Honey Bear” or “Glide.” Crompton responded with 63% shooting and impressive rebounding.

The press began to talk of Geff Crompton “turning the corner.” Dean Smith praised his Number 2 center effusively, saying that on short duty Crompton was as good as anyone in the ACC. If only Geff lost another 30 pounds by December 1976, the fans would see a “really great player.” Still skeptics guffawed. To some, Crompton was too fat and was only using his weight as a hedge against failure. Others argued that despite his 7 feet, he played much shorter than that and was too slow. Still detractors said he was too dumb and could never handle the academic side of college life. It was a lot for an adolescent to bear.

In January 1976, after the Big Four Tournament, Crompton was suddenly in big trouble again. He had strained a muscle that extended from his knee to his thigh. He had two foot injuries and a bad cold. And in the second week of January, a box in the paper announced that Crompton had been declared ineligible. He had flunked a Portuguese course and received an incomplete in a botany course called “Plants and Life.” For the second time in two years Geff Crompton slunk home to Burlington defeated and depressed. The sports columnists said that

was the end of it and wondered why Dean Smith had stuck with Crompton so long.

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Geff Crompton grew up on Hatch Street in the black section of Burlington, only several blocks from the huge Burlington Mills plant, and the textile plant got most of his friends from Hatch Street, if they did not flee to the northern industrial cities. Geff knew of only one other Hatch Street buddy who ever went to college.

His mother, who is nearly six feet herself, would say that the “big-boned” people were on Geff’s father’s side rather than hers, and Eugene Crompton, a plumber by trade, was 6’4”. In the unhappy times when Geff was home from Carolina during the school year, he would occasionally help his father in the plumbing business, but Geff has trouble getting into “tight places” where plumbers go. His parents recognized early that there was no future for Geff in Burlington.

“There’s nothing for him here,” his mother told me. “Nothing for anybody really. People just go to work and come home.”

Geff enjoyed growing up tall. In the seventh grade, when average boys were 4’10”, he was 6’7”, and still climbing. When he began playing basketball in the 7th grade, the schools of Burlington integrated, but there were no problems at his school. Geff had known a number of public officials in his youth, who seemed to realize that his mere presence in tense situations

always had a calming effect. Geff Crompton has never been in a fight.

When the recruiting of Crompton began in junior high school, he quickly became one of the most hotly sought-after players in the country. He would hear of scouts in the crowd who came to see him play, and the letters began to pour in, followed by the coaches' visits. In high school, his team won his conference all three years and went to the State championships, losing

once to a Charlotte team, led by his Carolina teammate and Olympic player, Walter Davis. In his senior year, Crompton was cited as one of the twenty best high school players in the nation.

“In high school,” Geff told me, “I began to realize my potential. My coordination stayed with my height. I didn’t have to work hard at that, like, say, Mitch Kupchak did. Once I started to make a name for myself, a lot of people knew me, and wanted to do me favors, including the teachers. So I didn’t have to work too hard. My parents were going along with the basketball thing. Occasionally my father would complain to the coaches that I was having it too easy, but I didn’t pay much attention to it then. Now I know it got me into some bad habits.”

By his senior year in high school, Crompton had received some 500 letters from colleges around the country. He did not open them after a while, simply throwing them into a box in the corner of the living room. They came from as far away as Hawaii – “for a while I considered Hawaii, but it was just a dream” – and the coaches came to visit as far away as Cincinnati and College Park.

“Some would say right off the bat. You’re going to start. We need a big man, and they would discuss the other players on their team and their abilities. Some of the smaller schools, trying to get on the map, might offer things, the use of a car and such. But Coach Smith was different. He would sit down and talk to my family sometimes, when I wasn’t there, and I liked that. It showed that he wasn’t concerned only about me. On the question of starting, he said that I had a chance, but I would have to work very, very hard, and that appealed to me. I didn’t want it that easy.”

Despite his dream about Hawaii, Geff Crompton really didn’t want to leave his home state, but, his impressions notwithstanding, the coaches at UNC were not overly enthusiastic about recruiting him. The man-child was an academic risk, and Dean Smith prided himself then

on the high percentage of his players who graduated in good standing and went on to useful careers outside of basketball. He steadfastly referred to his men as “student-athletes” and pointed proudly to his “Dean’s List” students. His student athletes, he argued, were playing basketball, while other students were goofing off, so that the time spent on academics was, or could be, more or less the same.

In the Fifties Smith himself had been on an academic scholarship at the University of Kansas, where he played on the 1952 championship team. His sister was a seminary graduate at the University of Chicago, and his intellectual interest, outside of refining his four corners defense, was theology.

“I knew I wanted some answers and knew that I didn’t want the religion I grew up with,” Smith told me in his distinctive, flat accent of the Plains during the Olympic trials in Raleigh in the summer of 1976. “And so I enjoy reading theology. Kierkegaard speaks of the leap of faith. He would take people to the point of need, and then say, they can find God. He brings it to the point of absurd, like Sartre does, and then says, here’s an answer, you can choose it if you wish. Not that I read Kierkegaard and Tillich to help me be a better coach, no. It’s a process of self-searching. I used to play tennis often with a religion professor; he’d want to talk basketball and I’d want to talk theology.”

Some say that between his interest in theology and the adulation of his players, Smith took on the airs of a demi-God in the basketball culture. The coach shaded his private life and his private self – almost to the point of obsession – from his players and the sports writers, wishing to highlight only his basketball accomplishments to show: 312 wins to 108 losses in 1976. (He became the winningest coach in the nation in 1997.) He wanted to be known only as the nice guy who finishes first. Immediately before the Olympics of 1976, a box in the paper

announced that Smith had remarried, and few knew he had ever been divorced. Through the years he has stoutly cultivated the image of the family man, father of three, and while he had been dating his next wife for some time, no one could remember having seen them together in public.

If Geff Crompton did not fit the Dean Smith image of a student athlete, neither did Smith want to play against him, and in Geff's senior year in high school, N.C. State and Duke went after him. The coaches at State tried to sell their school not only on their basketball program, but escorted Crompton around their textile engineering facility, hoping that might impress the Burlington boy. "It impressed me a little bit," Crompton told me, "because my mother had worked in one of the mills, and she enjoyed it." But when Duke, the Princeton of the South, accepted Geff, UNC coaches felt Crompton's academic qualifications might just be good enough for them after all, and so UNC made a pitch.

Coach Smith's philosophy of recruiting was never to talk anybody into coming to UNC. He felt that if Chapel Hill was oversold, players later could get unsold, and leave the program. In recruiting, he simply laid out what UNC had to offer and hoped that the player would choose UNC cheerfully and voluntarily rather than be arm-twisted into choosing it. That was Smith's personal posture, but he lets his former players and assistant coaches follow with the raamatazz like the talk about what a lofty gentleman Smith was and how the great coach was really "too good to be true.

The other recruiting rule that Smith followed was that he made no promises about making the team. To the most courted prospects in the school ranks, Smith would say only that they had a chance to make the first ten on the team.

“If I promised you a starting slot,” Smith would say to the youngster, “what would you think next year, when I go after someone with your size and your quickness? What would you think I might be telling him?”

The formula worked with Geff Crompton, and he chose Carolina. Upon signing, the big man, Smith told the press, “Any time you get the best basketball player in the State, you’re pleased. We’re particularly pleased that Geff wants to come to Chapel Hill with his unlimited potential. We’re confident he will reach his potential here.”

Crompton was admitted as the one exception allowed under the ACC rules for a player with a poor combined College Board score and low high school grade-point average. When he accepted Carolina’s offer, the ACC academic standards were higher than the NCAA standards for an athletic grant in aid, and even the NCAA standards are bendable. Indiana All Americans, Scott May and Bobby Wilkerson, and Olympic player Steve Sheppard of Maryland, were all accepted into college as exceptions to the NCAA academic standards, receiving normal student aid financing rather than an athletic grant-in-aid. But at first they were barred from competition for one year.

The perks for the Carolina basketball player were as heady then as they are today, and the frenzy always starts with the scramble for tickets. Since the players were given several tickets for each home day, Geff Crompton’s phone rang constantly days before home games, and he could even expect dorm room visits from businessmen, often total strangers, offering to buy the tickets at astronomical rates. The players get tired of signing autographs after the first year, Dean Smith insisted, but there were better souvenirs. Olympian Walter Davis was excused from an English assignment in early 1976, because, when he went to the bathroom in the library, he returned to find all his books and papers stolen. Meanwhile, the ceremonial duties of the players seemed

endless: high school visits, banquets, speeches on such promotable topics as “the importance of education to an athlete,” but most of all visits to the hospital to perk up the spirits of “sick kids.”

Against this basketball mania, Dean Smith set down several rules for his entering freshman. But he imposed discipline only for that first year, hoping good habits would be established, and maturity would develop from there on its own. Freshman had to go to an enforced study hall at nights, had to show up for breakfast and attend class, and, unless parents wrote a letter to the contrary, they had attend religious services on the weekend. (He had only one letter in his coaching career, he told me, from a parent saying their son could miss church.) Each week, the freshman had to turn in a card to the basketball office, signed with an honor pledge, promising that he had abided by the rules. Smith talked endlessly, “until the players get tired of hearing it,” about the importance of getting a degree, and about the transitory nature of their notoriety.

“I tell them to recognize it for what it is,” he said. “If they keep their feet on the ground, it can’t hurt them. I tell them: enjoy it, but realize that two years after you leave, no one will know you. And I tell seniors to leave Chapel Hill, unless they are going on to graduate school: the old basketball player hanging around the place of his glory is sad.”

In Coach Smith’s experience it was the second rank of players---those who “are not coddled and fussed over”--- who had the easiest time later in adjusting to a job and to society later.

“They know what hard work and discipline is,” he told me.

In the first few weeks after Crompton arrived on campus, Smith sat down with him alone, as he did with all his new players. Geff admitted that he was scared and unsure of himself. The coach gave him the book, The Power of Positive Thinking, and “that helped a lot.” They talked

about setting goals, short and long range. In the short run, Geff would have to work hard, stay in shape, watch what he ate, go to class, keep appointments. They talked also about Geff's long range goal of playing pro basketball.

Even though Coach Smith had more players in the pros in 1976 than any other coach,--- Charlie Scott of the Celtics, Robert MacAdoo of the Buffalo Braves, Billy Cunningham of the 76ers were the outstanding ones---and the talk about cash deals for his standouts was incessant, Smith down-played pro talk. At the outset of a college career he asked players about their career ambitions: law school, dental school, or "if you're good enough, pro basketball." But he used this talk as a gentle motivator rather than a club.

"In the black culture, pro basketball often becomes a goal, and if a player doesn't achieve it, he feels like a failure," he told me. "That reminds me of that character in the Ship of Fools, the guy who said he was a failure in life, because he couldn't hit a curve ball. The curve ball took him out of the big leagues, and his life was ruined. That kind of immaturity you have to try and change."

But for his stars who were clearly headed for the pros, Smith broached the subject early. After the 75-76 season, he asked Phil Ford, Tom LaGarde, and Walter Davis, all Olympic players who had a few more years of eligibility left at UNC, if they wanted to consider being placed in the NBA draft early.

"They seemed surprised I asked. But I told them to feel free, if they see a chance to better themselves. It's so hypocritical of coaches to demand that their players finish school first, because they can always finish in the summer. You know yourself," he said to me, "that if the New York Times offered you an editorship as a sophomore in college, you'd take it."

But somehow, the ones who left early never seemed to finish their college education. A notorious case was Pete Maravich of the Atlanta Hawks who left Tulane on the day of the NBA draft with a month to graduation. Robert MacAdoo left Carolina a year early to join the Buffalo Braves. Dean Smith insisted that a \$50,000 bonus for finishing college in the summer be written into his pro contract, but somehow MacAdoo seemed always to be too busy in the summers. \$50,000 to him was not the temptation it was to most people.

In his freshman year, his “leading year,” as he called it, Geff Crompton responded to the discipline imposed under the Smith system. Since he was leading his junior varsity team in all statistics, he did passably well. He knew the price of failure. When he went home to Burlington, he saw what was happening to his high school friends.

“All they do now is hang around on the streets: working in the mill, getting off, staying around town, parked, sitting in lots, doing nothing,” he told me. “I knew I didn’t want that.” To resist the bad influence of these old friends, he kept away from them, until he could return to summer school. There, he concentrated on his courses. When summer school was over, he went in the hospital under the care of the team physician for three weeks, and lost 15 pounds. When practice began in the fall of ’75, Geff felt comfortable with his weight. He was enjoying the game again and excelling. It came as a surprise to him as well as to the press that he was touted as Kupchak’s first replacement. The roar of the crowds at his performance elated him. He began to dream about the pros again, thinking about it constantly, discussing pro contracts with the other players. The old bugaboo cropped up again: if only he lost more weight, he was headed for the NBA. The coaches weren’t saying that about everybody.

Geff’s academic load was mainly physical education and recreation courses, but he also took Elementary Portuguese, a notorious “slide” at North Carolina, even though it is not an easy

language, and a famous botany course, Botany 10, entitled “Plants and Life.” It was taught by Dr. Willie Koch, the flower child of the tenured professors, who has scandalized the traditionalists by agreeing publically that his Botany 10 was not exactly the most taxing course at the university.

“Of course, Botany 10 is a slide,” he told the Daily Tar Heel, “I wouldn’t have my name associated with any course at this University that wasn’t. I wonder whoever had the dumb idea of attaching grades to the process of human growth and development. Perhaps the first teacher was a caveman who quit hitting animals with clubs and took up hitting students with grades.” Sometimes instead of lecturing to his packed classes of 200 students, Willie had been known, allegedly, to show student-made porno films.

But “Plants and Life” and Portuguese were not exactly foremost in Geff’s mind that fall. While he was enjoying his return to basketball, the old pain had returned to his legs, and soon he began to “fall back into my old ways.” He attended classes rarely if at all, and while he knew that eventually there would be a crisis, “I didn’t think it would be that bad.” Someone would help him out, he thought, as they always had in high school.

When the announcement appeared in the newspaper in January 1976 that Geff Crompton had been declared ineligible, with an F in Portuguese for non-attendance and an incomplete in Botany 10 ---Willie Koch never failed anyone---Dr. Koch made a final gesture. In a conference with Crompton the professor laid out a modest program: “Here’s the least you can do to get through,” Willie remembered saying. Crompton considered Willie’s proposal for a moment in silence, and then let out a Goliath sigh.

“It sure seems like a lot to do,” he said.

Several days later, crestfallen and discouraged, he returned to Hatch Street to watch on TV in his father's paneled living room, amid his many trophies from high school days, as his college team piled up victories in the ACC without him, until his team mates lost badly to Virginia in the ACC Tournament, and finally were blown out ignominiously by Alabama, 79-64, in the first round of the NCAA Mideast Regionals. In that Alabama defeat, Mitch Kupchak had been soundly outplayed by another superior big man, Leon Douglas, who scored 35 points and went on to play with the Detroit Pistons.

Mitch could have used some big help in the Alabama game. His back had flared up again, and he knew it would be best not to play at all. But the pro draft was coming up, and Kupchak's advisors had told him it would go better for him in the draft if he played badly than not at all.

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In the summer of '76 Geff Crompton was glad to be back in school. His infectious smile, revealing that gap between his two front teeth, was broad as ever, and a small gold ball adorned his left ear lobe. He was retaking Portuguese 1 and a physical education course, and outwardly seemed unconcerned that the academic wall was getting higher all the time. He had to have several Bs to raise his grade point average and become eligible again. But in the first session, he made a C and a D: "It didn't work out for me as well as I'd hoped," he said. Already, another of Dean Smith's recruits, Keith Valentine, who had been another academic exception to the ACC standards, had flunked out of school, and Dean Smith vowed that he would now stay away from academic risks entirely. Geff tried again in the second summer session with a Sociology course with no better success. He had perseverance, but in the often cruel talk of Franklin Street, fans wondered if he had the inner toughness.

“Geff really loves this place,” one fan remarked. “He really wants to play basketball and wants to go to the pros. He has the potential, and if he could get the academic side together, he would never have to work a day in his life, unless you call basketball work.”

Meanwhile, the Olympics focused national attention on Carolina. Dean Smith was now the Olympic coach, and he was constantly having to explain why four of his 12 players squad were from UNC, and 7 of the 12 from the ACC. Most fans were sure that Smith would have to cut one of the four Carolina players for political reasons. The coach had hoped for more big men, like Leon Douglas from Alabama or Robert Parish, 7’1” from Centenary, but they were saving themselves for the pros. So Smith settled for Mitch Kupchak as his big center. To the press, he said, in a statement that should not have escaped Geff Crompton.

“International basketball is very physical, and every one of these teams seems to have a 6’11” guy who weighs 250 lbs. Our lack of size won’t hurt us on offense, but it will at defensive center.”

Geff Crompton was trapped. He needed the playing experience in the ACC to have a chance for professional basketball, but his image as a less-than-successful “student-athlete” haunted him. And Dean Smith wasn’t counting on him. It would be wonderful if Crompton were around in the fall, the coaches felt, because the team sorely needed a very big man in the lane. But if he wasn’t, Smith was prepared. Over the summer he had had the terrific recruiting season for big men: Steve Krafcsin, a 6’9” player from Chicago Ridge, Illinois, Jeff Wolf, 6’10”, from Kohler, Wis., and Rich Yonakor, 6’9”, from Euclid, Ohio. The publicity said they were all “good students.”

But Geff was still in a tight place, where his father said, he had trouble maneuvering. Education, Geff told me once, was like a crutch. You could always fall back on it if basketball didn't work out.

"I'm not worried about them," Geff said about Coach Smith's new recruits as he relaxed one day after his afternoon workout. "I've got experience over 'em."

POST SCRIPT: Geff Crompton finally got his degree from UNC in 1977. In 1978 he was taken in the fourth round of the NBA draft by the Kansas City Chiefs and immediately traded to the Denver Nuggets. He bounced around the NBA and the Continental Basketball Association (CBA) for a few years, playing spot time behind other big men. In 1984, his final and best year in the pros, he was voted the Most Valuable Player of the CBA, playing for the Puerto Rico Coquí. He died of leukemia in 2002.

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