

## Former UNC athlete fights paralysis

# Streater vows victory against toughest foe

By RICK WARNER  
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CHAPEL HILL — His hands, once the terror of opposing quarterbacks, cannot form a fist.

His legs, which once boomed a football 74 yards, remain motionless.

On his head, in place of the familiar blue helmet, is an awkward-looking metal brace known as a "halo."

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*About 11,000 spinal cord injuries occur each year nationwide. For a look at the spinal cord and the damaging effects of its injury, see People, Section III.*

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Only his smile is the same. Lying in his bed at N.C. Memorial Hospital, Steve Streater greets

visitors with the contagious spirit that made him one of the crowd favorites last season at Kenan Stadium.

Streater, a former University of North Carolina football star, was paralyzed from the chest down in an April 30 auto accident. He is tackling his recovery with the kind of zeal he displayed in stopping wide receivers.

"I know it's not going to be easy,

but I'm going to make it," Streater said in an interview last week. "Instead of giving 100 percent like I did on the football field, I'm going to give 110 percent."

Doctors say the former all-conference punter and safety may never walk again. But Streater, the product of a proud, athletic family, isn't buying that.

See EX-UNC, page 21

*Continued from page one*

Hanging by his window is a maroon jersey with his name and college number — 5 — stitched on the back. It is a gift from the Washington Redskins, the professional football team that signed him to a free-agent contract the day of the accident.

"I am going to wear it one day," Streater said, casting a dreamy eye toward the window. "I have all the faith in the world that it will happen."

The jersey is one of hundreds of morale boosters Streater has received since his car overturned last month on a slippery road near

Raleigh-Durham Airport. The walls of his hospital room are covered with get-well cards and letters, including one from New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner.

Other gifts include a hand-knitted football, team caps from the Atlanta Falcons and Baltimore Colts, and a giant card signed by the residents of one of UNC's female dormitories.

Streater also is getting a near-record number of visits from friends, relatives and former teachers. The flow of traffic through his room has been so heavy that hospital officials have

posted a sign on his door limiting each visitor to 10 minutes.

"It's been a big help," Streater said of his giant fan club. "I've gotten flowers from people in Los Angeles and San Francisco, people I don't even know. My high school coach (in Sylva) sent me a card signed by just about everyone in Jackson County. It's so big, I can't even open it.

"When you're down like I am, things like that give you an extra boost. I know I have a lot of people praying for me."

But prayer alone won't do it. Streater knows that the success of

his rehabilitation mainly will depend on hard, often painful work.

Twice every day, Streater travels by wheelchair to the hospital's physical therapy section. There, with the help of nurses, he lifts weights, works on his balance and learns the technique of boosting himself into a wheelchair.

Not even Coach Dick Crum's twice-a-day football workouts prepared Streater for the kind of physical and mental stress that paralysis victims must endure.

"It seems like easy work, but by the time we're done, I'm really exhausted," Streater said.

"It's hard to accept. After playing football all those years and getting knocked around all the time, now I can't even stand up. It just makes me more determined, though. I don't care how long it takes, but I'm going to beat this thing."

Though his legs are paralyzed, Streater has shown some improvement since the accident. Spinal surgery has fused the broken vertebrae in his neck and increased the movement in his hands, while therapy slowly is returning strength to his arms.

There is other good news, too.

Any day now, Streater is expected to be transferred to a rehabilitation center in Charlotte, where he'll be closer to his family.

Meanwhile, he will spend his time watching soap operas ("I know them all backwards by now"), doing his exercises and dreaming of wearing that Redskin jersey.

"I can do it," Streater said softly. "I know I can do it."

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