

Keeping Dean Clean

By Alex Kowalski

It's 9 p.m. on a basketball night in Chapel Hill, and all 21,750 seats in the Dean E. Smith Center are filled – with trash. Empty Domino's pizza boxes. Half-eaten Chick-fil-A sandwiches. Carolina blue cups still filled to the brim with soda. Stale popcorn kernels. Ooey-gooey nacho cheese dripping down onto the floor.

Someone has to clean this mess.

So when Tyler Hansbrough is icing his knee, Roy Williams is telling ESPN how his team demolished Boston College by 21 points and Tar Heel fans are rushing to Franklin Street, another team takes over.

They'll get dirty, sticky, smelly, sweaty and sore from climbing endless steps and hauling heavy garbage bags. There's nothing to drink unless someone finds a working water fountain, and the only reward is some leftover hot dogs and a \$15 check that usually works out to being just slightly above minimum wage, but they come out anyway.

They are student volunteers representing a variety of clubs, usually sports teams including rugby, rowing, and handball that need the \$15 check to decrease their dues.

They arrive in the last 10 minutes of the game when thousands of fans are preparing to leave and head to section D where their coach for the night – Chuck Matheson, the housekeeping supervisor for the arena – waits to give them orders.

“This year we had to rent a bus to go to Arkansas which costs \$6,000, and we’re also hosting a match that will cost us \$10,000,” says senior Rick Baker, vice president of the rugby team. “It’s a Thursday night and cleaning the Dean Dome isn’t high on my list of things to do, but we have to.”

Baker puts in hours of labor each week serving the basketball team’s needs so he can continue playing the sport he loves. His team, as well other groups there, competes on a national level and practices as much or more as the basketball players do. Yet they receive almost no funding from the school.

This night will be particularly arduous as someone has stuck Post-it notes reading “Score 1 For the Kids!” on every single seat in the Smith Center in an effort to generate funding for Dance Marathon. Most have fallen to the floor.

“That looks sweep-able,” someone says as the group waits for Matheson’s instruction.

“No, it doesn’t,” says another voice “They’re too sticky.”

With his back turned to the court, Matheson explains the process to students in his Eastern N.C. twang.

“We’ll divide you guys in two. Half you do the upstairs, half you do the downstairs. Put all recyclables in clear plastic bags and the rest in the black trash bags. Liquids go in the buckets. There are brooms and rubber gloves over there.

“Jesus, this is a small group” someone says, looking at the 20 people around him. It should take 30 people two hours to do the cleaning, but they will be slower tonight.

“Work as a team and you’ll get done quicker,” Matheson says.

The students will fill between 300 to 500 bags of trash with all the leftover debris. They first patrol all of the seats, grabbing trash, and then skirt the entire circumference, section by section, sweeping up popcorn and scraps. Each person works alone so there is little communication. It seems more like punishment doled out to juvenile delinquents.

As they begin to clean, the only prospect of hope is the occasional gem they might find. Besides the usual trash, money, gloves and hats, unopened airplane bottles of alcohol and cigars often line the concrete rows.

“I found a nickel!”

“An unopened bag of chips!”

But for all the treasures they might discover, there are plenty of more repulsive items.

“One time we found a loaded diaper,” says a small girl, the coxswain for the men’s crew team. “I hate a full cup of soda with ice in it because you know they didn’t drink it, and they paid \$5 for it. Nacho cheese is really bad too, especially when it’s mixed with all the other liquids.”

“The worst thing I picked up was a full thing of melted ice cream ‘cause I know they didn’t eat it and I could have eaten it, except there was a hair in it,” says sophomore Logan Eaker, another member of the men’s crew team. “Otherwise I could have at least grabbed a spoonful.”

But he keeps at it, seat by seat, undaunted by the hundreds of steps he must climb and the lack of amusement, because he needs the fundraising.

“It’s no fun to come in and clean up after other athletes,” Eaker says. “It’s 12:30 and I’m so sore. I came here from practice and I have to get up in five hours to go practice again, but you have to do what you have to do.”