

# Wait 'til next year

## Taste of success has Carolina looking for more

By Joe Macenka  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

While most sports franchises finishing their second season are trying to figure out how long it will take to be winners, the Carolina Panthers are trying to figure out how to win it all.

An improbable run that ended in the NFC title game left the Panthers with just one goal for the 1997 season: Go one step farther.

"We're almost right there," quarterback Kerry Collins said. "We'll come back. We're not done. We've got it going in the right direction."



Collins

The San Francisco 49ers and Dallas Cowboys would be hard-pressed to challenge Collins' assessment of the Panthers' development.

Carolina swept the 49ers on the way to winning the NFC West, a title San Francisco had owned in 12 of the previous 15 years.

The Panthers went 8-0 at home in the regular season and 12-4 overall, closing their schedule with a seven-game winning streak that helped them earn a first-round bye for the postseason and a second-round home game.

They showed no signs of jitters in their first playoff contest, a 26-17 victory over the Cowboys, winners of three of the previous four Super Bowls.

Carolina's season ended Sunday with a 30-13 loss to Green Bay in the conference championship game.

"I hope we've been able to establish a foundation for the future," coach Dom Capers said. "To me, getting into the playoffs and experiencing the playoffs is something that you can take and use to your advantage in the future. Now we've been there."

Carolina may undergo changes on several fronts before the 1997 season begins.

It starts with the front office. Team president Mike McCormack will be 67 this summer and is hinting that he might retire. General manager Bill Polian is a likely target of several teams looking for new leadership.

Carolina's coaching staff could be affected as well. Defensive coordinator Vic Fangio already has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the San Diego Chargers' head-coaching vacancy.

And free agency, a tool Carolina has used so successfully in its rapid ascension, is about to affect the Panthers in a different way. This time, instead of Carolina signing free agents away from other teams, the Panthers have a number of players who may attract the interest of competing franchises.

Among the Panthers whose contracts are up is halfback Anthony Johnson, who took over for the injured Tshimanga Biakabutuka in the fourth game of the season and responded with six 100-yard rushing games. Biakabutuka, Carolina's top draft choice last year, is recovering from knee surgery and is expected to rejoin the team in time for training camp this summer.

Other free agents include 37-year-old linebacker Sam Mills, who is coming off a Pro Bowl season but is likely to play just one or two more years; Matt Elliott, who played every position on the offensive line this season, and Mark Carrier and Willie Green, the team's top two wide receivers in each of its seasons.

Both Carrier, who just turned 31, and Green, who will be 31 in April, want to remain with the Panthers. But that picture is clouded by Muhsin Muhammad, who was drafted in the second round last year with the hopes he would provide a boost to Carolina's receiving corps. Instead, Muhammad was bothered by a variety of injuries as a rookie, limiting him to 25 receptions.

Capers prefers to look at the bright side, noting that even though Carolina's top two 1996 draft

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Green Bay running back Dorsey Levens (right) wrestles the football away from Carolina cornerback Eric Davis for a touchdown in the Packers' 30-13 win over the Panthers in the NFC championship game. Carolina's second season ended one game short of the Super Bowl, but hope springs eternal for next year.

PHOTO/WADE NASH

## There'll be some changes in 1997

By Karl Petraroja  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Standing still is the only thing the Carolina Panthers won't do in the offseason.

Season No. 2 came to an end with a 30-13 loss to Green Bay in the NFC championship game, but Carolina went 13-5, including a playoff win over the Dallas Cowboys. The Panthers front office and coaches want to build on this season's success, especially in the area of free agency. The team has 18 free agents, most of them starters or key reserves.

Carolina head coach Dom Capers realizes he can't keep them all, but he wants to keep the nucleus intact.

"I would like to keep the core of this team together," he said. "Many times you don't have a lot of control over that. I like what this team was all about, what they stood

for. I like their work ethic. For the most part we had a group that was on the same page, heading in the same direction and pulling together."

Among the 18 is veteran running back Anthony Johnson. After being a career

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All-pro linebacker Sam Mills, pressuring Green Bay quarterback Brett Favre, will return next season.

PHOTO/WADE NASH

## Hornets quietly improved over last season

By Karl Petraroja  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Charlotte Hornets earned a big 'D' as the NBA season nears the halfway point. That's 'D,' as in defense.

As for what they achieved, the Hornets get a B-plus, for a much better than expected showing at 20-16 after 36 games.

Charlotte has built a winning record despite a brutal schedule, blending in a rookie coach with several new players and a system built around defense.

Defense has worked it for Charlotte. It's turned the once-soft Hornets into a force to be reckoned with, especially when the game's on the line in the fourth quarter. Leading

scorer Glen Rice, who is averaging 22.4 points a game, likes the Hornets' improvements under coach Dave Cowens.

"We're a much better defensive team now," Rice said. "Anytime you're struggling on offense, you definitely need to rely on the defense to pick up the aggressiveness."

The architect of the Hornets' new commitment to defense is

Cowens, but on the court, Anthony Mason is the field general. Mason, who came over in the Larry Johnson trade with New York, has been preaching the importance of playing tough defense from the day he arrived. Mason, who averages better than 40 minutes of play per game, practices what he preaches and his

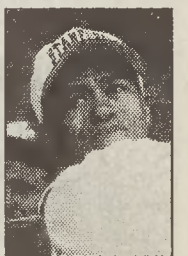
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## Tiger's tale grows

By Ron Sirak  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARLSBAD, California — Just when it seems Tiger Woods must surely come down to earth, he does something to show he's the real deal.

Woods did it again Sunday at the Mercedes



Woods

Championships, shooting a near-hole-in-one with a 6-iron from 186 yards to win a playoff with Tom Lehman after Lehman hit his 6-iron into the water on the first extra hole.

Both had finished 54 holes at 14-under-par, five strokes ahead of Guy Boros, who received third-place money, and six better than Paul Goydos and Fred Couples.

But a persistent rain made the La Costa course unplayable for Monday and tournament officials decided to make it a three-round event. Woods and Lehman played No. 7 because it was the only hole that was playable. They would have continued playing No. 7 over and over until a winner was determined.

The \$216,000 first prize gave Woods \$1,006,594 in career winnings in only nine events. Ernie Els had the old record for getting to \$1 million fastest, needing 28 events. And only Gene Sarazen and Horton Smith won three events at a younger age than Woods.

"It's a perfect start," Woods, 21, said about winning the first tournament of the new season.

Lehman hit first in the playoff and immediately took the pressure off Woods by hitting into the water. All Woods needed to do was put the ball on the green and two-putt.

He did much more than that. "Tiger hit a great shot," Lehman said. "Of course he had

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## North Rowan is N.C.'s track tower of power

By Brian Powe  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

SPENCER — What city in North Carolina has a high school track and field team that's won three straight state championships and produced three All-Americans in the past decade?

It's not Charlotte, Durham, Raleigh or maybe Greensboro. But, surprisingly, this particular team hails from Spencer.

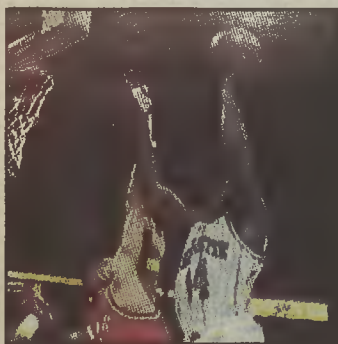
Tucked away in a small community that sits in the backyard of Salisbury, the North Rowan High School track and field team has emerged as the premier powerhouse of 2A track and field in the state.

Under the helm of coach Robert Steele, North Rowan was voted the top indoor track team in America in 1991. The Cavaliers have had nationally-ranked individuals who have ranked jumpers, hurdlers and sprinters.

"It is a credit to our athletes that we have been able to compete at this level," Steele said. "For those who want to become a part of this program, they must understand we carry a program with a rich tradition of winning."

"We have been fortunate

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PHOTO/PAUL WILLIAMS III

Anthony Mason has been a force for the Hornets.