

SPORTS

Blakeney learns net assets

By Herbert L. White
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Quentin Blakeney didn't always look like a tennis champion.

The Charlotte Country Day junior is one of the top junior players in America and the leader of the Buccaneers' sixth N.C. independent schools championship in seven years. Blakeney is ranked 53rd in the nation in the 16-under division

and the target of college recruiters who are intrigued by his range and power. He's come a long way from being a raw talent as a seventh-grader.

"Mainly I work real hard and I get help from my dad (Jonathan) a lot," Blakeney said. "He taught me what you need to do to play at that position. I was pretty skinny at first and he told me I needed to put on weight. My mentality was I had to start playing more aggressively."

That aggression has paid off. Blakeney has been Country Day's top player for the last two seasons and a major reason why the Bucs dominate private school tennis. He went 12-2 this season on a team made up mostly of sophomores and won the singles title by beating Robert Weidl of Bishop McGuinness 6-4, 6-1. He also teamed with senior Blair Easton to win the doubles title with a 6-7, 6-3, 6-3 comeback victory over Weidl and Zane Sharpe.

"These are two well-seasoned players, college-bound tennis players who have been working hard ever since they were 9 or 10 years old," Country Day coach Calvin Davis said of Blakeney and Easton. "When you've been competing for that long, you understand what it means to compete. These two boys answered the calling. They wanted to win in the singles and dou-

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Quentin Blakeney is ranked 53 among U.S. 16-and-under players. PHOTO/DIANNE V. CUFTAIN

Mailman missing for Jazz MBA MVP struggling to find game

By Chris Sheridan
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALT LAKE CITY - Karl Malone hasn't yet received a congratulatory phone call from Michael Jordan. Nor has he earned one with his play in the Western Conference finals.

Malone has been performing a notch below his regular season standard, and his dropoff was extra notable over the weekend as the Utah Jazz lost two road games to the Houston Rockets to extend the series to at least six games.

"I haven't played the kind of basketball I have to play. I'm due for one," Malone said. "Even though we've won, I haven't had the kind of games I need to have."

After grabbing only six rebounds in Game 3 and then complaining too few plays were called for him, Malone came out in Game 4 and took 28 shots, missing 18, and went to the foul line only two times. Many of his misses were layups or 3-footers, and some said Malone looked timid.

"I wouldn't say he's tentative, I'd say he's trying to be as quick as he can be because (Hakeem) Olajuwon is back there and he knows that," coach Jerry Sloan said Monday. "Maybe he got a little more reserved. If anything, he's probably trying to be too quick."

Malone scored 21, 24, 21 and 22 points in the first four games, an average of 22.0. That's a considerable dropoff from his averages of 28.6 in the second round against the Lakers, 30.7 in the first round against the Clippers and 27.4 in the regular season.

Malone's many misses from close range contributed to 14 missed layups by Utah. Sloan was particularly upset about poor execution on Utah's final offensive play when the ball was swung to Bryon Russell instead of Malone. Russell rushed a three-pointer and missed, and Eddie Johnson won the game for Houston on the ensuing possession with a buzzer-beating three-pointer.

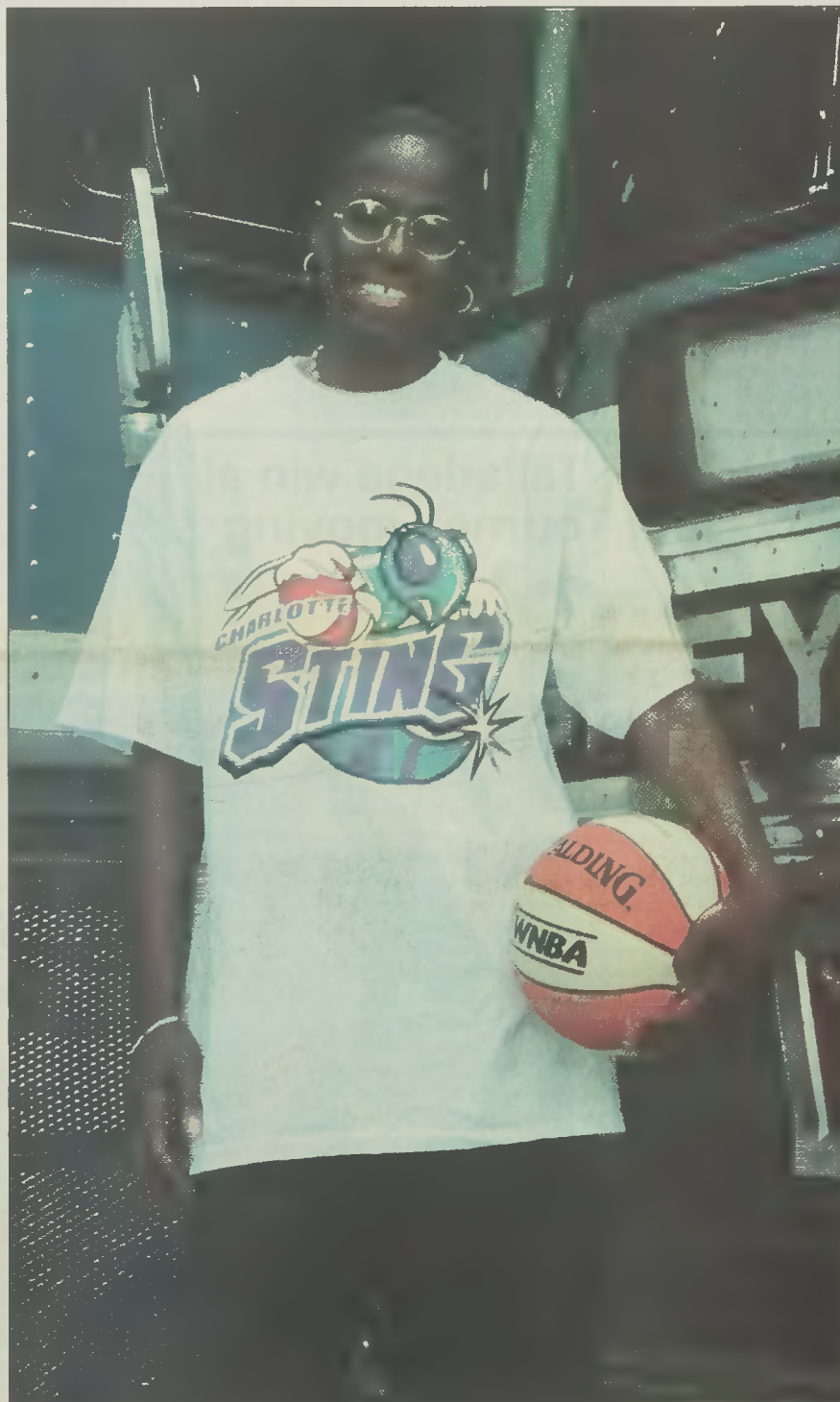
Because Malone beat out Jordan for the MVP award - and because many people think Jordan should have won - Malone's game is being picked apart and scrutinized like never before.

"He's been picked at pretty good in the past. People have always said: 'He's never won a championship, he's never won a championship,'" Sloan said. "But he has nothing to apologize for. A lot of people said this is upsetting Michael Jordan. Well Karl didn't vote for himself, and nobody in our organization disrespected Michael Jordan."

Malone wasn't sharing any new thoughts after practice

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The longest shot



PHOTO/HERBERT L. WHITE

Katasha Artis parlayed \$144 and a 14-hour bus ride from New York to Charlotte into a job as Charlotte Sting forward. The former Northeastern star averaged 25 points per game as a collegian, but couldn't get a tryout with her hometown New York Liberty, Charlotte's WNBA rival.

Artis realizes WNBA dream

By Herbert L. White
THE CHARLOTTE POST

A \$144 gamble paid off for Katasha Artis.

The Charlotte Sting forward couldn't afford air fare to the team's open tryouts earlier this month and couldn't convince anyone to help her drive down from New York. So Artis, 23, did the next best thing - she caught a bus. At least she could get home after the tryouts.

"I called the airline and they said a ticket was \$800, which I couldn't afford," she said. "I couldn't find anyone to help drive and I didn't want to drive by myself, so I got a bus ticket."

Artis' odyssey started through word-of-mouth. A

friend told her about Charlotte's open tryouts four days before they took place. Artis, who was snubbed by both the rival ABL and the WNBA's New York Liberty, sent a resume and received an application from the Sting, although the coaching staff knew little about her.

"I was a pretty long shot for this area," she said. "I was a long shot in terms of notoriety, but in skills, I can play with anybody."

The 14-hour trip to Charlotte was just the beginning. Although she averaged 25 points a game at Northeastern University in Boston, it wasn't against the top-flight competition most coaches look for. With 300 athletes trying out for four roster

spots, the odds of sticking were long, but Artis had come too far to give up.

"If I'm given a chance, I could contribute to any team," she said. "My situation has been to create opportunity for myself so if I had to catch a bus to Charlotte, that's what I'd do."

Sting coaches were impressed with Artis' athletic ability, but she admits being in awe of her teammates, many of them with credentials from the powerful ACC. With former all-Americans like Andrea Stinson of Cornelius, Vicky Bullett and Rhonda Mapp on the team, even pick-up games can be fun.

"I'm in awe of just about

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Dr. J's team brings color to NASCAR

By Karl Petraroja
and Herbert L. White
THE CHARLOTTE POST

CONCORD - The face of NASCAR is changing.

Basketball hall of famer Julius Erving and former Washington Redskin Joe Washington, announced last week the formation of Washington Erving Motorsports for the 1998 NASCAR season. The team, which doesn't have a sponsor, will compete in Ford cars on the Winston Cup and Grand National circuits. Washington Erving is the first NASCAR operation owned by African Americans since Wendell Scott left the circuit in 1972.

"We'll be a little bit different and there might be some changes because of our presence here," Erving said. "We don't have a problem with that. As a matter of fact, we're excited about it."

Washington Erving will have North Carolina connections. Kathy Thompson of Greensboro will be the team's president of race operations and Fields Jackson of Cary will be president of corporate operations. The team hopes to set up a race shop in the Greensboro area.

"Our goal in coming into NASCAR is not to make it be different, but to be champions," Washington said.

Erving, who won an ABA title with the New York Nets and NBA championship with the Philadelphia 76ers, said black NASCAR ownership will likely raise the sport's profile among non-traditional fans. He also acknowledges there'll be some adjustments among racing's traditionalists.

NASCAR is excited too, especially if the entry of a black-owned team will attract new fans, said Kevin Triplett, the organization's manager of communications.

"That will provide us the opportunity to reach the African American community," he said. "They will provide us a chance to reach a segment of the population that hasn't traditionally been fans."

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Tradition-laden Indy 500 can't keep up with changes

By Jim Litke
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS - Even Gomer stayed away.

A decade ago, the Indy 500 was among the hottest properties in sports. By last year, the feud between speedway boss Tony George and the owners of the best Indy cars and their drivers had reduced it to the level of a curiosity. This year, track officials will be grateful for that much attention.

Even God seemed disinterested. For the second straight day Monday, the 500 was washed out by rain.

"If we don't get it in tomorrow, we'll go the next day and so forth," chief steward Keith Ward said, "until we get it done."

At the rate they're going, however, they might run out of cars first.

Six of them were waylaid after just 15 laps Monday. Three of the cars, incredibly, were taken out by a crash during the pace lap, requiring five more laps under a caution flag before the race could even begin.



Washington



Erving



Jackson



Thompson

A sponsor watching all this from the first turn sidled over to a reporter and cracked, "The only way I get my money's worth in this bunch is to sponsor the pace car. It'll be on the track every couple of minutes. It might be the only one going at the end."

Still, there was no truth to a rumor that some drivers had chosen the pre-paid fuel option and tried to bring the cars back to the pits empty; the three other casualties were caused by blown-up engines and a broken timing chain.

"We had a good chance at finishing the race and a good shot at rookie of the year," said driver Sam Schmidt in what qualified as the most optimistic utterance heard at the Brickyard all month.

Worse, the problems weren't just limited to the machines. Actor Jim Nabors, who played Sgt. Gomer Pyle on TV and whose rendition of the song, "Back Home Again in Indiana" has been a race-day fixture for two decades, didn't bother to

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