

# Gilbert next on Panther list

By Herbert L. White  
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Carolina Panthers are on the verge of making their most important free agent signing.

Carolina came to contract terms with Washington defensive tackle Sean Gilbert Tuesday, bringing the Panthers a step closer to acquiring the run-stopper they've sought.



Gilbert

As the Redskins' franchise player, though, the only way Carolina can acquire Gilbert is via trade, which will likely cost the Panthers a first-round draft choice, players or more picks.

Carolina overhauled its secondary last week with the signing of unrestricted free agent safety Brent Alexander. The courtship between Carolina and Alexander was brief, but both sides liked what they saw.

"I'm excited about this opportunity," Alexander said. "From

my visit, I sense that the Panthers are making every effort to win. Being from a small town (Gallatin, Tenn.), I was impressed with the friendliness and support that I experienced during my visit. I have a good feeling about being here."

Half of last season's starting secondary - cornerback Tyrone Poole and free safety Chad Cota - is on the trading block or signed with another team. Acquiring Alexander became a necessity when the Panthers chose not to match New Orleans' offer sheet to Cota, which contained clauses that likely would've voided his contract after a year if Carolina matched.

Last season, Alexander totaled 109 tackles in 15 starts for Arizona, his second as a full-time starter at free safety. In five seasons, the former Tennessee State all-America started 50 of 64 games at cor-



Alexander

nerback and safety with 328 tackles and four interceptions.

"I am happy that Brent is a Carolina Panther," Carolina coach Dom Capers said. "He is an experienced player with good speed and range and has good cover ability. Alexander, 5-11, 196, can play either safety or cornerback, which gives the Panthers more flexibility in the secondary."

"In addition to being a talented player, Brent is an impressive young man whose versatility could help us throughout the secondary," Capers said. Alexander joins former Green Bay cornerback Doug Evans as new starters in Carolina's secondary.

Alexander, who was undrafted when he signed with Arizona in 1994, overcame long odds in college and the pros. A computer science major who walked on as a freshman at Tennessee State, he earned consensus NCAA Division I-AA honors as a senior after totaling 113 tackles and eight interceptions. Alexander was a teammate of Atlanta safety Randy Fuller, another TSU all-America in '93.

# Pride sees opportunity with the Braves

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teasing him."

Pride drew plenty of attention during his rise through the minor leagues, but he longed to be recognized for more than his lack of hearing. The outfielder thought that acceptance would come when he hit 300 with 10 homers, 31 RBIs and 11 stolen bases for Detroit two years ago.

But the Tigers were in the midst of a youth movement, so he was pushed aside in 1997, finishing out the season with the Boston Red Sox. Now, at age 29, he's trying to earn a spot with one of baseball's best teams.

"People always have a question mark over me because of my disability," said Pride, who wears a hearing aid in his left ear and has learned to speak quite clearly despite his impairment. "I think I'm the equal of most guys as far

as talent, maybe better. But I need an opportunity."

Pride is convinced he would have been a major-league regular by now if not for his disability. Don't get the impression, however, that he sits around cursing others for his plight. His parents instructed him at an early age not to make excuses.

"We're still trying to figure out what happened in Detroit," said John Pride, who traveled with his wife to Disney World this week to watch their son in the waning days of spring training. "But one of the things we taught Curt is to just accept whatever happens, keep going, and everything will work out for the best."

A few concessions must be made to Pride's lack of hearing.

When he calls for a ball in the outfield, it's automatically his because he can't hear those

around him. When he leads off first, he must position himself so that he can see both the pitcher and his third-base coach. When batting, he must look at the umpire to tell whether the pitch is a ball or strike.

But those are minor points. "I want to be known as a good ballplayer," Pride said, "not just a deaf ballplayer."

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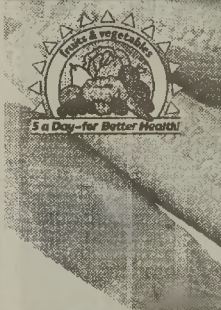
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