

Panthers in need of a win Sunday at lowly Arizona

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three close games (in which we ended up on the short end. We have to turn that around quickly."

This Sunday, the Panthers have another chance to clinch the NFC South title - something they refused to do last week in a late-night loss to the Atlanta Falcons.

The Panthers are playing the no-account Cardinals this weekend, you say?

Big deal. That means nothing right now, because the Panthers also are struggling with confidence, especially after losing to Atlanta. They don't seem to know how to win anymore.

That the Falcons were benefiting from the emotional return of quarterback Michael Vick (broken leg) was not an excuse for losing to Atlanta. Vick doesn't play defense. The Falcons had the

single-worst defense in the whole NFL, and the Panthers still got beat.

So, no, victory at Arizona on Sunday is not a given.

Should the Panthers win this game? Absolutely. They're better than the Cardinals. And, hey, the Panthers only have lost these three consecutive games by a combined 20 points. That means there are things that can be fixed.

That means it's not as if the Panthers are going out on the field and getting outplayed every single Sunday.

The bottom line? This club does not yet know how to win. Not when everything is at stake. And, honestly, you'd expect that from a team that, not so long ago, was an NFL bottom-feeder.

But because we know the Panthers can beat great teams in this league,

because we know they aren't just going out there and getting clobbered each week, even during an ugly eight-game skid, we can't just shrug and give them convenient excuses to underachieve. They're beyond that now.

If the Panthers continue limping into the playoffs and wind up with an early post-season exit, yes, they definitely will have choked.

Reach C. Jemal Horton at jemalwrite@aol.com.

Muhammad, Panthers deal with gaffe

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ers."

But make no mistake, Fox is not blaming Muhammad for the loss to Atlanta.



Fox

The Panthers made plenty of other errors, from Delhomme losing one of three fumbles and throwing two interceptions, to a complete inability to contain Falcons quarterback

Michael Vick.

But Muhammad's mistake is not so easy to overlook in what's been a miserable season for the former Pro Bowl receiver. With just 42 catches for 677 yards and two touchdowns this season, Muhammad has fallen out of favor with many fans for numerous drops, fumbles and failed plays.

He argues that his numbers are down - third-year player Steve Smith is the leading receiver with 72 catches for 914 yards - because Carolina's offense is centered around running

back Stephen Davis.

And the Panthers insist Muhammad has quietly done the dirty work all year, sacrificing statistics for the unheralded role of blocker.

Before the Atlanta game, he was on a three-game streak with 17 catches for 326 yards and a touchdown. Solid numbers, but probably not good enough to help him extend his stay in Carolina.

Muhammad has one year left on the five-year \$22.5 million deal he signed after the 1999 season, when he led the NFC with 96 catches and ranked fourth with 1,253

yards. He counts for close to \$6 million against this year's salary cap, which has led to rampant speculation he'll be released in the offseason.

Mistakes like the one he made against the Falcons won't do anything to silence the talk, even if Muhammad did step up and partially accept the blame.

"Jake threw to a spot that he felt like I should have been in - I probably should have been there," he said. "But they are a good defense and they played the play and stepped right in front of me and made the play."

USOC pressures USA Track over doping

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but have yet to get an answer.

The IOC's executive committee decided Friday to consider denying accreditation to USATF administrators if they fail to explain why Young was exonerated. Young and the rest of the 1,600-meter relay team, including Michael Johnson,

could be stripped of medals if the IOC determines Young was improperly cleared.

USATF officials have refused to acknowledge that Young is the athlete in question or provide details in the case, citing confidentiality rules after an international arbitration court ruling upheld the organization's right to maintain secrecy in

doping acquittals.

"It is our recommendation that they should either confirm the name at this stage or, in the alternative, provide the unredacted version of the appellate opinion that exonerated Jerome Young," McCarthy said.

USATF compiled the 23-page report after executive director Craig Masback and

president Bill Roe were summoned to a USOC meeting in October. At the meeting, USATF was told to either address recent doping and athlete conduct issues of face being stripped of its Olympic charter.

USATF filed the report on Nov. 19.

NOTICE OF A CITIZENS INFORMATIONAL WORKSHOP FOR THE REALIGNMENT OF THE SR2804

(REEDY CREEK ROAD)/SR 2805 (HARRISBURG ROAD) INTERSECTION IN CHARLOTTE

WBS ELEMENT 36774.1.1 U-4401 Mecklenburg County

The North Carolina Department of Transportation will hold the above Citizens' Informational Workshop on Thursday, December 11, 2003 between the hours of 4p.m. and 7p.m. in the Multi-Purpose Room at Reedy Creek Elementary School, 10801 Plaza Road Extension, Charlotte.

Interested individuals may attend this informal workshop at their convenience during the above stated hours. Department of Transportation representatives will be present to answer questions and receive comments relative to the proposed project.

The purpose of this workshop is to present information, answer questions, and receive comments regarding this project. This project consists of realigning Reedy Creek Road/Harrisburg Road intersection further away from the existing 1-485 Interchange Ramp.

Anyone desiring additional information may contact Ms. Michele James, 1548 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1548, phone (919) 733-7844 ext. 233 or e-mail at mjames@dot.state.nc.us.

NCDOT will provide auxiliary aids and services for disabled persons who wish to participate in this workshop to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. To receive special services, please contact Ms. James at the above address or phone number, or fax 919-733-9794 as early as possible so that arrangements can be made.

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