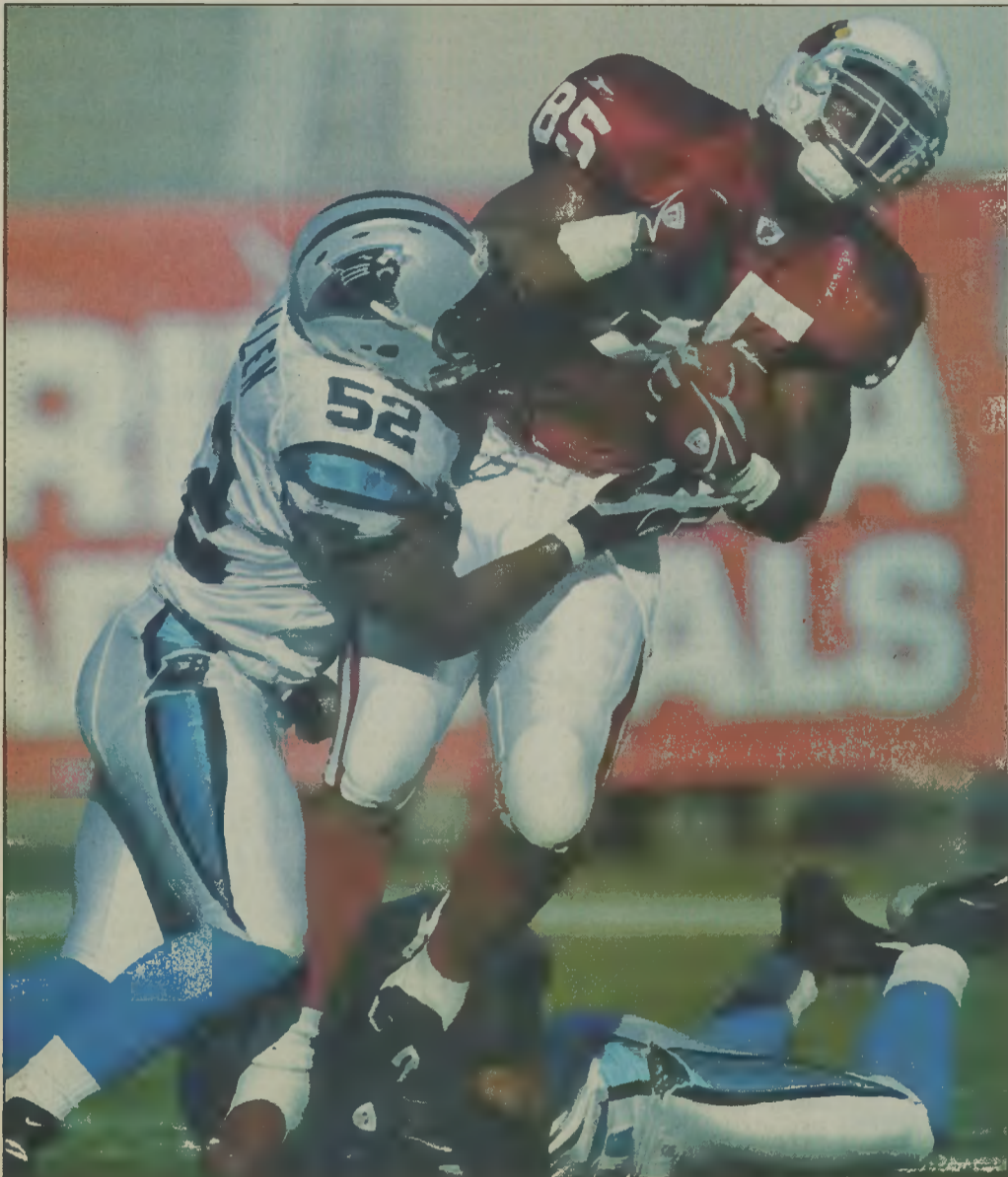


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Black College Sports/4C

PANTHERS CAN EXHALE NOW



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL PHOTO/STEPHEN DUNN

Carolina linebacker Brian Allen hits Arizona tight end Freddie Jones after a first-down catch in the Panthers' 20-17 win in Tempe, Ariz. The Panthers wrapped up the NFC South championship with the victory, their second division title in franchise history.

Division title allows key starters chance to heal

By C. Jemal Horton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

For the first time in a month, smiles penetrated the massive breezeways of Ericsson Stadium.

The luxury vehicles in the Carolina Panthers parking lot seemed to have an extra gleam this week.

That ugly, three-game

losing streak that got everyone around here so agitated was a distant memory, as the Queen City welcomed its football team back into its bosom.

Owner Jerry Richardson patted his coach on the back.

It was official: The Carolina Panthers were in the playoffs again.

After a last-minute vic-

tory at Arizona last week, the Panthers (9-5) clinched the NFC South title and assured themselves of being one of the top four seeds among conference playoff teams. And, now, Sunday's home game against the lowly Detroit Lions (4-10) doesn't loom so large.

Instead of playing the final two games of the

season to gain a semblance of momentum for the postseason, the Panthers most likely will close by letting some key players rest and get healthy.

Star running back Stephen Davis, who has been hampered by an ankle injury in recent weeks, is a prime candi-

See PANTHERS/2C

Heisman heavily hyped, but award is empty

C. JEMAL HORTON



Wanna know what it means to get a free trip to New York City, get your butt kissed on ESPN for two whole hours, and then get crowned as the single-best college football player in the land?

Nothing. The Heisman Trophy has turned into a farce. It has turned into every bit the joke the Academy Awards have been for generations and the Bowl Championship Series has become in recent years.

It doesn't mean a thing to win the Heisman, because the award has gotten so far away from what it allegedly is supposed to be.

According to the Downtown Athletic Club,

which presents the trophy, the Heisman goes "each year to the Outstanding College Football Player in the United States."

Please.

If you believe Oklahoma quarterback Jason White is the outstanding player in the country ... well, let's just hope you don't really believe that.

Something's got to be done. The Downtown Athletic Club needs to change the award so it goes to

"Our Favorite Quarterback and Occasional Running Back Who Plays for the Top-5 Team We Like the Most." Or it needs to go back and start picking the most outstanding player in America every year.

This year's award should have gone to Pittsburgh's Larry Fitzgerald, who finished second. Don't give me anything about Fitzgerald's team finishing in the middle of the Big East pack.

Don't give me anything about Fitzgerald being a sophomore. Don't give me anything about Fitzgerald having a bad game against Miami.

Fitzgerald was the outstanding player in Division I-A this season.

It doesn't matter how voters chose to dress it up. The most valuable player? Fitzgerald. The most dominant? Fitzgerald. The mesmerizing? Fitzgerald. And the list goes on.

And, by the way, University of Southern California sophomore wide receiver Mike Williams, who wasn't even invited to New York, was the second-most outstanding player in Division I-A.

The Heisman is losing credibility each year voters put some patsy on the stage to give an acceptance speech for an award he doesn't deserve.

Consider the last three years:

This year, it was White. Yeah, right.

In 2002, it was Carson Palmer. He got the award after having one stellar game, a prime-time affair against Notre Dame. Otherwise, the award should have gone to Miami's unstoppable Willis McGahee.

In 2001, it was Eric Crouch. Will someone please tell me how a guy can throw seven touchdown passes and 10 interceptions and still win the Heisman Trophy?

Look, Jason White is a very good college quarterback. But it could be argued that he wasn't even the best player on his team. That honor, most likely, would go to defensive tackle Tommie Harris.

Which brings us to another outrageous thing about the Heisman: If not a single defensive player has won the award, how can it be

Please see HEISMAN/2C

Withers key to 49ers' success

By James Hamlin
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

In the Charlotte 49ers' 85-64 win over Appalachian State senior Butter Johnson led the team in scoring with 16 points. Fellow senior Demon Brown led in assists with 6. On the season, junior guard Brendan Plavich is leading the team in scoring, while 7-foot freshman Martin Iti is the leading shot blocker. But one thing is apparent: when the 49ers play very well sophomore forward Curtis Withers does, too.

In last week's win over Appalachian State, Withers scored 15 points, pulled down 10 rebounds and dished out 5 assists. He was the second leading scorer, tops in rebounds, and second in assists in that game. For the season he is averaging a near double-double, just under 14 points and 10 rebounds, and in the only game he didn't play the 49ers lost to less-talented George Washington.

"Our team needs all the pieces and he's certainly an important piece," says 49ers head coach Bobby Lutz. "He can really pass the basketball. He's a really good post passer. In Syracuse he was tremendous against their press. He can do some things that our other bigger guys can't do."

Lutz is referring to 49ers biggest win of the season so far a 96-92 overtime defeat of Syracuse where Withers scored 16, pulled down 7 rebounds and added 3 assists.

What has really helped Charlotte this season is Withers' rebounding. He hit the weight room hard spending time with the team's strength and conditioning coach this summer to help his rebounding, but that's not all. "I worked on my agility and footwork," says Withers, "(To) get quicker with my feet as far as guarding a quicker (power forward because) we play a lot of small teams."



Withers

Please see WITHERS/3C

After rookie season, black NASCAR owner closes shop

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



FILE PHOTO

Lack of sponsorship forced Sam Belnavis, co-owner of BelCar Racing, to close shop last week.

CONCORD — The only black-owned team in NASCAR's top level shut down last week after losing its sponsor.

BelCar Racing fielded the No. 54 Ford for Todd Bodine this season. Sam Belnavis of Charlotte was the majority car owner along with Travis Carter.

The team was sponsored by the National Guard, which signed Wednesday to sponsor Greg Biffle and the No. 16 Ford for Roush Racing. In announcing Biffle's new sponsor, the Roush team also introduced Belnavis as its director of diversity programs.

"I knew the direction the National Guard was taking," Belnavis said. "But I needed a platform for my career but also a platform that could substantiate and support a true diversity program."

Carter is trying to secure sponsorship for his own team.

U.S. track stars may go low-key for Athens

By Tom Foreman Jr.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — As a precaution, American track and field athletes at the 2004 Athens Olympics might be discouraged from wearing red, white and blue or anything with "USA" when they are not competing.

"For security reasons, if that's the way they want to go, that's what we'll do," said U.S. men's track coach George Williams, also track and field coach at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh.

USA Track & Field spokeswoman Jill Geer said that "off-track uniform issues are governed by the U.S. Olympic Committee."

"Coaching and managerial teams always look at a number of security issues before any international competition, including clothing," Geer said. "For the 2004 Games, the Olympic team is within the oversight of the U.S. Olympic Committee."

A spokesman for the USOC

did not return a call seeking comment on whether that organization was considering such a proposal.

Greece is spending more than \$750 million for security — the biggest security budget in Olympic history and more than 3 1/2 times as much as what was spent for the 2000 Sydney Games. Authorities plan to deploy about 50,000 security personnel — including 16,000 soldiers — during the games.

Williams said track officials have suggested ways to lower the profile of American athletes around Athens.

"They said it would be good if we low-keyed it," he said. But he added: "Some of us are going to look American. We're going to have our Bermuda shorts on and our white tennis shoes. It's going to be hard to do."



Williams