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C. JEMAL
HORTON

Panthers vulnerable, but still on right track

They still have a tendency to look so very vulnerable.

Even after their inspiring first-round playoff victory over Dallas last week, the Carolina Panthers still wouldn't know a blowout victory if it walked up and drop-kicked them in the face-masks.

Their quarterback, Jake Delhomme, still has a tendency to just throw the ball up and hope for something to happen. And their overall style of play still is so ugly, it could qualify as an art exhibit masterpiece.

But that's the way it's been with the Panthers since John Fox took over as coach two years ago. Fox-ball is aesthetically challenged. It is devoid of Showtime and other plays that qualify for "SportsCenter."

And it also is this: extremely effective.

So, no, the Panthers won't change when they go up to St. Louis this weekend to face the Rams in a second-round playoff game that could land Carolina in the NFC Championship once again. The Panthers won't do anything unusual to try and stop the Rams and their "Greatest Show on Turf" reputation.

The Panthers will be their blue-collar, non-cell-phone-wielding selves. They will be everything that Fox has molded them into since he arrived.

And, as we've seen with Fox-ball, usually, that is more than enough.

Why not these Panthers?

After the Dallas game last week, during which the Panthers committed nary a penalty or turnover, I became a believer: Fox-ball is special. Fox-ball is the kind of ball that wins championships.

Maybe the Panthers won't go all the way this year. Maybe their tendency to play every team in the NFL within three points will catch up to them in this post-season. But the Panthers clearly have what it takes to beat the Rams and anybody else in these playoffs, experience be damned.

"All week long, you heard about the Cowboys, you heard about (coach Bill) Parcells," Panthers veteran safety Mike Minter said. "All we were going to do is sit back and do our talking on the field. We came out there, and we busted some heads, like we always do."

Then, the normally composed Minter lost it a moment when talking about his coach.

"I was a little disappointed that (when) I looked at the coaches of the year, my man Fox wasn't out there," Minter said. "I was a little disappointed about that. I think a lot of guys were. So we wanted to go out there and prove to everybody that was watching that Fox is one of the best coaches in the league, and he should have been on that list."

New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick won the NFL coach-of-the-year award with 35.5 votes. Cincinnati coach Marvin

Please see PATRIOTS/2C

Thunder & lightning



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Running back Stephen Davis is the focal point of Carolina's offense, but he's getting help in the passing game. In last week's win over Dallas in the first round of the NFC playoffs, Davis gained 104 yards on 23 carries with a score.

Panthers mixing power and passing at right time

By Herbert L. White

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The Carolina Panthers offense is playing out of character, and it's a good thing.

The Panthers, who rode the running of Stephen Davis to the NFC South championship, will also take a big-play passing capabilities into Saturday's division playoff against St. Louis. Davis ran for 104 yards and a touchdown in

last week's 29-10 win over Dallas in the first round, but receivers Steve Smith and Muhsin Muhammad also came up big. Smith caught five passes for 135 yards and a score, while Muhammad had four receptions for 103.

"I think in the last couple of weeks we went against our tendencies and the coaches felt comfortable with it," Muhammad said. "They saw that Steve and I

can make plays in the passing game. We have been pitching for it all year long. But when you have a good thing, you let it ride and Stephen Davis has been playing some great ball."

With productive running and passing, Carolina kept Dallas off-balance. Although the Panthers didn't design plays for huge gains, they hammered the Cowboys' top-ranked defense to avenge a 24-20

regular season loss.

"It's the same plays we've been calling all season," coach John Fox said. "I just thought we executed better. I think we've improve as the season has gone on."

"Certainly we left some points on the field, but you can't say enough about the offensive line," said quarterback Jake Delhomme, who completed 18-of-29 passes for 273 yards and a touchdown. "Stephen

rushed for 100 and they gave me unbelievable protection. The receivers made plays. ...Everyone made plays, and that was the biggest thing."

Carolina's skill-position players were especially good, especially Smith, who torched Cowboys cornerback Terence Newman for gains of 70 and 32 yards. Smith was particularly peeved that Newman criticized Newman's criticism.

See PANTHERS/2C

Prep career over, Olympic QB looks forward to Pirates

By James Hamlin

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

When the high school football season began, Olympic High quarterback Antonio Miller expected to put up gaudy numbers and lead his team to the postseason. In August Miller said he wanted to pass for 3,000 yards and run for 1,000, 12 games later Miller passed for 3,088 yards and 27 touchdowns

and rushed for 984 yards and 10 more scores. He didn't hit his personal marks exactly, but it was close enough. However, Olympic fell way short of their team goals this season finishing with a 4-8 record.

"It was tough, but I couldn't get my head down. I had to stay a leader so the team could look up me and see me with my head held high," Miller says. That attitude is

why Miller's teammates and Olympic head coach Maurice Flowers hold him in high esteem. But despite the numbers, the talent, and the positive attitude Miller was overlooked. He was left off the Associated Press all-state team as Independence's Joe Cox earned that honor. Miller also took a backseat to some of the other top players in

Please see OLYMPIC/2C

Combine takes steps in search for pit crew talent

By Herbert L. White

THE CHARLOTTE POST

A little rain didn't stop a talent search for people of color to work on NASCAR pit crews.

Crew scouting was completed at the Drive for Diversity motorsport combine testing and evaluation event at 5 Off 5 On Race Team Performance Center in Mooresville. Due to rain, the driver testing combine was

rescheduled for Tuesday at Hickory Motor Speedway.

"In spite of the weather, it was an exciting day for the outstanding crew candidates who showcased their skills at 5 Off 5 On," said Daryl Stewart, general manager of Access Marketing & Communications, the combine's organizers. "Because of the rain at Hickory, we were not able to evaluate the drivers today. We have

rescheduled the driver scouting event for tomorrow, weather pending."

Crew members participated in a physical assessment and pit crew skills testing and were interviewed by racing professionals to determine their overall knowledge and commitment to the sport.

Crew members are vying for as many as six openings

Please see COMBINE/2C

CLOSE SHAVE AT CURRY SHOOTOUT



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Garinger High's Jerry Hollis glides in for a layup in the Wildcats' loss to West Charlotte in the Dell Curry Shootout last week at Charlotte Latin. West Charlotte went on to win the regional boys' championship