

Titans in good shape for Patriots

By Teresa M. Walker
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Steve McNair was limping around, grimacing with nearly every step. Eddie



McNair

George wore a harness to prevent his left shoulder from popping out of its socket. Sure, Tennessee beat the Baltimore Ravens 20-17 on Saturday night in an AFC wild-card game. But can the Titans go any further if the NFL's co-MVP can't scramble around?

Don't worry about the Titans' ironmen.

Not only are both stars likely to play in the divisional round, coach Jeff Fisher said Sunday that McNair and George should practice this week.

"We're really in good shape," Fisher said.

Fisher said McNair did not re-injure either his strained right calf or his sprained left ankle with the cracked bone spur that kept him out of two

of the final three games of the regular season. The quarterback only had some soreness and a little swelling in his left ankle.

An MRI on George showed no structural damage to the shoulder he dislocated when he tackled Pro Bowl safety Ed Reed following an interception. Fisher said George already can raise his arms and has flexibility in the shoulder.

"He'll be ready to go with a harness this weekend. I'd be surprised if he doesn't practice late in the week, which is good," Fisher said.

Tennessee lost a chance for an extra day of rest when Indianapolis beat the Denver Broncos 41-10 on Sunday, which means the Titans will visit New England as they try to return to the AFC championship for the third time in five seasons.

"I'm sure it'll be snowing with it being an 8:15 game Saturday night," Fisher said. "The conditions will be perfect."

The Titans got to the playoffs this season by leaning on McNair, the league's top-rated passer.

But he couldn't move around well with his achy legs, so the Titans turned back the clock against the Ravens to 1999 when they reached their only Super Bowl by running with George. They controlled the clock for 35 minutes, and George had 88 of 165 yards rushing to offset McNair's three interceptions in his worst performance this season.

The victory snapped a five-game losing skid to the Ravens, and the Titans who endured that skid savored it as poetic justice for the past.

Others see this victory as a springboard that could help them return to the AFC title game for the second straight season.

"It was a perfect way for us to enter the playoffs this year," Titans defensive end Kevin Carter said.

"It was the perfect game for us to get the monkey off our back, shut up all the critics and shut down the stigma about us losing to the Ravens. It's over. So we won ... and we're going to go on."

Fisher said he has never seen his Titans as excited as they were after beating the

Ravens - not even after beating Jacksonville in the AFC championship to reach the 2000 Super Bowl. But he promised they will not suffer an emotional hangover.

"That's going to take you a long ways. It doesn't wear out. It doesn't create a situation where you become complacent or take things for granted," said Fisher, who is 5-3 in the postseason and 3-1 on the road.

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						DBE	MBE	WBE
B-2963 32780.3.2 8.2352202	Dorham	12	Structure, Grading, Drainage, Paving	Bridge 111 over New Hope Creek on SR-1107				
B-3067 32849.3.1 8.2750903	Watauga	4	Structure, Grading, Drainage, Paving	Bridge 324 over Middle Fork Creek on SR-1542				
B-3422 33049.3.2 8.2663203	Cabarrus	10	Drainage, Grading, Paving, Culverts, Signals	Bridge 47 over Three Mile Branch on SR-1002				
B-3627 33175.3.1 8.1480503	Caswell	26	Structure, Grading, Drainage, Paving	Bridge 24 over Hyco Creek on US 158				
R-1030E 34363.3.2 8.1330502	Wayne	002	Guardrail, Signing, Paving	US 117 from North of US 70 Interchange at Goldsboro to South of SR-1342				
R-1030F 34363.3.14 8.1330511	Wayne, Wilson	12	Guardrail, Paving, Signing	US 117 from South of SR-1342 to South of US 301				
U-3803 34971.3.2	Rowan	32	Grading, Drainage, Paving, Widening, Curb and Gutter, Signals, Pavement Markers	China Grove - Intersection of US 29A (North Main Street) & NC 152 - SR 1337 (Church Street)				

* Designates a Federal Project

LETTING DATE: TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2004

Until further notice, the pre-letting activities formerly held at the North Raleigh Hilton will no longer be held at the Bennington Corporation. If you have questions, please contact the Office of Civil Rights.

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Sharpe coy about retirement

By John Marshall
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Losing in a rout is not exactly how Shannon Sharpe wanted to go out. That's why the Denver tight end will take some time before making a decision about retirement.

"Obviously, it would be the easy thing for me to say I'm coming back because I don't want to be remembered as a 41-10 loser," Sharpe said Sunday after the Broncos were knocked out of the playoffs by Indianapolis. "I'm not foolish enough right now to say this is it or this isn't it."

Sharpe considered retirement in the offseason, but decided to come back for a 14th year. He said he's already made his decision, but wants to spend some time back home in Georgia before telling Broncos coach Mike Shanahan for sure.

"You take all those out of the equation, then you just let whatever happens, happen," said Sharpe, who had five catches for 31 yards against the Colts. "I'll just call Mike in a couple of months and say 'this is what I'm going to do.'"

Should he retire, the former Savannah State stand-out will go down as one of the best pass-catching tight end ever.

He's the league's career leader in receptions (815) and yards (10,060) at his position, and this season he passed Jerry Smith for most touchdowns with 62.

A seven-time Pro Bowl selection, Sharpe also has won three Super Bowls - two with Denver, another with Baltimore - and was part of an NFL-record 12 straight playoff wins from 1997-01.

This season, Sharpe

caught 62 passes for 770 yards and eight touchdowns at age 35 - second only to Kansas City's Tony Gonzalez in the AFC.

"The one thing I wanted to do was come in and have fun," Sharpe said. "I had fun playing this year. It was great being with the guys and we have the makings of something special. If I come or go, these guys will be fine."

But when it comes to making a decision about retirement, Sharpe will do it alone.

"Only if they can take some of those reps, eat the kind of food I have to eat and go lift the weights like I have to in the offseason will I ask for their (opinion)," he said.

"I think the ones closest to me know what I'm going to do. They know which direction I'm going in."

Panthers look vulnerable, but figure out ways to win

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Lewis was second (seven votes), Parcells was third (6.5) and Philadelphia's Andy Reid was fourth (1). Fox did not receive any votes.

In many ways, Fox's not getting a vote is fitting. His team certainly is respected throughout the league, but because of its paint-drying style of play, it's sometimes hard to notice that Carolina is one of the toughest - and best - teams in the NFL.

The Rams had better be careful.

Everybody's saying this game will be a track meet. Yeah, right. The Panthers will turn this game into a closely fought, red-knuckled hob-

ble to the finish. Big plays will take place between the tackles, not down the sidelines. If St. Louis does win, it won't be because its acclaimed list of throwers and catchers were dominant; it will be because the Rams interior lines hunkered down and found a way to out-muscle the Panthers. Which would be one heck of an accomplishment.

Forget game-planning, forget elaborate scheming. The Panthers just need to stay true to their vanilla selves on Saturday.

Fox-ball hasn't let them down so far.

E-mail C. Jemal Horton at seejemalwrite@aol.com

Summer trial likely for Bryant

By Jon Sarche
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — The judge in the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case has scheduled a series of hearings that will last until nearly April, making it unlikely the NBA star will have to worry about a trial until the season is over.

State District Judge Terry Ruckriegle announced hearings for Feb. 2-3, March 1-2 and March 24-25 to settle disputes over what evidence can be used at trial. He has not specified what he wants to cover at each hearing.

"I doubt if the Lakers' schedule will have any impact in the judge's mind, but it certainly will in Kobe Bryant's mind," said Denver attorney Dan Recht, past president of the Colorado Criminal Defense Bar. "I don't see a trial happening in this case until summer at the earliest."

The NBA finals do not begin until early June and must end by June 20.

Bryant, 25, is charged with felony sexual assault stemming from a June 30 encounter with an employee of a mountain resort west of Vail. Bryant has said he had consensual sex with the 19-year-old woman. If convicted, he faces four years to life in prison or 20 years to life on probation.

Bryant's attorneys are asking the judge to close the February hearing, saying evidence they expect to be discussed might taint the jury pool and may not even be allowed at trial.

Any parts of the hearing that deal with statements Bryant made to investigators should be closed, defense attorney Hal Haddon said in a Jan. 2 court filing released Monday.

The February hearing was scheduled to deal with a

defense request to throw out statements the Los Angeles Lakers guard made to police early July 2. The defense says the statements were obtained illegally because a sheriff's investigator used a hidden tape recorder and never read Bryant his rights.

"If the statements attributed to the defendant are disseminated to the public and then suppressed, the intense media coverage of this case will insure that the jury pool will be exposed to these statements," Haddon wrote.

Haddon said the U.S. Supreme Court has approved closures of pretrial hearings, including those to discuss motions to suppress evidence.

Prosecution spokeswoman Krista Flannigan prosecutors will "most likely" file a formal response to the request to close the hearing.



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