

NEAR-ZERO TO HEROES

Carolina, Pats put team first

By Steve Wilstein
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Even ardent football fans would have trouble naming more than five players between the two Super Bowl teams. Which makes several points about the New England Patriots and the Carolina Panthers, as well as about the NFL and America's biggest day for drinking beer and munching chips.

First, superstars are overrated when it comes to winning. Teamwork and coaching matter more.

Look up and down the rosters of the Patriots and Panthers and there is not a player about whom anyone would say with any certainty: He is a future Hall of Famer.

Each team has plenty of talent. Some players, like Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and cornerback Ty Law and Panthers' defensive linemen Julius Peppers and Kris Jenkins, already are among the best in the league and may develop into some of the game's greats.

What these teams lack in luminaries at the moment, they make up for in harmony and execution. They are brilliantly coached, gritty enough to win close games, and careful not to make a lot of dumb mistakes.

Indianapolis had co-MVP Peyton Manning and Philadelphia had Donovan McNabb, but in the conference championship games Sunday both star quarterbacks were neutralized by rugged defenses and the stone hands of their receivers.

The Patriots and Panthers performed as finely meshed teams, without a lot of clashing egos. In that sense, they have something in common with the winners of the World Series the past two years, the unheralded Florida Marlins and Anaheim Angels, who toppled star-studded teams and won over a lot of fans on the way to the championship.

Second, the NFL has changed after more than a decade of salary caps and free agency. It took a while for most teams to figure out how to finagle contracts to stay under the cap, but by the end of the '90s the changes were producing an endless game of musical chairs, with players going from one city to another.

A few legitimate superstars might sign long-term contracts and stay put, but hardly any team could build consistently on its success and develop a core that would gain national attention.

No longer would there be mini-dynasties, as there were with the Dallas Cowboys, the San Francisco 49ers and the Washington Redskins in the '80s and '90s, or with the Pittsburgh Steelers and Miami Dolphins in the '70s. Those teams had players of national renown and defensive or offensive lines with their own nicknames. They stayed together long enough to build an identity.

Going beyond parity, the NFL succeeded in creating a league where anonymity trumped stardom. Truly, nobody was bigger than the

Please see NO-NAMES/3C



PHOTO: CALVIN FERGUSON

Johnson C. Smith guard Ben Chasten shoots over Winston-Salem State's Jay Maynard in the Golden Bulls' 62-61 win at Charlotte Coliseum.

Bulls missing as much as they're hitting

By Herbert L. White
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Johnson C. Smith hoped to turn its season around at the Legacy Classic.

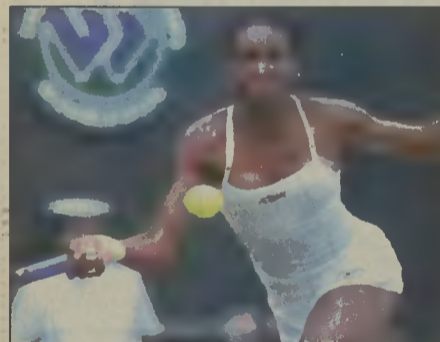
But that may take a while yet.

The Golden Bulls pulled to .500 with a 62-61 comeback upset of CIAA West rival Winston-Salem State at Charlotte Coliseum, then stumbled to a 76-51 loss at St. Augustine's Tuesday. For Smith, which has won two straight, taking down the Rams was supposed to be the win that jump-started an inconsistent season.

"It certainly can help," Smith coach Steve Joyner said. "We look at the Legacy Classic as a (preliminary) to the CIAA tournament and we gauge a lot of things off this. We take great pride in it and it's a great event."

Please see JCSU/2C

No Serena, no problem for Venus at Australian Open



Venus Williams

By John Pye
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MELBOURNE, Australia - Venus Williams misses her kid sister at the Australian Open. The hotel room is quiet, and the phone doesn't ring.

The rest of the women's field doesn't exactly share the sentiment.

Serena Williams, the defending champion, skipped the year's first major tournament to recover from knee surgery, clearing the way for others. Venus Williams could be the one to take advantage.

Please see NO SISTER/3C

Agencies unite against doping

By Jerome Pugmire
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

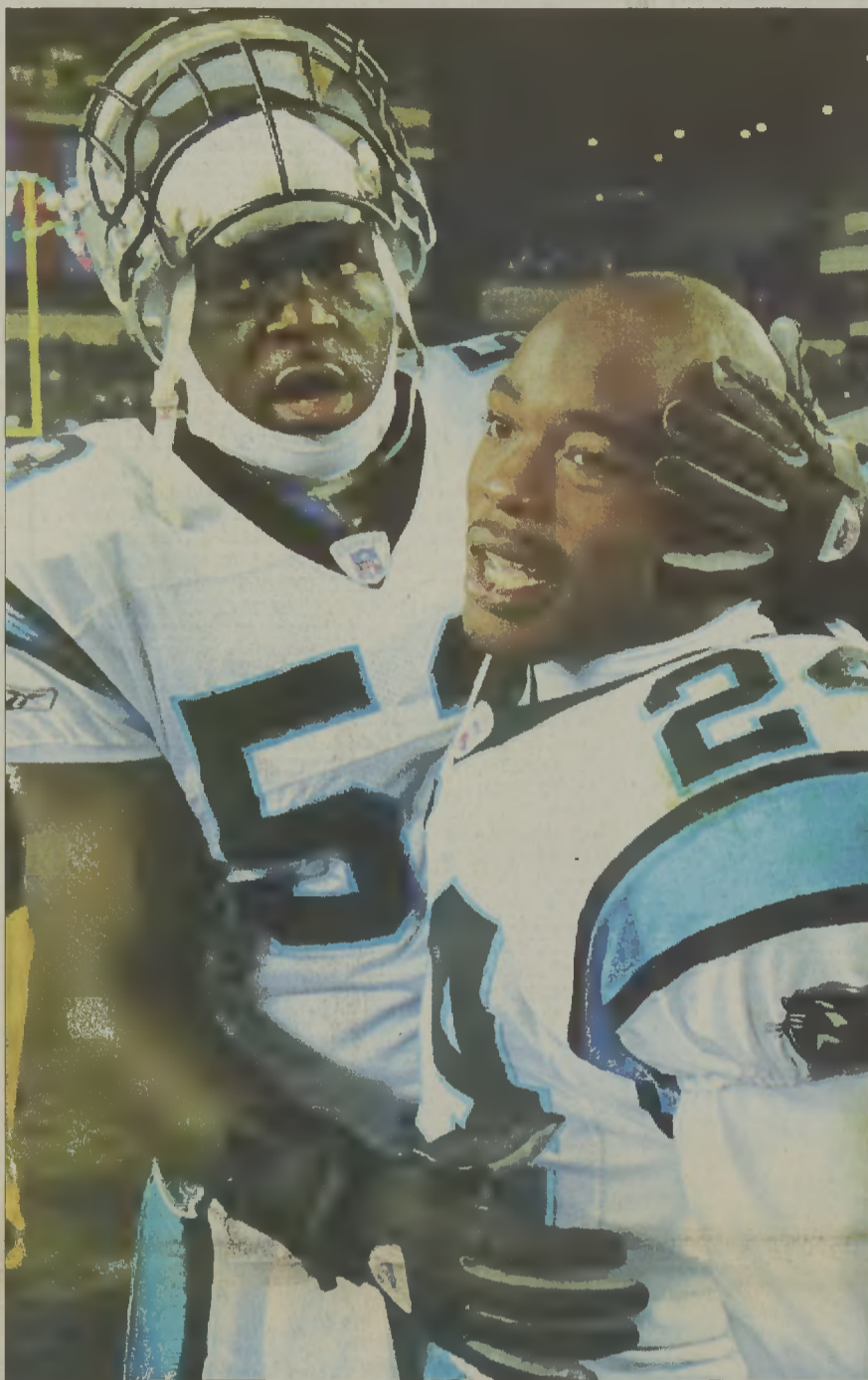
PARIS - The IOC and UNESCO signed an agreement Monday aimed at unifying the global fight against doping.

IOC president Jacques Rogge was at the U.N. group's headquarters for the opening session of a weeklong meeting to review the preliminary draft of the International Convention against Doping.

"Combatting doping is more than a matter of ethics, it's a matter of public health," Rogge told delegates from the body's 190 member states. "Twelve percent of the world are involved in sport or sports clubs. Athletes have died and will continue to die if nothing is done."

"If this continues, mothers will stop sending

Please see IOC/2C



EPA PHOTO/MATT CAMPBELL

Carolina Panthers Greg Favors (left) and Ricky Manning celebrate after the Panthers beat Philadelphia 14-3 in the NFC championship game Sunday in Philadelphia. Next up is AFC champion New England in Super Bowl XXXVIII.

Panthers' turnaround one win away from complete

By Jenna Fryer
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

His house and lawn were covered in toilet paper and congratulatory banners when Carolina coach John Fox returned home from the NFC championship game early Monday morning.

The drive home from the stadium took longer than usual because of the extra time it took to push through the thousands of fans who turned out to greet the Panthers following their 14-3 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles.

Two years after the lowest

point in Carolina history, Fox and the Panthers are headed to the Super Bowl for the first time in franchise history.

"We've got great fans and they were out at the airport and all along our trail to the stadium, and there were a number of people to greet us here at the stadium," Fox said. "I had all kinds of things on my house and

everybody was really excited."

That's because the Panthers' turnaround has been nothing short of amazing.

A young franchise that had long been troubled by off-field problems, Carolina hit bottom on Jan. 6, 2002. The New England Patriots came to town for the regular season finale and humiliated the Panthers 38-6.

The game capped Carolina's 1-15 season and was played in front of a half-empty stadium. Of the franchise-low 21,070 in attendance, over half were

Please see PANTHERS/2C



Fox

Panthers stake claim at top of chain

C. JEMAL HORTON



They are fifth no more. It wasn't all that long ago that the Carolina Panthers ranked last in love from sports fans in the Carolinas.

But a dream of a football season, which is culminating with a trip to Super Bowl XXXVIII in Houston next week, has changed all of that.

The Panthers are the top sports team in the Carolinas, hands down.

They've come a long way since that 1-15 season of two years ago. They've come a long way since they were at the back of the line when it came to sports allegiances in these parts.

"I've always believed when you win, (fans) come," Panthers coach John Fox told reporters during his weekly press conference.

And that's why Panthers jerseys are being scooped up with the efficiency of The Fat Boys in a buffet line. That's why people in other states and countries - people who haven't lived in this area for years - are sticking their chests out and reminding neighbors, "That's

my team, you know."

And that's why this resilient football team suddenly has become the face of a city and a region that has exemplified resilience for so long.

You don't think that's an accomplishment?

Here's a reminder of what the Panthers have overcome in their ascension from NFL/Carolinas backburner to toast of the NFL/Carolinas:

- All the great college basketball in North Carolina, what with Duke and the University of North Carolina making Final Fours with the regularity of Metamucil, used to be first in people's hearts and

Please see PRO/2C