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PRIMED FOR ANOTHER RUN



PHOTO/CAROLINA COBRAS

Former Independence High standout DeAngelo Lloyd is one of 21 new Carolina Cobras.

Everything's different for AFL Cobras

By Herbert L. White
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Football season - the indoor kind - starts this week.

The Carolina Cobras open their second AFL season in Charlotte with a revamped roster that looks nothing like the group that went 0-16 in 2003. The Cobras reduced its season-opening roster to the league maximum 24 by trading player and waiving two.

Carolina opens Sunday at the Dallas Desperados, with the home opener Feb. 21 against the Arizona Rattlers.

Carolina traded offensive specialist James Bowden (N.C. A&T) to the Orlando Predators for future considerations and waived receiver/linebacker D.J. Humphries, lineman Bryan Ray and quarterback Charlie Peterson.

This season's roster will have some familiar names. Lineman Troy Pelshak of Charlotte, who won a Super Bowl ring with the St. Louis Rams and played at N.C. A&T, was a key offseason acquisition. The former Garinger High standout is an AFL rookie, as is lineman DeAngelo Lloyd, a former Independence High star.

The Cobras will have to make do without offensive specialist Bernard Holmes, their best returning player. He was placed on the injured list last week after surgery to repair a slightly torn meniscus and will miss two games. Last year, Holmes set franchise single-season records with 20 touchdowns, six 100-yard receiving games and 74 kick-off returns. He also established new marks for kick return yards (1,546) and all-purpose yards (2,641).

Single-game, season and group tickets are on sale starting at \$64 per seat. For information, call ((877) 4-COBRAS or log on to www.cobrasfootball.com.

Williams, Bulls agree on NBA contract buyout

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO - Jay Williams, who played one season with the Chicago Bulls before a motorcycle accident put his NBA career in jeopardy, and the team agreed on a contract buyout Monday.

Bill Duffy, Williams' agent, said the buyout was in the \$3 million range. Williams had two more years worth about \$7.7 million left on his original deal.

"No question it's more than fair," Duffy said. "Usually when you cut a deal it hurts both parties, but this is great for both parties."

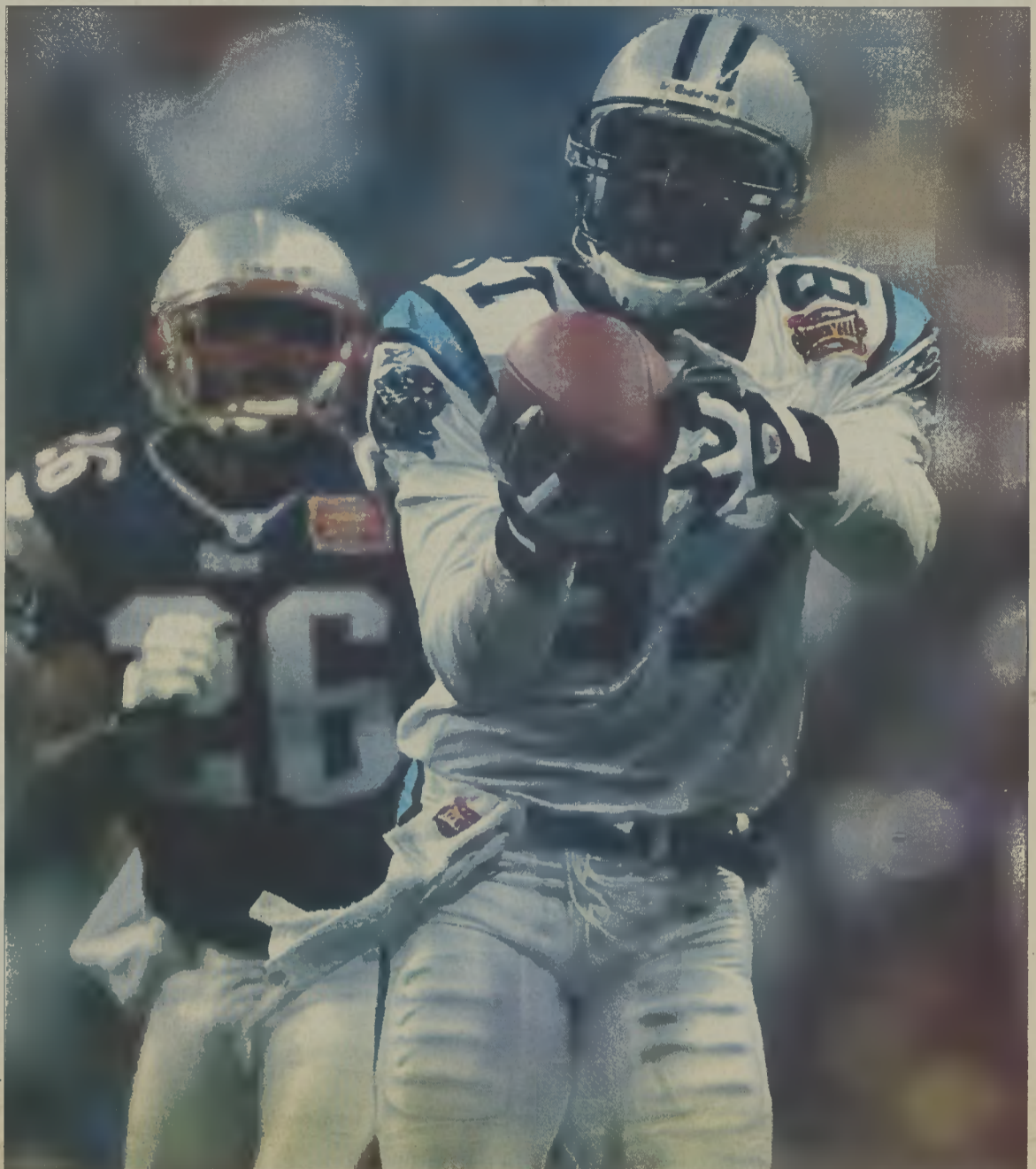
Because riding a motorcycle violates the standard NBA contract, the Bulls could have terminated Williams' deal after the accident June 19. Instead, they put the former Duke star and No. 2 pick in the 2002 draft on injured reserve and continued to pay him.

The buyout allows the Bulls to gain a roster spot and flexibility with the salary cap.

Williams was riding a new motorcycle June 19 when the bike got away from him and slammed into a utility pole. He was thrown onto a grassy curb, face down from the waist up, his left leg tilting grotesquely upward.

He severed a main nerve in his leg, fractured his pelvis and tore three of the four main ligaments in his left knee. He spent two weeks at a Chicago hospital before being transferred to Duke University Medical Center, where he continues to rehab, holding onto hope that he can play again. As a free agent, Williams is free to sign with any

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REUTERS PHOTO/MIKE SEGER

Muhsin Muhammad, who hauled in a Jake Delhomme pass for an 85-yard touchdown in the Super Bowl against New England, will be the source of much speculation during the offseason. His contract will count for \$6 million against the salary cap.

Narrow loss aside, Panthers headed in the right direction

By Jenna Fryer
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Making it to the first Super Bowl in franchise history should be enough for the underdog Carolina Panthers.

Don't try telling that to the team, not after it came so close only to lose 32-29 to the New England Patriots on Adam Vinatieri's 41-yard field goal with 4 seconds to play Sunday.

The Panthers weren't even supposed to make the playoffs, let alone roll through the post-season with wins over Dallas, St. Louis and Philadelphia. Still, the players weren't buying it - "almost" is not nearly good enough.

"There is nothing accomplished if you don't win,"

receiver Steve Smith said. "It's all or nothing and right now we have nothing. Our goal is not to open anybody's eyes, it is to win championships." Two years removed from a 1-15 season that had sapped the energy and enthusiasm out of the franchise and the community, the Panthers have embraced winning and won't settle for anything short of a Super Bowl title.

It was a quick turnaround from the bottom of the NFL

and was led by coach John Fox, who wasted no time in rebuilding the confidence of this Carolina team. He made the Panthers tough by installing a blue-collar work ethic and making them believe they were supposed to be in the Super Bowl.

That's why simply getting there, only to come out on the losing end of a back-and-forth battle in a game they were never expected to win just isn't good enough.

"I can't say enough about Coach Fox - he's given this team a direction they didn't have for a lot of years and showed them they can win," receiver Ricky Proehl said. "Now they know the feeling of

losing, and it's something you don't want to feel again."

So Fox and general manager Marty Hurney will likely waste little time getting to work on improving the Panthers the same way they have done the past two seasons. Piece by piece, the two strengthened a unit that was just a few key players away from this turnaround.

After drafting defensive end Julius Peppers two years ago, they turned attention to the offense last spring and bolstered the unit with two of the best free agent signings in the NFL this season: Running back Stephen Davis and quarterback Jake Delhomme.

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Smith

Football success brought us all a little closer



Don't tell me that sports are just games.

Don't tell me that sports are irrelevant and that we should ONLY encourage our kids to be doctors and scientists and concert pianists when they grow up.

I don't care how many times some Stiff Shirt sticks out his pinky as he's drinking tea and tries to say that sports are

meaningless and should be shoved to the back of our nation's consciousness.

Sports matter. Sports can be good for us - all of us. And sports can bring people together like only a handful of activities and occupations can.

Super Bowl XXXVIII, which featured the now-beloved Carolina Panthers, is one of the latest examples of that. The game was a thrilling, emotional, magnificent testament of all that is good in football and sports in general.

That game put almost every person in this city and this region on the same page. That game brought a collective hope to Charlotte. It united us for a

cause unlike any time in the area's history.

People wore hints of Panthers paraphernalia to their places of worship last week. People who normally could care less about a football game - like my wife, who once asked me, "Did Michael Jordan just score a touchdown?" - were huddled around the television hanging on every play.

That's the moral in all of this, in the value of sports: impact.

Sure, the Panthers lost to the Patriots in the Super Bowl. Sure, professional football history probably won't talk twice about the Panthers when it comes to the Super Bowl and

overall gridiron greatness.

But you know what?

It simply doesn't matter.

Yes, people were sad. But when the game was over, we paused, looked at our neighbors, smiled and thought, "That was fun." Suddenly, losing wasn't all that catastrophic. The ride Charlotte's football team took us on over the last month or so was a bigger deal.

Now, tell me: When was the last time in most of our lives that losing didn't matter?

Obviously, sports and the people who play them are fallible. There are shameful things that go on in sports, and some of it has happened within the

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