

# Panthers 'have a lot to build on' for '04 season

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Davis, pushed out of Washington by then-coach Steve Spurrier, came home to the Carolinas and rushed for a career-best 1,444 yards while setting a single season mark for the Panthers and earning his fourth Pro Bowl bid.

Delhomme, a career backup, took over the starting job in the second half of the season opener. He rallied Carolina from a 17-0 deficit that day to the win, the first of eight second-half comebacks in 14 regular-season wins.

With Delhomme at the

helm, Carolina never considered itself out of the game as he helped the Panthers to a 7-0 mark in games decided by three points or less and 8-0 when scoring at least 21 points.

Still, neither felt like reflecting on their accomplishments after losing to New England.

"I am feeling a little bad and sad and mad," Davis said. "But nobody in that locker room can drop their head because all the guys went out and proved something this year and we just fell short."

Delhomme was already

looking ahead to next season.

"I don't know if I can take any solace in getting this far," Delhomme said. "I hope we're not forgotten and you always want to come back here again. Deep down in my heart, I think we will be."

"I hope we'll be in Jacksonville (at the Super Bowl) next year fighting again."

But first, a series of offseason decisions will have to be made.

Smith is a restricted free agent who took it personally when the Panthers declined to open contract talks with

him earlier this season. Muhsin Muhammad will count for more than \$6 million against the salary cap next year — a steep figure for a No. 2 receiver who has evolved into a blocker in Carolina's run-first offense.

Making a run at a top-name receiver would not be out of the question for the Panthers, who head into free agency about \$12 million under the salary cap.

Starting safety Deon Grant is also a free agent, but said he wants to stay in Carolina.

The Panthers, who focused on offense last spring by tak-

ing a pair of offensive linemen in the first two rounds of the draft, will likely try to shore up its secondary this time around.

Although rookie Ricky Manning Jr. had a solid post-season with four interceptions, Carolina is in desperate need of a shutdown cor-

ner.

If his first two seasons are any indication, Fox will work hard to get the Panthers back to this level again.

"It's been a great ride and I'm very proud of the way they fought," he said. "We just came up a little short. We have a lot to build on."

## Sport proves its value as shared pastime

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Panthers franchise. But it would be deeply careless to point to that as a reason to diminish sports and the people who play them.

Surely, after episodes such as the Enron scandal or the Martha Stewart fiasco, you're not going to discour-

age your kid from becoming a CEO.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying playing a sport is the most important occupation one could have. I'm not saying we need to throw out all of our kids' textbooks and replace them with playbooks that show

them how to attack the 3-4 defense with an empty backfield. Truthfully, we do need lawyers and engineers and teachers in our society, and we need them much worse than we need professional athletes.

But to act as if lawyers and engineers and teachers are

the only types of people who make a great difference in our society is wrong.

Remember the days following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001? People couldn't wait until the country returned to play football and baseball.

## Braves face new challenges as season nears

By Paul Newberry  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — John Smoltz isn't quite as pessimistic as a few months ago, when he had just endured another operation on his elbow and another disheartening loss in the playoffs.

Remember, spring training is just around the corner. The numbing cold of winter will soon be replaced by soothing, sun-soaked days in Florida. It's a time for hope, a time for optimism.

Still, when Smoltz looked around the Turner Field clubhouse on Monday, he couldn't help but wonder how the Atlanta Braves will pull off a 13th straight division title.

Greg Maddux's old locker? Empty. Gary Sheffield's former stall? Now occupied by rookie first baseman Adam LaRoche. Javy Lopez and Vinny Castilla? They're gone, too.

"This is not a team that's going to be able to rely on past experiences," Smoltz said, a bit of resignation in his voice. "We're not going to be able to just ride it out and keep saying, 'We know we'll be there at the end.'"

Indeed, the Braves no longer have the look of a favorite in the NL East, not after the gut-wrenching changes of this offseason. Sheffield, Lopez, Castilla and Robert Fick moved on, taking away 115 homers and 397 RBIs. Maddux also left, depriving the rotation of a guy who has four Cy Young awards and 16 straight seasons of at least 15 wins.

The Braves traded for injury plagued J.D. Drew to take Sheffield's place in right field. Lopez will be succeeded

at catcher by Johnny Estrada, who spent most of last season in Triple-A. The corners of the infield are now manned by LaRoche and former utility infielder Mark DeRosa. Maddux's spot in the rotation will be taken by journeyman John Thomson.

"We can't expect the guys coming in here to be the guys who left," said Smoltz, who joined nearly two dozen players at Turner Field for "Camp Leo," the pre-spring training camp run by pitching coach Leo Mazzone.

While the Braves were cutting payroll — at least \$15 million — the rival Philadelphia Phillies were going through a major upgrade. They'll move into a new stadium with new closer Billy Wagner and new starter Eric Milton.

And, oh yeah, the Braves also must get by the World Series champion Florida Marlins, armed with one of the best young rotations in the game.

Atlanta's cost-cutting mandate didn't sit well with the players who are returning in 2004.

"It's disappointing," left fielder Chipper Jones said. "This kind of situation never would have happened eight or 10 years ago."

Despite all the losses, general manager John Schuerholz believes the Braves still have enough talent to contend for that elusive World Series championship. He is quick to point out that a payroll in the neighborhood of \$80 million is higher than the last two Series winners — Anaheim in 2002 and Florida last season.

"We were challenged," Schuerholz said. "But under the circumstances, I thought

we did real well."

Smoltz wasn't feeling too good as the offseason began. The closer underwent elbow surgery just days after the Braves were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs by the Chicago Cubs. He was ticked off by the impending loss of so many valuable players. He floated the idea of being a starter again. He even went so far as to criticize teammates who hid out from the media after the Game 5 loss.

Smoltz said he wasn't singling out anyone, but it was viewed as a slap against Jones, who was nowhere to be found after the final post-season game.

There are no apparent hard feelings between two of the team's most prominent players, though Smoltz said he would clear the air if necessary.

Explaining his side of things, Jones said, "After that fifth game, I didn't have anything nice to say. I wasn't going to just offer the obligatory congratulations to the Cubs. I'm not that kind of person. If John wants to do it, that's his decision."

Jones said he didn't take Smoltz's comments personally.

"It's all water under the bridge," Jones said. "It was probably just the frustration of losing coming out in him. I understand that. In the future, I will try to oblige Mr. Smoltz whenever we get beat."

Smoltz approached last season with a sense of desperation, believing a championship might keep the team together.

"If we had won it all, I don't think all of this would have happened," he said. "That's

## Williams, Bulls agree on \$3 million NBA contract buyout

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team, including the Charlotte Bobcats, who could bring him in to stock the expansion franchise with a young player with some local appeal. The Bobcats open their inaugural season in October.

Williams 22, led Duke to a national title as

a sophomore. He came to the Bulls a year later with great expectations but had his ups-and-downs as a rookie, finally losing his starting spot. He averaged 9.5 points as a rookie.

With reporting by Herbert L. White of The Charlotte Post.

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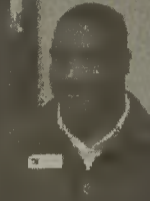
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