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SPORTS

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C. JEMAL HORTON

49er missed his NBA chance

College is all about the relationships.

College is all about the sheepskin. College is all about the late-night pizza runs, truly finding yourself and getting a quality education so you'll be prepared to be a viable contributor to your society one day.

Uh ... unless you're 7 feet tall with a ridiculous wingspan.

When you're working with those kinds of dimensions, the things you go in expecting to get from college are way, waaaaaay different.

Now, of course, even when you're 7 feet tall with a ridiculous wingspan you can glean commodities like relationships and quality education from your college experience. You really can.

But let's keep it real, OK? If you're 7 feet tall with a ridiculous wingspan, most of the buddies you're making those 1 a.m. sprints to Pizza Hut with aren't even thinking about leaving college early. They aren't even dreaming that they'll actually be partying with Rudy from "The Cosby Show" at an after-party in a matter of months.

Charlotte 49ers center Martin Iti went into college last fall knowing that he could have done that, had he skipped Highway 49 and gone straight to the NBA.

Instead, he chose to go to college. Which is a great thing, by the way.

But the thing is, Iti has missed out on his chance to party with Rudy from "The Cosby Show" - or any other so-called celebrities.

Nonetheless, last week, Iti announced that he was entering the NBA draft after one season with the 49ers.

It's just too bad that that boat is long gone now.

Iti has as good a chance of making it to the NBA as a current UNC Charlotte student has of making it to the National Football League. And you might remember that the 49ers don't have a football team.

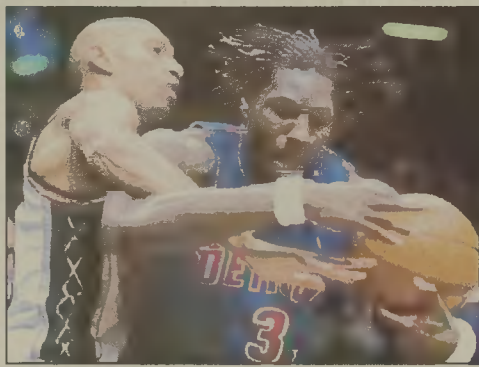
If Iti's plan all along was to go to the NBA early, he never should have gone to college. It was too much of a risk. That's merely the world in which we live today.

Again, I'm all for college. I think it's an experience we all should have. But Iti is one of these new breed of young basketball players who actually should have skipped college and gone directly to the NBA.

See, coming out of high school, Iti, who, yes, is 7 feet tall with a ridiculous wingspan, was considered in at least one recruiting poll to be the third-rated high school prospect behind LeBron James, who did go straight to the NBA, and Duke's Luol Deng, who announced he is entering the draft this year.

That's some serious stuff. Some scouts were seriously looking at Iti as a potential draft pick - again, he's 7 feet tall with a ridiculous wingspan - and Iti actually had considered going directly to the NBA after graduation.

Please see 49ER/3C



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/JULIE JACOBSON

The Pistons need to get maximum effort from their top players, including Ben Wallace (3).

Pistons battered and bruised going into Game 5 vs. Nets

By Tom Canavan
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. - The Detroit Pistons are hurting in the Eastern Conference semifinals - and it's more than Rasheed Wallace's foot and Chauncey Billups' back.

Their stingy defense suddenly has holes. The offense is nonexistent, with the exception of Richard Hamilton.

Even more of a concern is that the Pistons' 2-0 lead in the best-of-seven series and their momentum is gone following a 94-79 loss to the

New Jersey Nets in Game 4 Tuesday night.

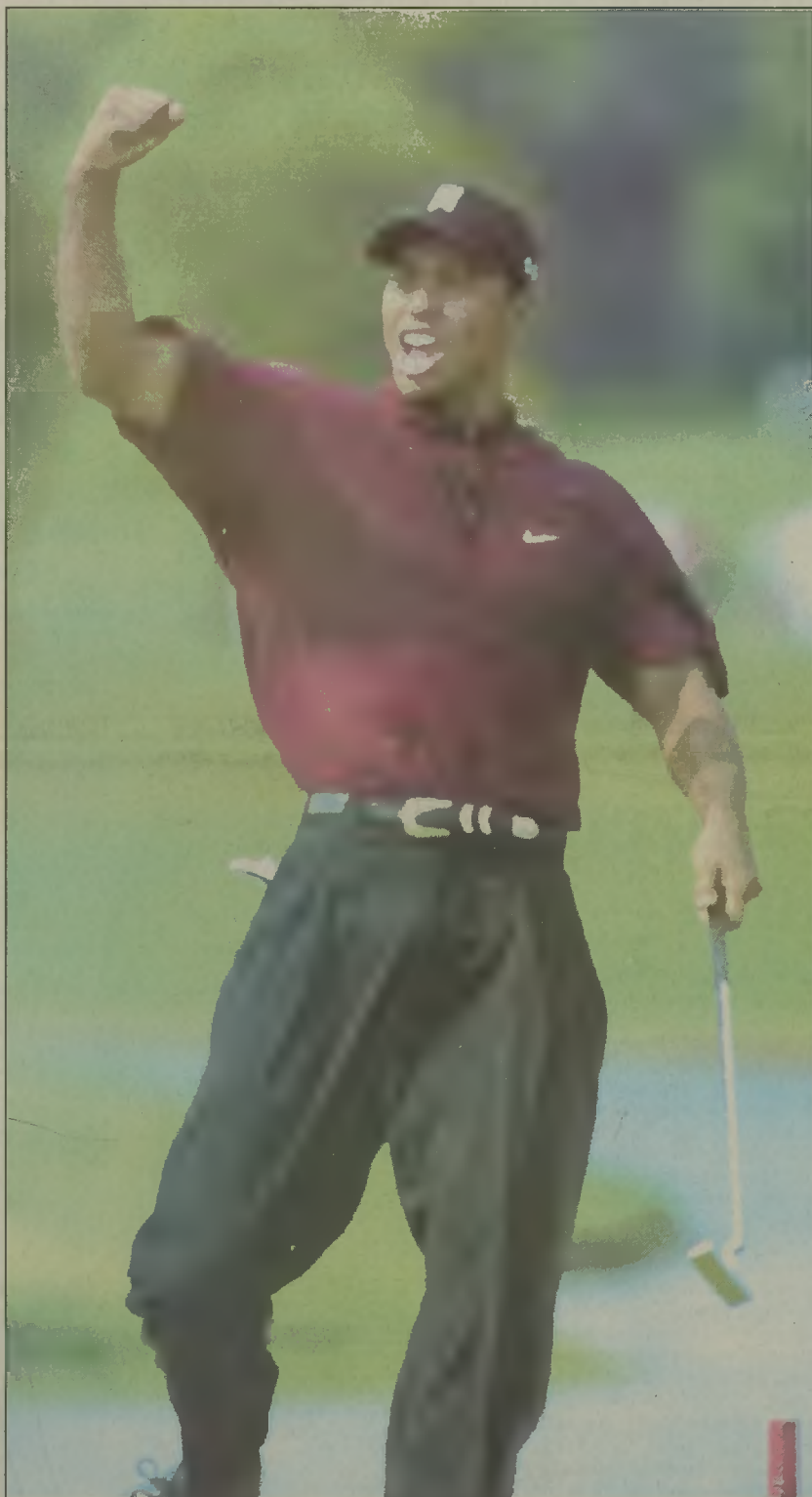
"We definitely gave them confidence," Pistons forward Tayshaun Prince said. "The momentum has shifted their way, especially how they won."

The how has to be a major concern for the Pistons.

After dominating play in the first two games in Michigan, the Pistons came to New Jersey with visions of avenging last year's sweep in the conference finals with one of their own.

Please see PISTONS/2C

TIGER GOOD, BUT NOT ENOUGH



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Tiger Woods celebrates a putt during last week's Wachovia Championship at Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte. Woods provided golf's biggest name, but couldn't convert it into a win. He had a three-shot lead going into the third day of play but faltered and finished tied for third.

Injury ends Pelshak's AFL season

By Herbert L. White
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Troy Pelshak's season with the Carolina Cobras is over.

Pelshak, who played high school ball at Garinger, has been placed on the injured reserve due to a quadriceps injury suffered in last week's loss to the New York Dragons. The injury will force the former N.C. A&T standout to miss the final three games of the 2004 season.

The Cobras (4-10) also released defensive specialist Daryon Brutley and wide receiver/defensive back Ernest Ross.

Pelshak (6-3, 258 pounds) improved rapidly throughout his rookie AFL season, leading all Cobras linemen with nine tackles and two sacks. He was a featured part of the Cobras line over the last seven weeks after being used sparingly over the first six games.

Pelshak joined Carolina after an NFL career that included a Super Bowl season with the St. Louis Rams and the Jacksonville Jaguars.

He will undergo further testing to evaluate the extent of the injury.

"Troy has been such a big part of our offensive and defensive line over the last two months," Cobras interim head coach Ron Selesky said. "He has worked very hard this season and has really developed into a force on the line for our team. We all hope for a quick and full recovery."

Brutley joined the Cobras for his first season in the AFL, posting 22.5 tackles and a team-high five passes defended in nine games.

Ross saw the majority of his playing time over the last five weeks after seeing action in only one of the Cobras first eight contests. The second-year player notched 16.5 tackles and four passes defended in extended playing time at defensive specialist.

Carolina plays Saturday at Philadelphia.



Pelshak



FILE PHOTO

Carolina Cobras lineman Troy Pelshak (left) is out for the season after a quadriceps injury in last week's loss to New York.

Ramirez misses first game of year to become U.S. citizen

By Howard Ulman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOSTON - Manny Ramirez had a good reason to miss his first game of the season with the Boston Red Sox. He went to Miami to become a U.S. citizen.

With the support of team management, Ramirez left Boston after Sunday's 8-4 loss to the Kansas City Royals. He was expected back for Tuesday night's second game of a three-game series against Cleveland.

"He was going to get a day off (Saturday), but something neat came up," Red Sox manager Terry Francona said. "It turns out he's down in Miami to become a United

States citizen. It's been a long process, and today is the day."

Not even a player of Ramirez's accomplishments - an AL batting championship in 2002 and a \$20 million salary - could schedule it for a Red Sox off-day.

"It's the timing," Francona said. "If he didn't do it today, we're not talking about (a delay of) weeks or months. It's like, maybe, a year."

General manager Theo Epstein said, "It's an excused absence."

Without Ramirez, Brian Daubach started in his place in left field and Kevin Millar replaced him in the cleanup spot against Cleveland on Monday night.

Ramirez "has our full support on this," Francona said. "He went about it the right way."

Going into the week, Ramirez was third in the American League with a .369 batting average, tied for third with eight homers and second with 45 hits in 31 games. He has hits in his last six games, batting .435 with three homers in that stretch.

Ramirez, who turns 32 on May 30, was born in the Dominican Republic and came to the United States at age 13. He graduated from George Washington High School in New York and lives in Fort Lauderdale.

Ramirez didn't tell all his teammates about Monday's appointment.

David Ortiz, one of his friends on the team, said he didn't have any details.

"All I know is that he's going down to Florida to do some personal business," Ortiz said.

"I guess it's something very important to him," said Ortiz, who graduated from high school in the Dominican Republic and isn't a U.S. citizen. "You know how that works. When they give you a day, you've got to show up. Otherwise, they delay."

Ramirez led the AL with a .349 batting average in 2002 and was second to teammate Bill Mueller last season at .325.

"When you decide to do it, you just go for it," Ortiz said.