

C

SPORTS

Section

Kids star, develop in football league

It did not matter that some of them were fortunate enough to come from two-parent homes.

It did not matter that some of them only had a mother - or, in some cases, a grandmother - smiling widely as they ran onto the football field for introductions late last Saturday morning.

All of the 300-plus children, football players and cheerleaders alike, were getting their day in the sun during Opening Ceremonies for the new Youth Development Football League - a league with a greater purpose than creating the next great person to perform in places like Bank of America Stadium.

And what made last Saturday especially cool, though, was the fact that the CHILDREN were out there in the spotlight getting the applause, thanks, in large part, to the efforts of men who have captured the public's gaze a time or two themselves.

The YDFL is believed to be the first youth football league run almost exclusively by former and current National Football League players, and it soon could become a model for youth leagues across the country.

Former Los Angeles Raiders tight end Ethan Horton serves as the league's president and also coaches one of the league's eight teams. Three current Carolina Panthers - Brentson Buckner, Mike Minter and Mike Rucker - also coach teams, while fellow Panther Steve Smith lends his hand with sponsorships.

Among the other former NFL players coaching teams: Myron Bell, Larry Griffin, Andrew Jordan, Adrian Murrell and Anthony Pleasant.

The league - which features teams from West Charlotte, North Charlotte, Concord, Huntersville and East Charlotte - plays its inaugural games this Saturday at Martin Middle School.

The teams have college-themed names: the Clemson Tigers, LSU Tigers, Miami Hurricanes, Michigan Wolverines, Nebraska Cornhuskers, Oklahoma Sooners, SMU Mustangs and USC Trojans. Ages 6 to 8 play flag football, while ages 8 to 13 play tackle.

"My two sons (Jay, 10, and Kyle, 8) used to play in another league, but I just wanted to provide an opportunity for NFL players to make a difference with young people," said Horton, who coaches the YDFL's Miami Hurricanes, along with Griffin, who played defensive back for the Dolphins, Steelers and Oilers.

"It's actually really easy to just go on with your life and not get involved, but all these (NFL) guys want to be involved. They want to help these young people. And there's more impact when there is a group of people doing something, as opposed to an individual. It's about more than football."

The fact that most of the coaches are former or current football celebrities isn't the only thing that makes this league unique. The coaches'

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Overhauled 'D' key for Golden Bulls

Speed and versatility necessary additions

By Herbert L. White
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PHOTO: CALVIN FERGUSON

Sophomore defensive end Donald Haynesworth (right) adds size and quickness to J.C. Smith's defensive line.

One look at Donald Haynesworth illustrates Johnson C. Smith's defensive overhaul to bigger, stronger and faster.

Haynesworth, a 6-3, 260-pound sophomore defensive end, is one of the additions to a Golden Bulls defense that was statistically the CIAA's worst last year. Going into Saturday's season opener against Glenville

State, the changes are obvious.

"We have improved in size. We've got some pretty good big fellas, and we have depth," said Haynesworth, a transfer from Livingstone. "I think that's going to help us out a lot this year."

Smith recruited most heavily on defense, adding size and speed to a unit that gave up yards in chunks in a 0-10 campaign last year. The additions have created competition, which forces

everyone to improve.

"We feel like it's coming along," head coach Daryl McNeill said. "It's just a matter of them getting on the same page with the calls and things like that. We have maybe 15 guys over there that can play. It's just a matter of us getting all 15 on the field at the same time, which we know we can't do. It's a good situation over there right now."

Change has been good
See REBUILT/2C



C. JEMAL HORTON



PHOTO: WADE NASH

Carolina Panthers defensive end Julius Peppers (90) is the most athletic, if not dominant defensive player in the NFL. Teammates and coaches expect a breakout year in Peppers' fourth season.

Chillin' Peppers

Panthers end doesn't buy into the breakout hype

By C. Jemal Horton
THE CHARLOTTE POST

SPARTANBURG, S.C. - Julius Peppers walked into the Carolina Panthers' training camp cafeteria late Monday morning, and the gathered media began scribbling feverishly in their notepads.

Instead of the agility he's used to terrorize NFL

offenses for the previous three seasons, Peppers entered the room with a cautious gait, thanks to the bulky, protective walking boot he wore on his right ankle.

Had Peppers, the Panthers' All-Pro defensive end, gotten seriously injured? Was the career season everyone predicted in jeopardy? And, by

default, were the Panthers' Super Bowl chances injured, too?

Peppers smiled and told reporters what Panthers fans definitely wanted to hear: His ankle's not seriously injured. The boot was just a precaution, something to try and ease a little soreness, he said.

"It's just been building up
See PEPPERS/2C



Peppers

End of season, and era

Sting finale also last game at Coliseum

By Herbert L. White
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The Charlotte Sting has been out of the WNBA playoff chase for weeks, but it's playing for more than the end of the season.

"We're still playing for next year," Sting coach Muggsy Bogues said. "I'm still evaluating. We're not going to quit until the last game is over, and they understand that."

That would be Saturday against Connecticut in the final basketball game at the Charlotte Coliseum. The Sting move to the new arena uptown in 2006.

The Sting, pulling up the rear in the Eastern Conference standings, beat Detroit 56-49 Tuesday to drop the Shock into a tie for the final playoff berth with Washington. The win was the Sting's (5-27) second against Detroit this month, the first opponent Charlotte has beaten more than once.

"It's very important," center Teana Miller



Bogues

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PHOTO: WYNE JERNIGAN

Sting center Teana Miller (left) said the team plays hard despite a losing record.

Football returns at Central State

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WILBERFORCE, Ohio - It's a rebuilding year for Central State.

Football kicks off this week after an eight-year absence at Central State, which won three NAIA national championships in the 1990s and sent such players as Hugh Douglas and Erik Williams to the NFL.

"It's finally here," said coach Theo Lemon. "We're excited

because we're practicing. We're excited that we have some big guys running around campus right now."

Central State dropped its football program following the 1996 season after the NAIA banned the team from postseason play for two years for using academically ineligible players. Later in 1997, the Ohio Legislature required the school - plagued by financial prob-

lems at the time - to drop football for two years as a condition of continued state funding.

In 2001, the school's board of trustees voted to restore football through private donations. School officials said a football program would boost school spirit and enrollment at the state's only historically black public university and increase financial contributions from alumni.

78 SURE IS GREAT



PHOTO: WADE NASH

Independence High running back DeQuann Leak rumbles past West Charlotte's Garnet Taylor in the Patriots' 28-0 win last week at Independence, their national-best 78th straight victory.

Best in West? NCCU's ready

By Bonitta Best
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

It's been a long time since North Carolina Central has received this much preseason hype. The Eagles (8-2 overall, 6-1 CIAA) completed their best 2004 season since 1996 under then coach Larry Little, and became just the sixth team in school history to win eight games.

But despite all the accolades, coach Rod Broadway and Co. just missed the CIAA football championship game and were snubbed by the NCAA for a postseason berth.

NCCU returns the No. 1 offense in the CIAA in tact. Back is senior quarterback Adrian Warren, the top passer in the conference (1,746 yards, 20 touchdowns); back is power running back Greg Pruitt Jr., only the fourth back in Eagle history to rush for 1,000 yards (1,103 yards, five TDs); and back is deep-threat wide receiver Torey Ross (53 catches for 639 yards

and 11 TDs.) The "triple threat" are among nine returning starters on offense.

"It feels good, but since everybody is talking about us, everybody is expecting us to come out and perform," said Warren, the 2004 offensive player of the year. "We're just trying to work hard so we don't let ourselves down or people who are coming to watch us. We're getting there."

What a difference a year makes. Last year this time, Warren was fighting for his starting job.

Warren met the challenge, and then some. "Part of recruiting is that you want to find somebody better than what you have," Broadway said. "We brought in two JUCO players that we thought would beat Adrian out, and he beat them both. Competition made him better. If we can get some of that in the other positions, we'd be in good shape."

Broadway has most of his work to do on
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