

C. JEMAL HORTON

## It's OK to call Panthers out for underachieving

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chise. That was easy, though. That wasn't about expressing disappointment with the players; it was about showing a crazy owner with his own off-the-court issues that you won't be run over.

Show that same fire with the players, when necessary.

And that includes those no-account Charlotte Sting. They're pros, too. They can handle it.

The Charlotte Bobcats are only entering their second NBA season. So perhaps coming down on them for sub-par play is a little drastic. But the Carolina Panthers? After all the hype and that Super Bowl trip, they're fair game. They should be held accountable like players in other big-league cities.

And I'm not just talking about the garden variety booing when the Panthers call a running play that failed on third-and-27 or leaving early to beat the traffic when the team is losing in the fourth quarter. But be firm. Be heard.

Panthers fans don't have to morph into Philadelphia Eagles fans - seriously, if you've had a jail in your stadium, you've got problems - but it's time to toughen up a little bit.

Example: If Julius Peppers played defensive end in New York or Pittsburgh, he'd constantly be reminded that what he's currently giving his team isn't good enough.

In the Carolinas, however, folks seem afraid to call out Peppers, or other stars, for underachieving.

In most NFL cities, it'd be unacceptable for someone generally regarded as the best defensive end in the NFL to have zero sacks entering the sixth game of the season. Sure, Peppers gets double-teamed, and that's hampered his sack total - at least that's what the Panthers are saying.

That explanation doesn't wash with me. Especially since the Panthers barely are 3-2 and the defense has been flagrantly inconsistent.

Indianapolis defensive end Dwight Freeney sees just as

many double-teams as Peppers - and Freeney doesn't have another stud end playing opposite of him, like Peppers has with Mike Rucker. And the same can be said of the New York Giants' Michael Strahan and other celebrity defensive players.

The great ones find a way.

And Peppers definitely is a great one. And the Panthers are a potentially great team. But with the exception of a few players, like Steve Smith, the whole team is underachieving.

That's where the fans come in.

You're beyond the point of feeling lucky to have an NFL franchise. You shouldn't be star-struck anymore. You rub elbows with pro stars in grocery stores, on golf courses and in fast-food joints.

So the next time you see a Charlotte sports celebrity, and he's been playing horribly these days, go ahead. Give him hell.

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## Sixers gushing about Cheeks, atmosphere at training camp

By Dan Gelston  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DURHAM - Maurice Cheeks learned in a week what Philadelphia never really figured out in the last two months of last year: Chris Webber is pretty good if he has the ball.

How good and how effective he can be in this system can't really be answered until the season starts, probably deep into the season. But if the megawatt smile that returned to the five-time All Star's face during training camp was any indication, Cheeks may have figured out how to properly use him.

"We're trying to put our guys in position to learn how to play with him and I think we've done that," Cheeks said. "That was one of the things we were trying to do and one of the things that we accomplished, seeing when we put the ball in his hands the things that can get done. It's the way the guys move, the constant movement we get when we put the ball in his hands."

Webber was noticeably unhappy with the 76ers last year, but Cheeks brought a plan and an enthusiasm to Duke University that not only has revitalized Webber, but the rest of the team.

Everyone from president Billy King down to the trainer gushed last week about Cheeks, from the confidence and organization he instills on a daily basis to the way he kept practices fun.

"Honestly, the atmosphere is different," Allen Iverson said. "It's a lot more relaxed."

While that's all fine now, the true test will be seeing how long this cohesiveness lasts into the regular season. Iverson and Webber may have clicked during camp, but they only practiced three days together with each veteran getting one of the last two days off. An encouraging sign, perhaps, just not enough for a Sixers fan to really feel good that this superstar tandem can coexist.

Cheeks, though, sees no reason that their sharing act can't carry over into the season. While Cheeks earned praise from his players, he was quick to credit his All-Stars for the real reason camp was a success.

"Chris Webber and Allen have a lot to do with it, particularly Chris when we put the ball in his hands," Cheeks said. "I thought the chemistry was great."

Many reasons were tossed around last year for why Webber failed to integrate himself with the Sixers after coming over in a late-season trade - from coaching methods, to his own sore knees.

But the players and coaches think they've got it all figured out this year.

"Now we understand where he likes the ball, where he likes to shoot from," said swingman Andre Iguodala.

What didn't work?

The defense sure looked like it needed some work. After focusing on defensive drills the first couple of days of camp, there were some breakdowns at the end of it, mostly with the first team's defense during a sloppy scrimmage Friday night.

When the preseason starts Tuesday against Houston, Cheeks wants to see improvement because he knows the potential is there for the Sixers to create turnovers and score off the fastbreak.

"We could see the pressure that we could put on people the way we're able to defend," he said. "If we can do it on a constant basis, we could be pretty good."

The Sixers also never got a complete look at their starting five. Center Samuel Dalembert missed all but one day with a quad injury - and on the one day he did play, he left early with a cramp and Webber had the day off.

Forward Shavlik Randolph was hurt the first session of the first day and never practiced again, spoiling his return to Duke, his alma mater.

The injuries gave former Villanova standout Michael Bradley a week to practice with the first team and he looked solid, hustling defensively and working for easy baskets on the low post. Bradley can be a serviceable forward/center off a thin bench, but the Sixers could be in trouble if he's playing more than 5 minutes a game.

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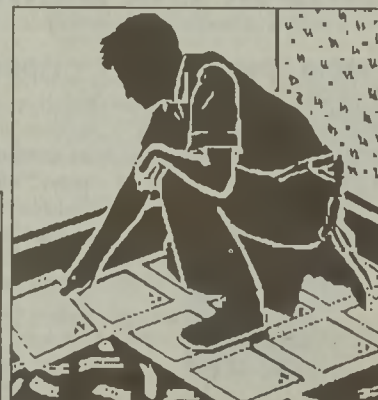
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## New Jersey's trio of Carter, Kidd and Jefferson eager for season

By David Porter  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. - It was the cruelest twist of fate in a season filled with them for the New Jersey Nets. The night Vince Carter made his debut with the team, Richard Jefferson made his exit.

It was late December and the Nets appeared to be on the rise after they acquired Carter from Toronto, giving New Jersey a high-scoring threat to go along with Jefferson and Jason Kidd.

The high hopes changed with one hard fall.

During a game on Dec. 27, Detroit's Chauncy Billups knocked Jefferson to the floor. The fall ruptured a ligament in Jefferson's wrist

and eventually sidelined him for the rest of the regular season. The Nets finished 42-40, but were swept in four games by Miami.

Jefferson is back in camp and completely healed nearly 10 months after the injury, and the Nets are suddenly looking like a contender again. Or at least, talking that way.

"It's exciting. It's a great feeling talking about it and not being afraid to say, 'Yeah, we have a good team, and we're going to be capable of competing,'" Carter said. "It's great to see everybody thinking that way. I think everybody's committed to this team because of the talent we have."

New Jersey's power trio

will have its first opportunity to play together this preseason when Indiana visits Continental Airlines Arena on Tuesday night. It will be a coming-out party of sorts for the Pacers, too, as forward Ron Artest will participate in an NBA game for the first time since his suspension for his part in an ugly brawl last November at The Palace of Auburn Hills.

Jefferson has been even more outwardly optimistic than Carter about the Nets, calling them one of five or six teams capable of winning the NBA title. To be in that class, the Nets will need to get more production out of their big men, starting with 7-footers Nenad Krstic and Jason Collins.