

# Panthers ready to roll

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"Our team got closer," head coach John Fox said. "We came to work and practiced.



Fox

We got freshened up. Without a doubt, we got healed off. We had an opportunity to reflect on some things we were doing schematically in all three phases and I think we improved."

For sure. Receiver Steve Smith had a record day with 201 yards receiving and a pair of scores; quarterback Jake Delhomme hit 21-of-31 passes for 341 yards and three touchdowns. The

offense outgained Minnesota's 452-253 and the defense rolled up four sacks. "Steve had a great game. That's pretty impressive," said Davis, who ran for a couple of scores. "Special teams played great, defense played great. Everybody played great. It's a stepping stone for us. The thing we have to do is keep getting better."

Tampa Bay's no Minnesota, however. The Buccaneers have one of the league's top defenses and a punishing ground attack featuring rookie Carnell Williams. As a division game, it has extra importance. "We take one game at a

time," said Smith. "You look at this (Minnesota) game. It was a win. Next week we've got a bigger challenge. It's that NFC rivalry. We've got to step our game up."

"We have the number one defense in Tampa next week and it's going to be tough," Delhomme said. "There is never an easy game versus those guys. They can bring it. Hopefully, this is a step in the right direction."

Smith, who has five 100-yard receiving games, said Tampa Bay-Carolina doesn't need any hype. Both sides know what to expect.

"You have to be ready for the challenge," he said. "It's going to be a punishing game."

# Bobcats tip off home season

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uptown arena this Saturday against Boston.

"I'm looking forward to playing Chicago," Bickerstaff said flatly, referring to the Bobcats' season-opening road game on Wednesday.

Moments later, he got even more serious. "We want to try to disrupt the NBA, if we can," Bickerstaff said. "(To) the prognosticators, it's pretty much like it was last year - we may be the worst team in the NBA. So we want to kind of disrupt things, if we possibly can."

For that to happen, the second-year Bobcats will have to be like the rest of the NBA this season: vastly different.

And, well, they can be.

While rookie point guard Raymond Felton's off-season playoff proclamation is highly unlikely, the Bobcats have made clear improvements to a team that went a surprising 18-64 and avoided having the worst record in the NBA last season (that distinction belonged to 13-win Atlanta).

Critical personnel additions and an increasing familiarity with his philosophy, Bickerstaff said, should allow the Bobcats to be better defensively - a necessity since only four teams allowed opponents to shoot a better field goal percentage than did the Bobcats (46.3), which contributed to their propensity for squandering leads in the fourth quarter.

"I think you improve simply in that the things you did last year, you're doing those things this year," Bickerstaff said. "So there's a little better reaction, as opposed to thinking."

"I certainly don't want to change our personality. What we're trying to tell the guys is: 'We're aggressive. Let's stay aggressive.' And eventually they represent (the coach's) personality."

Already, the players reflect Bickerstaff's drive.

Power forward Emeka Okafor, last year's NBA rookie of the year, showed up at training camp with 20 pounds of new muscle (if that's possible). And to improve his scoring potential, Okafor (15.1 points, 10.9 rebounds) spent two weeks this summer getting tutored on post moves by NBA legend Hakeem Olajuwon.

The Bobcats should benefit greatly from having most of their 2004-05 starting lineup intact, with point guard Brevin Knight, shooting guard Kareem Rush, small forward Gerald Wallace and center Primož Brezec joining Okafor.

Depth, however, could be the critical difference this season. Promising first-round draft picks Felton and Sean May, who played together at North Carolina, might be the first two players off the bench. And veterans Keith Bogans and Melvin Ely, who dropped 20 pounds, will provide stability.

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