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SPORTS

Section

Hand Heisman over to Reggie

It's pretty amazing how so many Heisman Trophy candidates have been manufactured and force-fed down our throats this college football season.

One week, a college football "expert" for a national television show is yapping to us about how Notre Dame's much-improved quarterback, Brady Quinn, has played



himself into Heisman "contention." Another week, someone is trying to convince us that Texas quarterback Vince Young actually is a Heisman Trophy "favorite."

Please. Cut the melodramatics, guys.

We all know that only one man REALLY is a Heisman Trophy candidate this year: Southern California tailback and kick returner Reggie Bush; those other players are just trying to win a free trip to New York City to give him pats on the back when he's announced the winner.

Look, if anybody other than Bush wins the Heisman when the award is presented Saturday, then they should just stop giving the trophy.

Don't talk to me about how Bush and his teammate Matt Leinart - who did actually win the award last year - could hurt each other by splitting the vote. Don't talk to me about Bush playing on the West Coast, while most of the college football world focuses on the East Coast. And definitely don't talk to me about how Bush had a supposed advantage over other Heisman candidates because opposing defenses had to focus on other freakishly talented USC players besides Bush.

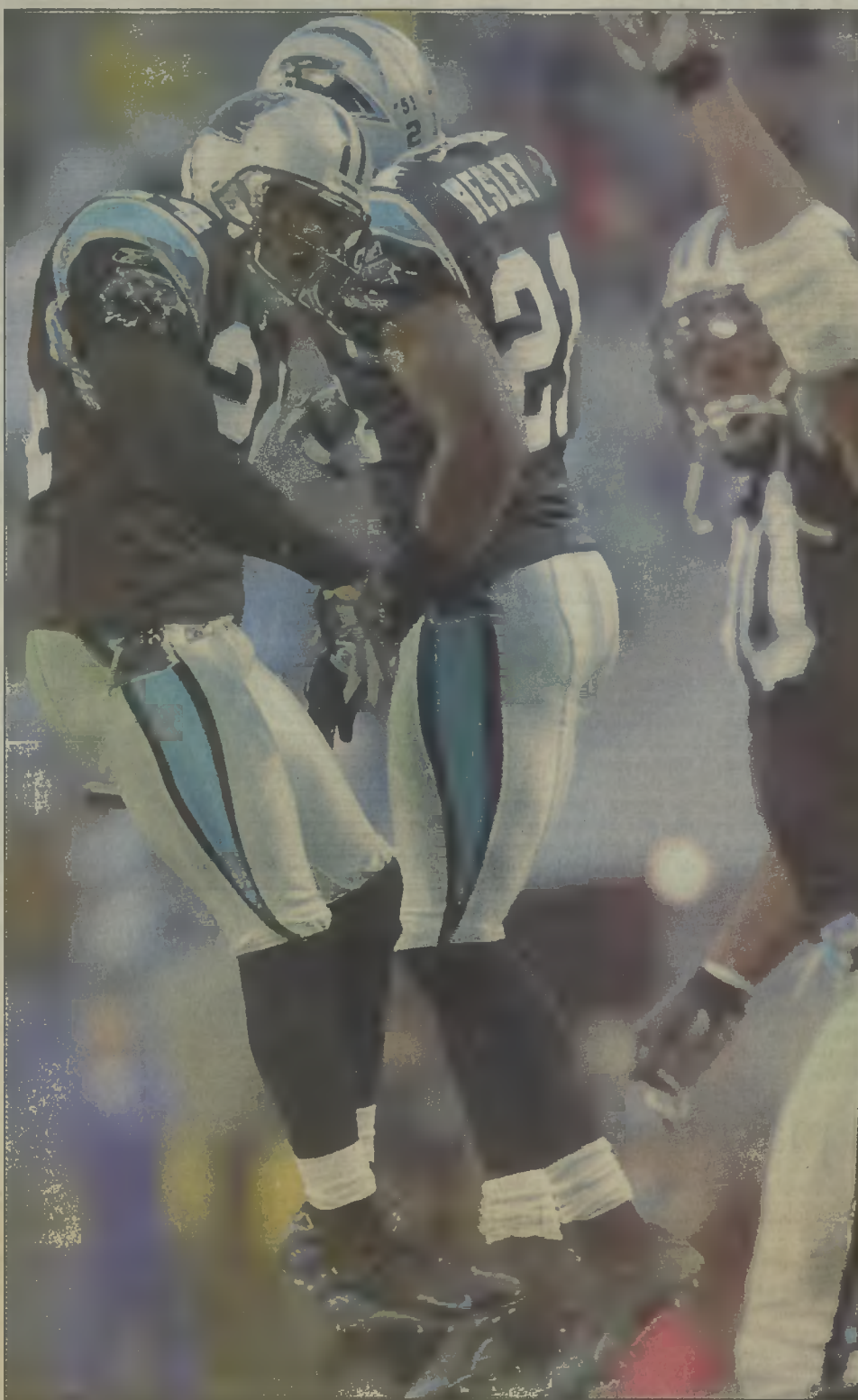
Neither argument holds water.

Bush is having the most dominating college football season I've seen since Barry Sanders in 1988. And no player ever has made it look easier.

All the ballots are in. If Bush doesn't win Saturday, it will be the most egregious Heisman injustice since 1956, when Paul Hornung won and Jim Brown finished FIFTH in the balloting.

At any rate, here are the top four players I see competing for SECOND place:

1. Young. Any other year, See JUST/3C



PHOTOS/CURTIS WILSON

Carolina Panthers Ricky Manning, Dante Wesley and Julius Peppers celebrate after Manning's interception in Carolina's 24-6 win over Atlanta Sunday in Charlotte. Since 2002, Carolina is 11-3 in December.

Win or go home

December can propel - or sink - playoff aspirations

By David Dawson
THE CHARLOTTE POST

December football separates contenders from pretenders.

Since 2002 under head coach John Fox, the Carolina Panthers are 11-3 in December. After a 24-6 win over NFC South rival Atlanta, Carolina has a one game lead on Tampa Bay Buccaneers

tugging at their heels.

With a fired up defense, the team played and will continue to play with the playoff mentality, win or go home. Some Panthers feel that the playoffs have already started.

"We are going to get ready for Tampa this week, cause all of these games are like playoff type games for us now because the NFC is so tight,"

said cornerback Ken Lucas. "So we can't take any games for granted."

Safety Marlon McCree, who racked up seven tackles against the Falcons, agrees. "To us this is the playoffs. From here on out we are in the playoffs. We have one conference and three divisional games and we can't afford to



Lucas

See DECEMBER/2C

49ers finally finding range

Charlotte four-game win streak a matter of improved shooting

By James Hamlin
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

In their first eight games the Charlotte 49ers have experienced plenty from offensive frustration in their three game losing streak to clutch play at home and on the road in confidence building wins.

The 49ers' rocky 1-3 start had many wondering why the 49ers were picked to finish second in the Atlantic 10 this season. Head coach Bobby Lutz says, "in the three losses we were just really, really unable to shoot the ball." In those three games Charlotte shot 27.9 percent from the field, including 18.4 percent of three-pointers.



Lutz

Those figures would keep any coach up all night looking for answers, but Charlotte has experienced more success, winning all four and improving its shooting to 40.5 percent from the field and 37.6 percent from long distance. While those numbers aren't impressive, they do represent a dramatic improvement.

"Fortunately our best basketball is in front of us because it seems when we're shooting well from the perimeter we're not shooting well from the inside and when we're shooting well from the inside we're not shooting well from the perimeter," says Lutz.

That lack of balance has hurt the early numbers of senior forward, Curtis Withers who has seen more than one defender hounding him at the offensive end. "If we get balance on our team it's going to force opponents to decide how they're going to play us. And I think Curt will individually

See CHARLOTTE/2C

Shaq drops in on last place Lakers

By Beth Harris
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES - Shaquille O'Neal dropped in on the last-place Lakers, soaked up a standing ovation, and split before his former team eked out a win over the Charlotte Bobcats.

If he had stuck around, O'Neal would have seen Kobe Bryant make two free throws with 7 seconds remaining for a 99-98 victory Sunday night.

O'Neal created a stir when he strode to his courtside seat during a timeout late in the second quarter. The quiet crowd suddenly erupted when O'Neal's smiling face was shown on the overhead screen.



O'Neal

"I didn't see him, but I heard the noise and wondered what was going on," coach Phil Jackson said. "It was great he came by."

O'Neal was in town ahead of Miami's game against the Clippers on Monday night. He is still recovering from a sprained ankle and left at half-time.

At first, Bryant said he hadn't spotted O'Neal, with whom he shared a tenuous relationship during their years in Los Angeles. Then he admitted he had, but said the big man's presence had "zero" effect on the Lakers.

Bryant's 9-for-30 shooting didn't help matters, but he made 11 of 12 free throws and finished with 29 points.

See CLEMENS/3C

Season of change and challenge in HBCU football

By Herbert L. White
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For the first time, Charlotte ushered out the black college football season, and what a season it was.

Worth cheering: There was lots of good, like the ascension of N.C. Central to the top of the CIAA for the first time since 1980, and St. Augustine's becoming the first CIAA school to be ranked first in a regional poll ever. Willard Bailey proved that good coaching stands for something, taking St. Paul's to instant respect in its first season of varsity ball since 1982.

Perhaps the best thing is the overall improvement of CIAA programs, long a stepchild of black college football. Not only did St. Aug's Central and St. Paul's produce breakout campaigns, Bowie State was more than representative at the Pioneer Bowl before los-



PHOTOS/CURTIS WILSON

Tuskegee receiver Calvin Russell pulls in a pass as Bowie State's Byron Anderson defends in the Pioneer Bowl Saturday at Memorial Stadium. Tuskegee won 28-26.

ing to Tuskegee 28-26. After so many years of being an afterthought to hoops, CIAA football is finally showing signs of life at the top.

• Boos clues: There can be no good without bad. Johnson C. Smith tops that list, going winless for the second straight season and losers of a school-record 24 straight. No one should've expected an overnight change in the

See BLACK/2C

Brightest stars add luster to baseball classic

By Mike Fitzpatrick
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS - Roger Clemens, Derek Jeter and Barry Bonds plan to play for the United States in the World Baseball Classic, while Alex Rodriguez is still deciding which country he wants to represent.

Mike Piazza (Italy), Andruw Jones (the Netherlands) and Pedro Martinez (Dominican Republic) are also among the 177 major leaguers who have agreed to participate in the inaugural, 16-nation tournament next March 3-20.

"This is going to be the most important international baseball event ever staged," Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig said on Monday during a news conference at the winter meetings to announce the latest details.

"I think this is going to take the whole interna-

