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'Banner' open to our own groove

For a while there, R. Kelly almost had me in a quandary. As was the case with many people, I at first didn't know how exactly to take Kelly's "steppers" rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the Bernard Hopkins-Jermain Taylor boxing match a few weeks ago. So I waited a week and watched the replay of Kelly's performance



C. JEMAL HORTON

— and the fight — on HBO. Now, I finally get it. I know how I truly feel about the performance. I love it. With a straight face, I can say that R. Kelly ranks a close third behind Jimi Hendrix (1969) and Marvin Gaye (1983) on my list of people who have provided the greatest renditions of "The Star-Spangled Banner" over the years.

Kelly's version came across just as heartfelt and, yes, patriotic as those Hendrix and Gaye gave us years ago. I'll admit being a bit surprised when I first saw the steppers in the boxing ring, but the version of the song itself was brilliant, if not classy.

And in the spirit of the ideals the song and this country allege to represent, "Kells" had a right to do it that way — yep, even though he threw in a "Come on, clap ya hands!" before that smooth breakdown near the end.

Apparently, though, I am in the minority.

Perhaps it's because he's an accused pedophile. But since giving his adaptation that night, Kelly has been roundly criticized — to say the least — for "bastardizing" the United States' national anthem. That was evident by the smattering of boos that could be heard after Kelly finished singing. It became even more obvious in the days after the fight, when some writers who cover boxing — and many who do not — ripped Kelly apart in print.

Morris W. O'Kelly, who writes something called the Mo'Kelly Report, said R. Kelly's version "was probably one of the most horrible and disrespectful abominations of the song on record ... EVER."

Gregory Moore, writing on

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PHOTOS/CURTIS WILSON

Charlotte Bobcats forward Sean May (above) and point guard Raymond Felton (left) have been forced to cope with losing on a consistent basis with the second-year NBA team.



Felton

Growing pains

Losing in NBA toughens Bobcats rookies

By C. Jemal Horton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

As scores of U2 concertgoers began lining up outside Charlotte Bobcats Arena late Monday morning, Raymond Felton and Sean May sat just below them, inside the Bobcats' darkened locker room, and talked.

This was a rare moment for the promising rookies. Even

though they are close friends and former college teammates at North Carolina, they don't often spend a lot of time together when they're not on the court. There's coveted sleep to get and a new city to learn on their individual terms.

But on this day, having arrived about an hour before most of their teammates,

Felton and May just sat and shared some time.

The central topic?

What they could do to change the Bobcats' losing ways — the team had lost seven consecutive games at that point — and how they could transform themselves as players.

Going from the reigning See BOBCATS/2C

Young Bulls learning ropes

By Cheris F. Hodges

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The Johnson C. Smith women's basketball team is experiencing growing pains.

With two sophomores and a freshman in the starting lineup, head coach Vanessa Taylor said the 4-6 Golden Bulls have had their share of ups and downs.

"With a young team, it's like Cracker Jacks. Sometimes you get a prize you like and sometimes you get a prize you don't like," Taylor said.

At times, she said, the freshmen have been a spark. One of the best is freshman Janai Jackson, this week's CIAA rookie of the week. In Tuesday's loss against Paine, Jackson played 36 minutes, scored 11 points and picked Paine for five steals.



Taylor

Jackson said she isn't intimidated about starting so soon.

"I came from a good high school and we had a good record," she said. "I feel like I'm ready. It's a challenge but I have to stand up and play."

Off the bench, freshman Whitney Barnes added 19 minutes and grabbed eight rebounds.

Barnes said she was surprised that she's playing so many minutes as a freshman.

"I know I have to step up and do what a freshman wouldn't normally have to do at a larger school," Barnes said.

When she's on the floor, Barnes said all the "freshman stuff" has to go out the window.

Taylor said getting the younger players experience early in the season will pay off down the stretch when conference play begins.



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Freshman Janai Jackson is one of J.C. Smith's top underclassmen.

Ex-S.C. State standout named to football hall

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Donnie Shell now has the ultimate small-college football honor.

Shell, an all-America football player at S.C. State who went on to a professional career with the Pittsburgh Steelers, was one of three players inducted into the Division II Hall of Fame last week in Florence, Ala.

Since 1994, Shell, who lives in Rock Hill, has served as Director of Player Development with the Carolina Panthers.

Shell, a standout defensive back and linebacker for the Bulldogs during his collegiate career (1970-73), will be joined in the 2005 class of inductees by former Valdosta State quarterback and later head coach Chris Hatcher and former Pittsburg State running back Ronald Moore. The trio was chosen by a 20-member selection committee.

Shell and Hatcher are the second inductees from their respective schools into the Division

Please see SHELL/3C

Final 3 games measure Panthers' will

By David Dawson
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Carolina Panthers are best positioned to clear their own fuzzy playoff picture.

Last week's 20-10 loss to Tampa Bay left both teams 9-4 atop the NFC South. However, the Panthers are ahead with a 3-1 record compared to Carolina's 2-2 division record. But don't tell Panthers' head coach John Fox that.

"There are still three games left. The record is a tie, we're tied for first in the standings. Where it'll end up, who knows," said Fox.

The regular season is down to the last three games.

On Sunday, Carolina faces New Orleans in Baton Rouge, La. The Saints beat the Panthers



PHOTOS/CURTIS WILSON

Panthers receiver Steve Smith was brought to his knees after a Will Allen hit in Carolina's 20-10 loss to Tampa Bay last week.

23-20 in the season opener. On Christmas Eve, they'll saddle up against Dallas for their final home game at Bank of America Stadium and then Atlanta at the Georgia Dome on Jan. 1.

"These games are like playoff games," safety Mike Minter said. "With this loss, we have

to continue to win and we have to win them out. In order for us to get to where we need to get to we need to win them out."

Defensive end Julius Peppers believes the division is up for grabs.

"The division isn't won," he said. "It wasn't won before (the

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