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SPORTS

Section

Artest troubled, not the devil

This is what you should know about Ron Artest:

He is the hardest-working basketball player I have seen in my life - and that includes his former Indiana Pacers teammate, Reggie Miller, the man who was allergic to developing love handles, and even The Great Michael Jordan.

During the two seasons I covered Artest in Indiana, he literally would go to Consecro Fieldhouse at 3 o'clock in the morning sometimes, just so he could work on his jump shot and run wind sprints. I marveled him. Pacers management applauded him.



C. JEMAL HORTON

And, despite being portrayed as a criminal after the infamous brawl in Detroit last year, you should know Artest isn't just some thug with an affinity for physical violence. In late 2002, Artest's then-fiancée, Kimisha Hatfield started hitting him in the head during an argument. Artest didn't hit back; he gathered the couple's children, went outside and called the police.

Hardly what you'd expect from what too many people seem to consider the biggest sports villain since Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson.

But why should people in Charlotte care about what kind of person Artest is?

First, I believe a few misconceptions about the man need to be clarified. I mean, our country is so hellbent on identifying the next bad guy that we too quickly draw negative conclusions about people before we really know them. And, to some degree, that's what happened with Artest after the brawl in Detroit, even among people who don't actually follow NBA basketball.

And, secondly, as many of you know, Artest is on the trading block now - mainly because Pacers management reached its breaking point recently, after Artest came out and said he was unhappy with his offensive role and wanted to be sent to another team.

Pacers CEO Donnie Walsh said the team has gotten calls from several NBA teams, wondering exactly what Indiana will accept in a trade for Artest. And, well, it would be naive to think that the Charlotte Bobcats don't at least have their antennae up, at least momentarily considering how a player of Artest's caliber - in my book, he's one of the 10 best players in the game - might work in the Queen City.

Well, let me tell you: He won't.

The Bobcats, with all their young, impressionable players, should stay the heck away from a guy such as Artest. Bernie Bickerstaff and Ed Tapscott have put in too much work in these few years to allow Artest to come in and tear it down.

Sound like I'm contradicting myself? What happened to the genuine guy I spoke of in the early paragraphs of this story, you ask?

Well, I'd never be one to say Artest doesn't have issues. He has some serious issues.

But none of them are based on Artest's being the devil, as

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PHOTO/CURTIS WILSON

Panthers linebacker Will Witherspoon celebrates after sacking Dallas quarterback Drew Bledsoe Saturday, but Carolina dropped to 10-5 with a 24-20 loss.

All or nothing

Carolina gets final chance to join NFL's playoff party

By David Dawson THE CHARLOTTE POST

To sum up the Carolina Panthers playoff picture is simple. Win it to be in it or have déjà vu blues.

If the Panthers dominate Atlanta at the Georgia Dome they seal a playoff spot. However, Michael Vick could give the

Panthers the déjà vu blues and end the Panthers' playoff hopes like New Orleans did last year.

On the last play of that game, John Kasay's 60-yard field goal attempt was blocked to end the Panthers' playoff contention.

The odds are stacked against the Panthers at the Dome. Under head coach John Fox they're

record is 0-3 and two of the last three meetings in Atlanta ended in overtime. Fox believes that records are made to be broken and they control their own destiny.

"The number one seed doesn't always win it. The way I look at it is that the playoffs have already

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Season finale a familiar spot for Panthers

By Cheris F. Hodges cherishodges@thecharlottepost.com

It's like déjà vu all over again. Last season an injury-decimated Carolina needed to win the finale against New Orleans to make post season play.

Once again, the Panthers are in a playoff game situation, this time against Atlanta, which could play the role of spoiler since the Falcons were knocked out of the playoff picture last week.

"We have to see what we can do next week," said quarterback Jake Delhomme.

After Saturday's loss to Dallas, the Panthers find themselves in a must win situation against the Falcons. Carolina can clinch a wildcard with a victory and the NFC South title with a victory and a Tampa Bay loss.

Tampa hosts the Saints Sunday. "We have to take care of business," said cornerback Ken Lucas. "We had a lot of opportunities (against Dallas) and we just

didn't compete today. Hopefully we can get the job done (against Atlanta). We were in the driver's seat for two weeks and now our backs are definitely against the wall. We have to do what we have to do and not depend on anybody else."

The Panthers' slide began with their home loss to Tampa. The Bucs and the Panthers battle for the top spot in the NFC South all season, Tampa holds the tiebreak over Carolina.

Tight end Michael Gaines said going into this week's game everyone is going to be focused on the task at hand.

"We're going to bounce back, we have good character on this team," he said. "We just have to work harder. With the playoffs right around the corner we have to do our job."

History isn't on Carolina's side Sunday; the Panthers have never won against the Falcons in Atlanta with quarterback Michael Vick under center.



Delhomme



Lucas

Toumey has deep talent, exposure

Top college prospects playing in Bojangles' Shootout this weekend

By Herbert L. White herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

The sixth year of the Bojangles' High School Shootout is bigger than ever.

The tournament will bring together 24 teams from around the country for three days and three championships to be decided Saturday at Charlotte Latin. This year, the tournament will take on a big-time feel with four games played today at Charlotte Bobcats Arena, starting with Charlotte Christian against West Charlotte at 3:30 p.m., followed by South Mecklenburg and Providence Day girls at 5:30.

Tickets are \$9 (youth/student day) \$24 (youth/student three-day pass) \$12 adult day) and \$30 (adult three-day pass). Proceeds go to the Dell Curry Charity for Youth, a community nonprofit that provides computer and tutoring services for children in underserved communities.

WJZY-TV (channel 46) will televise the local/regional boys championship game Saturday at 5 p.m. and Time Warner Cable will show all three championship games on tape delay and the national boys' semifinals Friday. The national girls title will be decided at 7 p.m. and the national

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PRIME BEEF:

Riley mulls a weighty idea to aid Shaq

By Tim Reynolds THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI - Shaquille O'Neal laughed at the idea: diaper-clad men of gargantuan size summoned as battering rams to make the NBA's most imposing big man even better.

Don't laugh, Shaq. It might happen. Coach Pat Riley is talking about adding extra bulk - and he means real tonnage - to Miami Heat practices.

Riley's idea? Sumo wrestlers.

"We're going to bring them in and have them lean on him and lean on him and we're not going to let him just back them in," Riley said. "And then he's going to have to take 100 jump hooks and 100 turnaround jumpers."

In Riley's eyes, there isn't much difference between sumo wrestling and the way teams defend his 7-foot-1, 340-pound center. Matches between sumotoris dressed in mawashis - diapers, in the vernacular of the uninformed - typically last 10 to 15 seconds, with two massive men pushing and shoving, trying to knock the other from a circular area.

Defending Shaq is essentially the same concept.

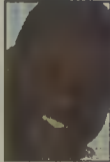
"The only ways for teams to keep Shaquille from getting good position is to hold him and to grab him," Heat center Alonzo Mourning said.

Opposing post players often keep at least one arm and often both - plus elbows - in his back, using every bit of leverage they can muster from their 260-pound bodies to keep him away from the basket. If O'Neal defended in a similar fashion, bodies would fly and he'd spend most games entirely sidelined with foul trouble.

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Riley



O'Neal