

C. JEMAL HORTON

Carolina's rise or fall starts, ends with Delhomme

Continued from page 1C

And for all the criticism he's taken this season for fumbling the football and making errant throws, the Panthers have won 12 of their 17 games this season. And Jake had a whole lot to do with that, just as he did during the Super Bowl season of 2003.

So we know Jake CAN lead the Panthers to a big-time

victory on the road.

The thing is, this weekend, he HAS to lead them.

There can be no sloppy mistakes against this Bears defense. Not with a beast like Brian Urlacher in the middle. Not with defensive backs such as Nathan Vasher and Mike Brown back there prowling, waiting to pick off a pass. This is a Chicago

defense that not only intercepts the football; it runs with the ball and scores touchdowns with regularity. And in a game that will undoubtedly be close from start to finish, one ill-advised throw from Jake could cost the Panthers their season.

It has been mentioned several times this week that the Bears had the No. 2-rated

defense in the NFL, behind Tampa Bay. But most people consider Chicago's to be the best in the league. Period. So there's a good chance the Bears will be successful at containing Panthers running back DeShaun Foster, who is coming off a great first-round performance against the New York Giants last weekend.

If Foster's effectiveness in

the running game indeed is minimized, that leaves Jake to do the bulk of the heavy lifting.

He'll have to use all his weapons wisely - Foster is a superb receiver out of the backfield.

Jake will have to find Smith the millisecond he becomes open, which might not be often.

Jake will have to hold on to the ball when he gets hit.

The bottom line? The Panthers gotta, wanna, needa, getta, havea great game from Jake.

E-mail columnist C. Jemal Horton at sejemalwrite@aol.com.

NBA's Pistons take heat for calendar with sexy pictures

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUBURN HILLS, Mich. — A 2006 calendar showing scantily clad women from the Detroit Pistons dance team has drawn criticism from a Christian group that says the pictures are too sexy.

The calendar is in its third year and shows members of the Pistons dance team Automotion in - and partially out of - swimsuits.

The American Decency Association last month started an e-mail campaign to officials of the NBA club, saying the calendar is inappropriate for a team supported by families, women and young children.

"To me, this is a form of prostitution," said Barbara Rotary of Pontiac, who said she saw the calendar while Christmas shopping and alerted the group. "The Pistons are profiting from using women's bodies this way."

The association is based in Fremont, about 40 miles north of Grand Rapids in rural western Michigan.

In a mission statement on its Web site, the

group says, "As Christians, we need to be increasingly discerning regarding our choices of media entertainment, recognizing that our bodies are the temple of the Lord, and we should not expose ourselves to that which will degrade and dishonor."

Pistons president Tom Wilson said the calendar is artistic and tasteful and contains images anyone could see on the beach.

"We've had far more positive comments than negative," Wilson told The Detroit News. "The girls look beautiful. They don't look sleazy or cheap."

The calendar shows the dancers posing around Michigan. The team gave away most of the 8,000 calendars at a December game, while others are on sale for \$13 in team stores. Buyers must be at least 18 years old. Profits go to charity.

On the Net:

Detroit Pistons:

www.nba.com/pistons/

American Decency Association:

www.americandecency.org

NBDL showcases talents

FROM STAFF REPORTS

FAYETTEVILLE — Players in the NBA Development League will demonstrate their talents for NBA scouts and fans during a two-day, MLK Showcase in Fayetteville Jan. 15-16 at the Crown Coliseum.

"We expect up to 100 NBA dignitaries from teams around the United States to be in attendance," said Todd DeMoss, president of the Fayetteville Patriots. "The opportunity to see more than 80 players - in real game situations, no less - is invaluable to the team executives responsible for discovering that talent."

According to NBA rules, D-League players who are not

designated by NBA teams can be signed by any NBA team at any time. The NBA 10-day contract signing period began Jan. 5.

The showcase opens at 11 a.m. and closes with an 8 p.m. game on Jan. 16. Eight games are scheduled over the two days, and all will be televised on NBA TV. Games are open to the public.

"By hosting D-League Showcase, the Patriots have given Fayetteville a great opportunity to shine in front of a national audience," said John Meroski, president and CEO of the Fayetteville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

One-day passes are \$10 and two-day passes are \$15.

Individual game tickets and group prices are available. For more information on tickets, or a full schedule of games, contact the Fayetteville Patriots at 213-1000.

The NBA Development League offers players the opportunity to develop their talents under the NBA's direction and guidance. D-League teams have direct affiliation with NBA Teams. In addition to the Patriots, other teams include the Austin Toros, the Arkansas RimRockers, the Tulsa 66ers, the Albuquerque Thunderbirds, the Florida Flame, the Roanoke Dazzle and the Fort Worth Flyers.

Former Hampton standout Mathis rolls into first Pro Bowl berth

Former Hampton standout Jerome Mathis earned his first Pro Bowl berth as a kick returner.



By Carter Tede
HOUSTON TEXANS.COM

When your team has posted just two wins before Christmas, rarely do you have a legitimate shot at a winter trip to Honolulu. Throw in the fact that you're a rookie and the odds are even greater.

But you can't argue with numbers. And that's why Jerome Mathis is heading to Hawaii on the league's dime as the AFC's 2006 Pro Bowl kick returner.

"He's been pretty consistent back there," former head coach Dom Capers said. "It's always great when you're honored by your peers. To have a chance to go over there and play as a rookie is quite an honor."

Mathis posted phenomenal kick return numbers in 2005. He returned 47 kickoffs for 1,402 yards and two touchdowns in just 10 games. In fact, Mathis has the second-highest single-season kick return average in the NFL dating back to the 1996 season when Carolina's Michael Bates (under Capers) had a 30.2-yard average.

Mathis is the fourth Texan to earn a Pro Bowl invitation, not to mention the first rookie and special teams player. San Diego linebacker Shawne Merriman was the only other rookie selected, upping the league total to seven this decade.

"It's a wonderful feeling," Mathis said after Capers made the announcement after practice Wednesday. "Everybody's giving me all the credit but most of it, in my heart, goes to Joe Marciano and the guys blocking for me. The

guys he put in front of me are a wonderful group who believe in just putting a body on a body and letting me take care of the rest."

The Pro Bowl voting is split evenly into three parts - fans, players and coaches. Players and coaches vote only for their team's conference and aren't allowed to vote for members of their own team.

Mathis wasn't even on the online fan ballot until a few weeks ago as the Texans had originally submitted cornerback Phillip Buchanon as their kick returner. So we know Mathis didn't get many votes from the fans.

That left the players and coaches. Yesterday afternoon the Texans split into offense and defense and filed into two auditoriums to conduct their voting. Meanwhile, the coaches voted in the respective meeting rooms. Each was given a list of players by position and, more importantly for Mathis, a complete set of league stats through Week 15.

Most players in the AFC couldn't pick Mathis out of a lineup. But his numbers were tough to ignore. Mathis' 29.8-yard average on kickoff returns led the conference (and NFL for that matter), nearly a yard better than Buffalo's Terrence McGee, who was last year's Pro Bowl representative. And while Mathis had two touchdowns - one on national television when many of his peers were tuning in - McGee and the next four players listed after him didn't have any scores. That had to jump out at the players, especially at a rather inconspicuous position compared to the glamour boys at, say, quarterback, wide receiver and defensive end.

The coaches? That voting bloc was likely a slam dunk for Mathis. The Texans have played eight AFC opponents to date and each of them had to be blown away during game planning by the speed they saw on film. We're guessing both the Colts and Chiefs - victims of Mathis' touchdown returns of 89 and 99 yards, respectively - cast their votes for the rookie.

"Any time he has the ball, he can score," special teams coordinator Joe Marciano said. "That's what makes him so special."

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