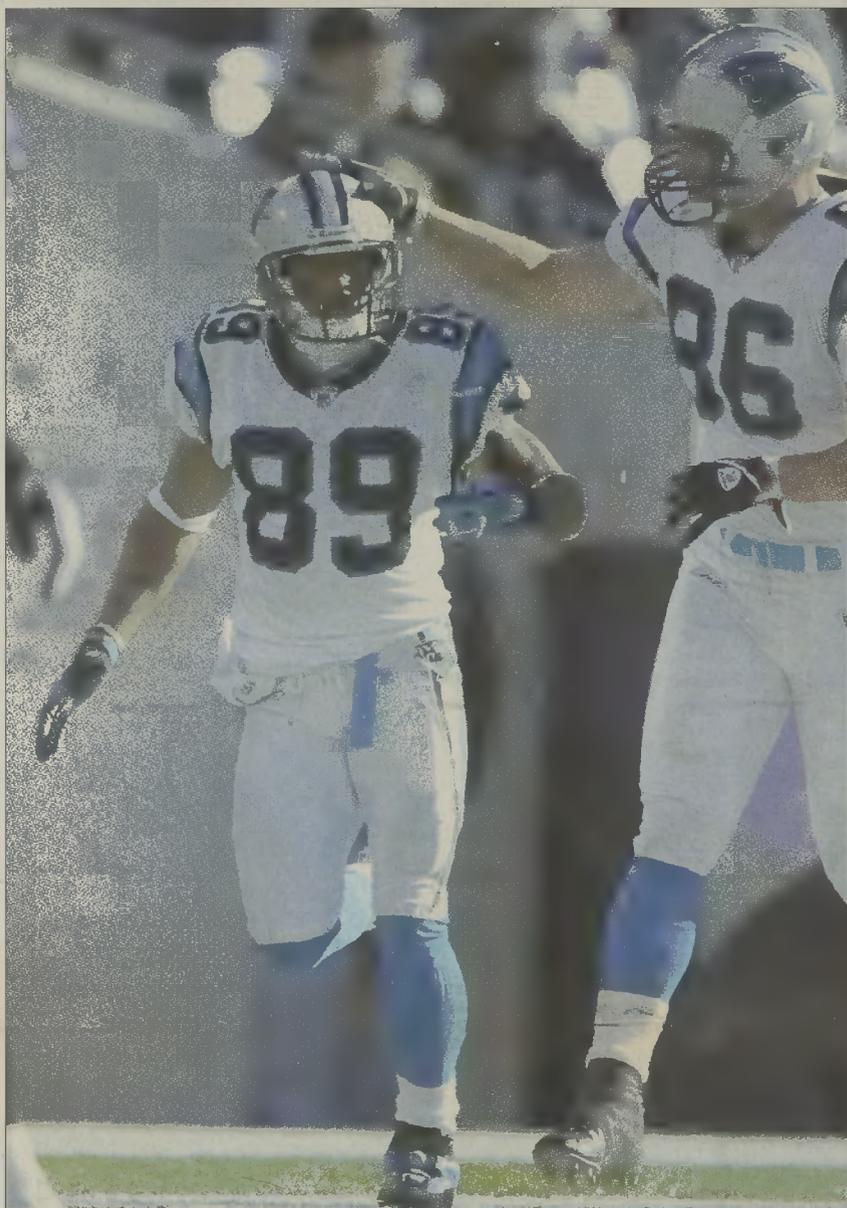


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SPORTS

Section



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/CHRIS GARDNER

Carolina Panthers tight end Kris Mangum, right, congratulates teammate Steve Smith after Smith scored a touchdown Sunday against Baltimore. The Panthers are 4-0 since Smith returned to the lineup. Carolina went 0-2 without the receiver.

It's full speed ahead

Surging Panthers look like contender with Smith at top form

By Mike Cranston
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Steve Smith has reached top speed, and so have the Carolina Panthers.

The Panthers started 0-2 while Smith nursed a hamstring injury. He returned to the lineup in Week 3 and Carolina hasn't lost since, although it was apparent Smith wasn't in top form. His

breakaway speed hadn't returned, and he had three drops in a win over Cleveland.

The old Smith returned Sunday as the Panthers beat Baltimore 23-21 for their fourth straight win.

Smith had eight catches for 189 yards, including a 72-yard touchdown catch that

grab Jake Delhomme's underthrown ball over the middle and then take off. He beat speedy Ravens cornerback Samari Rolle to the right corner of the end zone for the decisive touchdown.

"You've got to remember Steve went through two hamstring pulls, missed most of camp as well as the pre-season games and two

regular season games," coach John Fox said Monday. "No matter how good you are, in this game you have to get into condition to play it. I'm not just talking about weightlifting and cardiovascular work, I'm talking about playing the game. At this level it's a certain speed. Until you're out there doing

Please see WITH TOP/3C



PHOTO/CURTIS WILSON

Charlotte Bobcats center Emeke Okafor is slowly working back into condition after missing most of last season with an ankle injury.

Bobcats bigs on the mend, one day at time

Okafor, May rebounding from injury-plagued season

By Erica Singleton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Bobcats Arena was jumping on Monday as an estimated 17,000 middles school students from around the region screamed, danced, and cheered on the Charlotte Bobcats at the Cool Schools morning game. But the energy in the Arena did not always translate onto the court, as the Bobcats looked slow and sluggish, right from the beginning. This "slow motion" basketball, some blamed the early 10am game time for, was especially evident with the play of forward/center Emeke Okafor.

Okafor, who missed 56 games last season due to an ankle injury, was itching to get back on the court to play in real game situations, since he had not played since January. For the pre-season Okafor is averaging about four points and five rebounds, compared to the 12.9 points and 10 boards he was posting before his injury. Yet, the low numbers so far are no concern to "Meek."

"I feel good," said Okafor. "Right now it's just, fine-tuning everything. You can do all the off-season stuff you want to, but you can't ever replicate actually getting in the game and the speed and the adrenaline, and all that stuff."

The idea of not being able to replicate or simulate the real NBA experience was seconded by Forward Sean May. May has also not been on

Please see BOBCATS/3C

Black managers in jeopardy; so are players, fans

By Tim Dahlberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dusty Baker is gone. Frank Robinson is finished.

Cito Gaston won two World Series for the Toronto Blue Jays but hasn't seen the inside of a dugout in years. And Don Baylor suffered the same fate a few years ago that befalls losing managers everywhere - he was fired.

So now there is one.
One black manager in baseball.

The same number there was in 1975, the year Robinson made history by becoming the first of his kind in the major leagues.

One.
Not a token one, to be sure. Willie Randolph has some serious credentials, and he just might have his New York Mets on the way to the World Series.

But, in a sport that has liked to pat itself on the back in recent years for opening the way to

See FADING2C