

Fast Freddie enjoying life in the fast Lane

Fred Lane is going places.

That's a surprise to some people in the NFL, but not to the diminutive runner from tiny Lane College in Jackson, Tenn.

Lane burst onto the scene last year as a rookie for the Carolina Panthers. He started slow, but gather momentum as the team went down the stretch run of their season. After a slow start, he rushed for more than 100 yards in three of the team's final four games and had four 100-yard games. Lane finished the season with a team-high 809 yards rushing and seven touchdowns.



Fred Lane

That took a lot of NFL experts by surprise. With Anthony Johnson, who had rushed for a team-record 1,000 yards the previous season, and highly coveted Tshmonga Biakabatuka on the team, the tailback position was considered a closed issue.

Especially considering the fact that Lane came to the team as a free agent and was expected to be little more than practice fodder for the team during training camp. But Lane's hard-nosed running style earned him points with the team's management and the Panthers' linemen. After earning a slot on the regular season roster with his tough running style, he slowly worked his way into the lineup.

"I never doubted that I could play in the NFL," Lane said during an exclusive interview with BCSR. "I just went into the camp and tried to do the kind of things I've always done."

Lane stands a scant 5-9 and packs a sculptured 190 pounds into his frame. He isn't exceptionally

fast though. He consistently runs in the 4.55-4.6 range. But when he takes the field, he plays much bigger and faster.

His coaches point to his work ethic as the key to his success. Lane, they say, only knows one gear - full speed ahead.

"That's me," he said. "I try to take what I have and make the most of it. That's all a person can ask himself to do."

It has been a philosophy that Lane has taken with him on each level of football. During his high school career in Franklin, Tenn., Lane produced three consecutive 1,000 yard seasons. That earned him District Player of the Year honors, as well as a slot on the All-State team.

However, academic deficiencies cost him a chance at a Division I college scholarship. A friend of the family suggested that he consider Lane College, a predominantly Division II school that plays an independent schedule. The coach there decided to bring Lane aboard - as a defensive back.

After a brief trial in the secondary, Lane was given a shot at running back. It was a fortuitous decision for Lane, the college and player.

He rushed for 1,779 yards and scored 14 touchdowns as a sophomore, finishing third in Division II in rushing and fifth in scoring.

He put up even better numbers as a junior, finishing second in Division II, with 1,833 yards on 273 carries, with 19 touchdowns.

As a senior, he managed only 821 yards and eight touchdowns after going through the season with



Fred Lane was a huge surprise during the 1997 NFL season when he led the Carolina Panthers in rushing.

a host of nagging injuries.

Lane's size and competition were question marks as the NFL draft approached. The draft came and went without his name being called. Several NFL teams offered free agent contracts, but he decided to cast his lot with the fledgling Panthers.

"Going into camp, I knew I would have to do well to earn a position on the team," Lane said. "I knew it would be difficult, but not impossible."

Looking back on that experience, Lane said he realizes that he's already had an improbable run.

"For things to turn out the way

they did was great," he said. "No one expected it. But that's what sports are all about."

Now that he's established himself in the Panthers' plans, Lane said he isn't about to change his approach to the game.

"I'm going to keep going as hard as I can at all times," he said. "Just because I had one good season doesn't mean I'm going to take anything for granted. I've got to continue to do the things that got where I am."

"I think I will be more a part of the team's plans in the future," he added. "So I have to continue working on my game."