

Hornets' best season laid to waste by injuries and lapses

Continued from 1B

Mason, who expects to have surgery on a sore toe in the off-season. "They came out and played, and that's all you can ask."

Charlotte's defense couldn't handle New York's rejuvenated

shooting touch, which stayed hot throughout the series. The Knicks sizzled from the floor Monday, hitting 37-of-66 shots (56.1 percent) compared to the Hornets' 38-of-86 (44.2 percent). Whether it was Johnson slashing or hitting from the perimeter or Patrick Ewing dominating in

the lane, the Knicks wouldn't miss in the clutch.

"New York played extremely well, they shot the ball extremely well," Bogues said. "It's difficult to beat a team that shoots that well."

Charlotte's shortcomings were

exposed by the Knicks, especially its defense against New York's perimeter shooters. Mason questioned Charlotte's penchant for the perimeter in the fourth quarter when the Knicks made their final push.

"If you put your best foot forward and you lose, I can accept

that. I don't think we did," he said. "I don't think we did what we were doing in the regular season. "We looked different in the playoffs, that's just my opinion."

Bogues, who scored a career playoff-best 19 points on a bad

leg, didn't make excuses. He was hurt, but felt a responsibility to play.

"I went out there and gave it my all. That's all I could do," Bogues said. "I knew the team needed my leadership, needed my presence. I wasn't able to pull these guys through."

Knicks newest acquisitions look like champions in first round victory

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it and let somebody else shoot it. This time he was open, he took the shots, so it was a great win for us."

The Knicks, who lost the regular season series 3-1, turned the tables by exposing the cracks in Charlotte's "Hardball" style. Defensively, New York clamped down on the Hornets' best offensive weapons, Anthony Mason and Glen Rice, while the Knicks shot the lights out.

"We're playing a lot better," center Patrick Ewing said. "We're focused, but we still have a long way to go. This is only one round. We still have two or three more rounds to go, so we're focused and we're going to get the job done."

Although New York was ahead 2-0 going into Monday's game, the Knicks knew Charlotte's injury-depleted troops and loud home crowd wouldn't go without a fight. That - and a potential date with the Miami Heat and

former coach Pat Riley - was all the incentive they needed to go for the sweep.

"We didn't want to come back," Childs said. "We wanted to get back and rest and enjoy it for a day and get back focused. We knew a lot of people didn't think we could do it. We took that personal. We wanted to come out and prove not only to ourselves but to everybody else that we're for real."

Johnson, who refused to talk to the media during the Charlotte

series, let his play do all the talking. His three-point basket with 44 seconds left in the game clinched the sweep and almost touched off a one-man celebra-

tion. Childs cautioned him that there's a long way to go.

"I cut him off when he hit that three," Childs said. "He was getting ready to get into one of

those poses and I gave him one of those (Dikembe) Mutombo shakes" of the index finger. "We're not going to do that until we win a championship."

Carruth impressive in debut

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After three days of practice, Carruth said he isn't intimidated by the size and speed of professional football. Coming from a successful program in one of the most competitive college leagues in America, he said, is good preparation for the NFL. Besides, everyone has to start off

as a rookie.

"The Big 12 is one of the best football conferences in the nation, so competition and size isn't really a factor," he said. "A lot of these guys were in college themselves two or three years ago themselves, so I don't think that's really a challenge."

Carruth's goal headed into the

next minicamp in June is simple: pick up the nuances of Carolina's offense and personnel. After all, this is his first full-time job, so there's much to be done.

"I guess I'm just supposed to learn the offense, get settled in, get more familiar with a lot of the guys," he said.

Barrow sees differences in camps

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inside linebackers to make big plays, but Barrow's excited about working with linebackers coach Kevin Steele, who is putting more emphasis on how to read offenses.

"The coaches are really coaching. I haven't had a coach teach me technique since I was in high school," Barrow said. "On the professional and even on the collegiate level at Miami, it was just 'Get to the ball, I don't care how you get there, just get there.' Coach Steele, he's really installed the technique side of me that I never had."

That emphasis on technique is the most difficult transition from

Houston to Carolina, Barrow said. The terminology is different, which requires some extra studying, but the formations and responsibilities are similar.

"The hardest part I'm having is technique-wise," he said. "As far as learning the defense, all I have to do is change the name of what Houston calls a certain package to what Carolina calls a certain package. I'm able to identify things that they're doing here that we did in Houston."

Barrow, who represents Carolina's most prominent free agent signing, said he looks forward to expanding his role as part of one of the league's top defenses. Helping the Panthers get to the Super Bowl and mov-

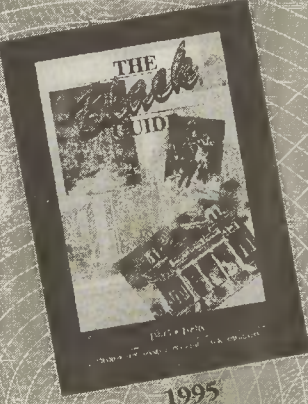
ing into the upper echelon of NFL linebackers are among his goals. Everything is in place to make both happen, and Barrow's excited about the possibilities.

"I feel like I'm going to be pushed to (the best of) my ability and even more, and they're going to get the most out of me," he said. "I still have a lot of growing to do, as a player and as a person."

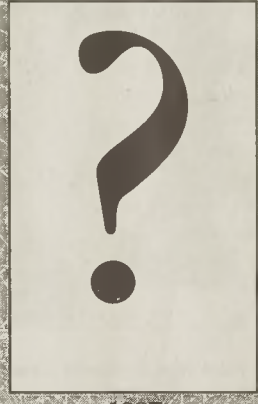
"Hopefully by the time the season starts, I'll be ready to go. With practice and working with the linebacker coach, I'll be able to work the kinks out, learn new things that are going to help me get to the ball, make plays and get better."

IT'S TIME

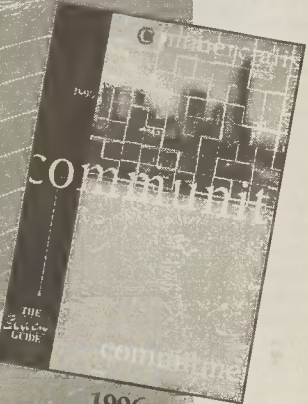
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