

Panthers have some questions

Continued from 1B

winning as well as continued fall-out from his use the N-word in the presence of black players over the summer. Beurlein isn't spectacular, but neither is Collins. What he brings to the offense is a steady hand.

4. Is Tshimanga Biakabutuka ready to be an every-down back?

About as ready as he's going to be, although he's not the best back on the team. That's Fred Lane, who's healthy and has shown the only consistent burst among the crew Capers has available. Biakabutuka is nearly 100 percent recovered from a torn ACL suffered last season, so it's time for him to start earning that money. Of course, that depends on an offensive line that hasn't set the world on fire of late.

5. Whatever happened to the run defense?

It's a memory now, ever since Green Bay found the soft underbelly in the NFC championship game. Carolina's front three of Greg Kragen, Mike Fox and Gerald Williams aren't stuffing the line of scrimmage, leaving the linebackers and secondary to clean up. There's a saying in football: You've got to stop the run to win games. Someone forgot to tell this group.

6. Can someone step in and become a receiving threat?

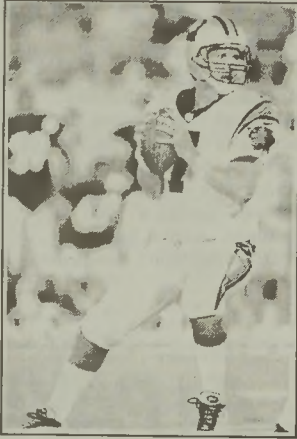
Yes. Mark Carrier has proven his value as a sure-handed pass catcher since rolling off his couch three weeks ago to rejoin the Panthers, but the best bet lie with

rookie Rae Carruth and second-year player Muhsin Muhammad, who's expected back from a broken wrist in a week or two. Carruth has shown steady improvement and Muhammad provides a big, physical target. That's a three-receiver rotation that could do some damage once they get some time together. Tight end Wesley Walls has been shut down at the line over the last two games, and needs help outside to get back to his former self.

7. Why isn't the defense creating more turnovers?

Two reasons: They're not getting into position to make big plays and don't make them when the opportunities present themselves.

The linebackers have been steady, but aren't striking fear in opponents. Micheal Barrow, the free-agent acquisition, needs to become more of a force, as does Lamar Lathon, who has been slowed by injuries. Capers was reluctant to move Barrow outside during Kevin Greene's holdout, but had to in order to take advantage of his physical abilities. With Renaldo Turnbull more than capable of playing outside, maybe it's time for Barrow to go inside and Andre Royal to the bench. Tyrone Poole and Eric Davis are among the league's better cornerbacks, but they need to start intercepting passes instead of knocking them down.



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Steve Beurlein takes over at quarterback for Kerry Collins, but Carolina's offensive problems go way beyond who stands behind center. The Panthers play at Minnesota Sunday.

8. Is Capers and his staff still capable?

Yeah. But a little imagination and daring would help, especially on offense. Three yards and a clump of grass is OK, but not when it's third-and-long, which the Panthers often find themselves in. Don't be surprised if Carolina makes some changes in personnel, if not strategy, from this point forward.

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O'Neal mature, ready

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

McMINNVILLE, Ore. — Jermaine O'Neal learned something about garbage time in the NBA last season, and even more along the highways of South Carolina last summer.

Now, just a few days shy of his 19th birthday, he says he's ready for prime time.

"I'm, like, 10 times better than I was last year," O'Neal said Sunday at the Portland Trail Blazers' annual media day. "That's how much harder I worked this summer."

Some of that work occurred along the highways around O'Neal's hometown of Columbia, S.C., where he served 100 hours of community service picking up litter.

"It was hard work at a minimum of eight hours a day," he said. "It was hot out there."

O'Neal still thinks he didn't deserve the treatment he received in Columbia, when he was arrested for allegedly mouthing off to security guards and sheriff's deputies while passing out party invitation leaflets at a mall.

O'Neal says he believes he shouldn't have been arrested, but was ready to pay the \$300 fine just to end the matter.

But when he mistakenly missed his court date, the judge sentenced him to 100 hours' community service, and Richland County put him on the litter patrol. O'Neal showed up as required each day just before 8 a.m.

"I wanted to make them think I was enjoying it," O'Neal said. "That's one thing I guess they couldn't really understand. I came to the community service every day smiling, acting like I really wanted to be there."

He said he felt that the local authorities were pushing him just to try to make him rebel in order to make an example out of him.

"I learned next time to just walk away," he said.

The Blazers have hired O'Neal's high school coach, George Glymph, as director of player development.

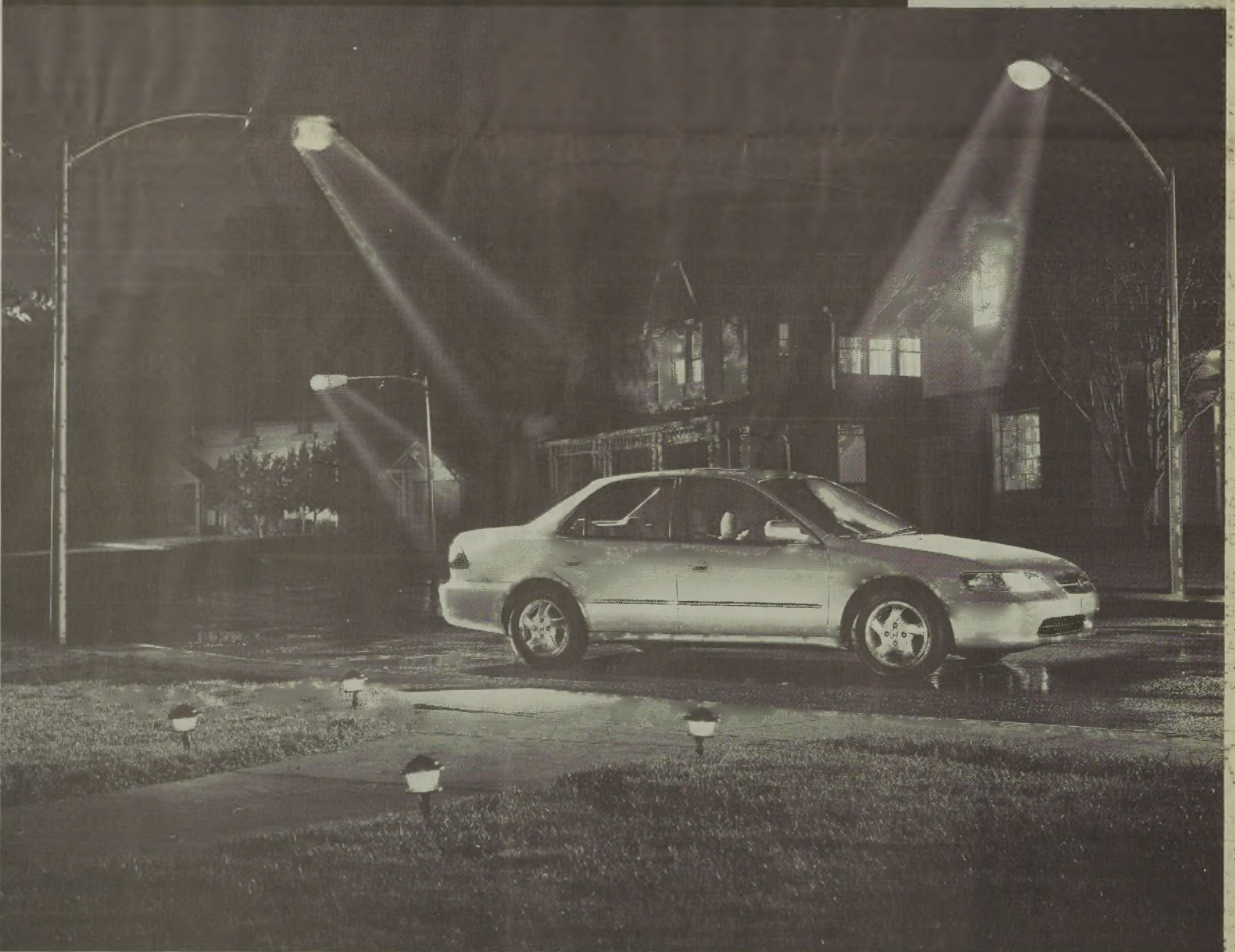
"I'm sort of a surrogate father," Glymph said. "Last year he called me a lot when he was down."

O'Neal was often homesick and grew increasingly frustrated with his lack of playing time under then-coach P.J. Carlesimo, and Glymph would offer encouragement and preach patience.

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