

Youth served in league

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primary focus is on improving the young players as people.

Certainly that isn't an unfamiliar goal among coaches, but the coaches in the YDFL are downright obsessed with that mission.

"On my team, at the first practice, I want their grade cards from the last quarter," said Bell, who played defensive back for the Steelers and Bengals and coaches the YDFL's USC Trojans, which feature his 8-year-old son, Corey.

"And then every week, one of the coaches will make the rounds and talk to the parents (about the report cards). And if we need to go talk to the teachers, we're going to do that. We're letting them know: If you're not up to

these standards, you won't play this week. And if it continues, you're going to be off the team."

"Plain and simple, football is just half of it."

The great part? The players in the league don't mind things being so stringent.

"We want to be out here," said 12-year-old Aaron McNeely, a defensive end/wide receiver for the Miami Hurricanes. "We listen to what they have to say because we know they're just trying to help us. We love these guys."

The football aspect of the league is pretty interesting — and fun. Individual and team statistics will be kept on the league's Web site, www.youthdevelopmentfootball.com, which is run by

Horton's wife, LaWanda, who serves as vice president. There will be a playoff system (are you reading, college football leaders?), an All-Star game, a Heisman Trophy winner and an end-of-the-season banquet.

"All I know is this: If I could have had this kind of experience when I was a kid, I would have loved it," said Pleasant, a Tennessee State alum who play 14 NFL seasons and won a Super Bowl with the Patriots in 2001.

"So, yeah, I know these kids are enjoying everything that we're giving them. That's what makes it feel so good to us, as adults. To sit back and watch them experience what it feels like to excel is amazing."

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Sting playing for jobs, pride

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said. "All year, we've known what we can do as a team, it's just a matter of putting it together. It was very important just to see all that hard work pay off."

Despite the losing record, Charlotte has become a factor in the WNBA playoff chase with wins over Detroit this month. The Shock has a better conference record than Washington, and would clinch fourth place if they finish tied. The Mystics and Shock end the regular season against each other.

"It's very satisfying," said Miller, a reserve who scored 12 points in 19 minutes in Tuesday's victory over Detroit. "If we can't get in, we want to keep them out."

Miller's help off the bench was a catalyst for Charlotte, which played without starting center Tangela Smith (knee bruise). She and forward Sheri Sam, who also scored 12, were the only Sting players to reach double-fig-

ures, but Charlotte spread the offense while connecting on 44.2 percent of its shots.

"When we had one of our top players go down in Tangela Smith, Teana, Ayana Walker and (Adrienne) Goodson and Janell (McCarville), everybody played a heck of a game tonight and that was the major difference," Bogues said.

"We knew we had to step up," Miller said. "We knew we were missing Tangela, so we just had to add that much more scoring from the bench."

With jobs on the line for next season, Bogues has used the last three weeks to evaluate players. He's pleased with their effort despite the mixed results.

"Considering the record, they could've just taken off and called it quits, but they're playing hard and everybody who comes in give me 110 percent effort," he said. "That's what we've got to continue to do."

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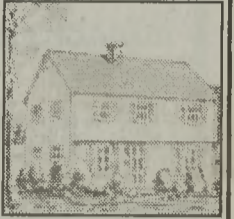
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