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SPORTS

Section

Carolina ahead of curve in winning

Perhaps it's too early to be giving Jerry Richardson a grand pat on the back.



C. JEMAL HORTON

After all, Richardson's Carolina Panthers have not yet clinched their second Super Bowl trip in three years. They're close. But not there yet. That won't happen until the

Panthers beat Seattle in the NFC Championship Game on Sunday - if they beat the Seahawks, that is.

But here's the thing about Richardson, who has owned the Panthers since their inception in late 1993: He deserves credit anyway. Even if the Panthers go out to the West Coast on Sunday and get blown out by 72 points.

With Richardson, it's about the whole picture. It's about the way he has not wavered over the years from his formula for building a team with championship intent. It's about the way he's always helped give a whole city hope come wintertime, what with Charlotte being home of an NBA team that usually isn't exactly flying high that time of year.

It's about how, in 11 measly NFL seasons, Richardson has made people go from thinking, "Charlotte's got a football team?" to "Charlotte's got a FOOTBALL team!"

Count them: 1996, 2003, and now. That's three NFC Championship Game appearances over the last nine seasons.

That's impressive by any standard.

Just ask some of the franchises that are decades older than the Panthers.

Ask the New Orleans Saints, who are creeping up on their 40th year in the league but have yet to make a single appearance in the NFC Championship Game.

Ask the Cardinals, a franchise that's been around since 1920 but hasn't been one step from the championship game since 1948.

What the Panthers have done in their brief existence is eye-popping - at least it would be, if the team were in a larger market.

And here is Richardson's franchise again, coming up big in the postseason, on the brink of an improbable second Super Bowl appearance in three years.

You've got to give the man his due.

You've got to step back, look at the numbers, look at the likelihood of such things taking place and acknowledge that Richardson is one of the top five owners in the NFL.

In my book, only New England's Robert Kraft, Denver's Pat Bowlen, Pittsburgh's Daniel Rooney and Green Bay's collection of stockholders are in Richardson's class. But what makes Richardson different is that, other than Green Bay's stockholders, there isn't an NFL owner who does more to keep his name and face out of the public eye.

As a journalist who thrives on talking to his subjects, I hate that Richardson rarely does interviews. But the fact that he doesn't says a lot about the man. I mean, here's someone putting his money on the line, but he still trusts his coaching staff and front office enough to let them do their jobs without worrying about their boss publicly criticizing them in tough times or trying to take all the credit when

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Johnson C. Smith guard Prince Parker drives to the basket against Bowie State Tuesday.

Shorthanded and undersized Bulls standing tall in CIAA

By Herbert L. White
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Johnson C. Smith is playing like underdogs and winning like favorites.

The Golden Bulls aren't particularly big or have superior depth, yet have the CIAA's best record and a pair of wins over the league's preseason favorites.

Tuesday's 68-56 win over Bowie State was the Golden Bulls' (12-3, 4-0) fifth straight,

including victories over East Division frontrunners Virginia Union and Bowie (12-6, 5-2). The win was Smith's first over the Bulldogs since 2002. Are the Bulls the best team in the league?

"I hope so," Bulls coach Steve Joyner said. "We're trying to be the best basketball team we can possibly be. That's what's so amazing about us right now. We have deficiencies just like any

other team that our players are overcoming. We have injuries, and we're trying to overcome those. I'm just impressed that they're sacrificing, doing everything they possibly can to win as a team."

Smith hasn't trailed during the streak, which dates back to a 79-72 win over Wiley Dec. 29 in Los Angeles. The California trip, in which the Bulls sandwiched a

Please see J.C. SMITH/2C



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/JEFF ROBERSON

Carolina receiver Steve Smith runs into the end zone after catching a 58-yard pass by Panthers quarterback Jake Delhomme in the first quarter of the Panthers' 29-21 win against Chicago last Sunday. Carolina plays at Seattle in the NFC championship game Sunday.

Another one for the road

Panthers can set NFL record and earn Super Bowl berth at Seattle Sunday

By C. Jamal Horton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

One more step. As if anyone in this town needed to be reminded.

Should the Carolina Panthers beat Seattle in the NFC Championship Game Sunday, they will return to their second Super Bowl in three years.

The region's collective pulse is pounding at the mere thought of making Super Bowl

trips like only the great New England Patriots have done in recent years. Sports Illustrated's preseason prediction that the Panthers would win Super Bowl XL is starting to look very good now.

And the Panthers players themselves, led by demonstrative wide receiver Steve Smith, are starting to move around with just a hint of a swagger.

Leave it to Carolina's vanilla coach John Fox to throw some water on this growing

bonfire by getting down to what matters most: a straight-forward perspective on the Panthers' Super obstacle.

"(The Seahawks) are a very good football team," Fox said Monday during his weekly press conference at Bank of America Stadium. "They play very fast. They are well-rested. They appear to be totally healthy. They have a lot of depth. They are well coached. It's going to be a huge, huge



Fox

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WEST CHARLOTTE HIGH

Lions grab opportunity to pull wrestling off mat

By C. Jamal Horton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The fact that West Charlotte High is the home of numerous sports heroes is not news to anyone around these parts.

What might surprise people here, however, is the school's storied sports legacy now includes wrestlers.

Yes, wrestlers. And folks had better get used to it.

The West Charlotte wrestling team has gone from having one member seven years ago - the poor fellow had to go all the

way to Garinger High to practice - to its current roster of 24, which includes one girl.

But the Lions aren't just a collection of wrestlers taking up space on the mat.

Thanks to tireless recruiting of some of the school's top athletes and an uncommon commitment from the coaching staff, West Charlotte has turned into one of the strongest wrestling programs in Mecklenburg County.

Going into its two matches this week, West

Charlotte had an overall record of 14-4. The Lions' 2-0 mark in the MECA 6 had them in a first-place tie with Central Cabarrus - and on pace to earn a team appearance in the state dual tournament for the first time since ... well, anyone can remember.

Not too shabby for a team that, not too long ago, didn't have sweat suits.

"We've fought through a lot to get where we are," said Lions head coach Lee Howard, a former wrestler at Livingstone who volunteered to coach the team.



PHOTO/CURTIS WILSON

Coach Lee Howard has led the resurgence of wrestling at West Charlotte High.

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