

Smith key to Johnson deal with Panthers

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"I didn't come here to catch 100 balls," Johnson said. "I came here because I feel Carolina is the team with the best chance to get to the Super Bowl."

Released last week by the Dallas Cowboys, Johnson rejected a bid from the New York Giants and also planned to meet with the Seahawks. But after coming to Charlotte on Thursday, he never made it to Seattle because the Panthers convinced him to stay.

"We have a wide receiver and a football player who is going to have a huge effect on this football team the next four years," Hurney said before handing Johnson his new No. 19 Panthers jersey.

Johnson said it doesn't bother him if quarterback Jake Delhomme considers Smith his No. 1 target.

"The only people who get caught up in No. 1 or No. 2 are the ones playing fantasy football," he said. "The only number that means anything is the number of (Super Bowl) rings you have on your finger."

"Steve is important to me and he's the reason I came here," he said. "And I'm important to him."

With Johnson on the field, defenses can't zero in on Smith because they'll know

the Panthers have at least a second option. Carolina lacked that for most of the year because its running

game took months to develop, and No. 2 receiver Keary Colbert had a big dropoff from his outstanding rookie season.

Now Johnson takes over that No. 2 role, where he can also be used as a blocker to open up DeShaun Foster and the running game. Colbert, who had offseason ankle surgery to correct a problem that apparently bothered him most of last year, won't have as much pressure on

him.

But the signing of Johnson is out of character for the Panthers, who have made a public effort to run a problem-free program since John Fox became head coach in 2002. After a series of off-the-field problems, including former wide receiver Rae Carruth's conviction in a murder-for-hire plot on his pregnant girlfriend, the team has avoided signing players with bad reputations.

Johnson left the New York Jets and Tampa Bay on bad terms. But his last two years with the Cowboys have been trouble-free under disciplinarian Bill Parcells. Still, he couldn't avoid the questions about his character.

"How come everyone keeps signing me if I'm such a problem?" Johnson said. "I know I wouldn't sign Keyshawn for all this money if I'm a problem."

But he also said he has an

image that's hard to shake.

"I'm Me-Shawn," he said, smiling at the nickname he inherited over the last 10 years in the league. "I'm fine with that."

Panthers officials talked to some of Johnson's former clubs and got positive reports.

"We knew we had a good player," Hurney said. "Everyone we talked to had something very good to say."



Smith



Delhomme

Davis drives to historic win

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Drive for Diversity is an ethnic and gender minority driver and crew member development program based in Charlotte. The program supports eight drivers in the NASCAR Dodge Weekly Series and 12 crew members in the NASCAR Busch Series and NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series.

"Talent behind the wheel of a race car comes in all shapes, sizes, creeds and colors. The program's success has allowed the company to think long term, because we have some really good drivers developing on the grassroots level. Their success will ensure this team's success now and in the years to come."

Davis will continue his season at Hickory Motor Speedway for the remainder of 2006.

"Joe Gibbs Racing and Levis Strauss Signature have given me a wonderful opportunity and I'm looking forward to an awesome year and great things to come," Davis said.

Davis, a native of Mitchellville, Md., already has several championships on his resume, including the 2005 National Auto Sport Association Road Course championship in the Super Unlimited Division.

On the Net:

Drive for Diversity
www.drivefordiversity.com.

Brock aims for title shot

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future of the heavyweight division than to rush there and get beat," he said. "Right now when the heavyweight division is mentioned, I'm in the mix. I'm right there. All I have to do is keep winning and when I get there, the world will know who I am."

That's something Brock has set his sights on since his days training at Charlotte Boxing Academy. As he's

risen up the rankings, Brock's on the cusp of professional success he envisioned as an amateur.

"I'm ahead of everybody else from the 2000 Olympics era that turned pro. I'll get a world title shot sometime this year. After June, we're looking for a title fight in September or October."

If Brock becomes The Man, he has a plan to stay there. His goal is to unify the cham-

ampionship, something that hasn't happened since Riddick Bowe was undisputed champion in 1993.

"I'm young enough to be around for another nine years if I want, because I haven't taken any punishment," Brock said. "People are living longer and middleweights to heavyweights back in the day boxed so often. We don't box so often - what, maybe twice a year?"

Embattled Bonds ready for record chase; will Rocket?

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and the much-improved Mets in the NL East, not to mention those power-hitting Philadelphia Phillies. Rookie of the Year Ryan Howard and Co. could be a lot better than people think.

"They're all kind of taking turns stockpiling and gearing up for us," Atlanta slugger Chipper Jones said. "Once again everybody is picking somebody else. We'll just lay back in the weeds."

In the NL Central, the St. Louis Cardinals are moving across the street into a new Busch Stadium. MVP Albert Pujols, Cy Young winner Chris Carpenter and a healthy Scott Rolen make this team the favorite for a third consecutive division crown.

Clemens and his hometown Astros finished second to St. Louis the past two seasons, winning the wild card each time. They finally topped the Cardinals in last year's playoffs to reach their first World Series, but could they do it again without him?

With 341 wins, 4,502 strikeouts, seven Cy Young Awards and nothing left to prove, the 43-year-old Clemens has been putting off his final decision about whether to come back for a 23rd season. He led the majors with an astounding 1.87 ERA last year.

The Rocket also pitched well for the United States in the World Baseball Classic this month and issued this open-ended statement after Team USA was eliminated in the second round: "For me, right now, it's goodbye."

Back in December, the Astros figured they couldn't wait for an answer from Clemens, so they didn't offer him arbitration. Under baseball rules, he can't re-sign with them until May 1.

Over in the American League, the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox and Texas Rangers have all expressed interest in his services.

"He knows how much we would like to have him back," Houston manager Phil Garner said. "I think this is the perfect spot for him."

Even if Clemens retires - again - the top of Houston's rotation should still be strong with NLCS MVP Roy Oswalt and lefty Andy Pettitte.

After missing nearly all of last season following three knee operations, the 41-year-old Bonds wants at least one more shot at a World Series ring. He and the San Francisco Giants certainly have a chance in the wide-open NL West, won last year by San Diego with an 82-80 record.

Mike Piazza came over to catch for the Padres, who had a curious winter and could be

headed for a fall.

The Los Angeles Dodgers might be San Francisco's stiffest competition after new general manager Ned Colletti brought in Rafael Furcal, Nomar Garciaparra (to play first base) and former Boston manager Grady Little. All-Star closer Eric Gagne is back from an elbow injury, and the bullpen is deep.

But all eyes out West will be on Bonds' climb up the career home run chart. He enters the season with 708 homers, needing only seven to pass Babe Ruth for second place and 48 to break Hank Aaron's record.

"The record is Hank's record as far as I'm concerned," Bonds said when he reported to spring training in Scottsdale, Ariz. "It's still Hank's record until somebody passes it."

Bonds said he's not sure if he'll play beyond this year, whether he sets the record or not, and he's declined to comment on allegations in a new book that he used performance-enhancing drugs for at least five seasons starting in 1998.

All the attention and criticism hardly appear to bother him at the plate, however. The left fielder had four homers and nine hits in his first 13 at-bats of spring training.

A look at the NL in predicted order of finish:

EAST

Atlanta Braves

The Braves acquired Edgar Renteria to replace Furcal at shortstop, but lost longtime pitching guru Leo Mazzone to Baltimore.

The 38-year-old Smoltz teams up with Tim Lincecum atop a deep rotation, and Gold Glove center fielder Andruw Jones is coming off a monster season at the plate. He led the majors with 51 homers and finished second to Pujols in MVP voting.

The big question will be the bullpen, where Chris Reitsma begins the season as the underwhelming closer.

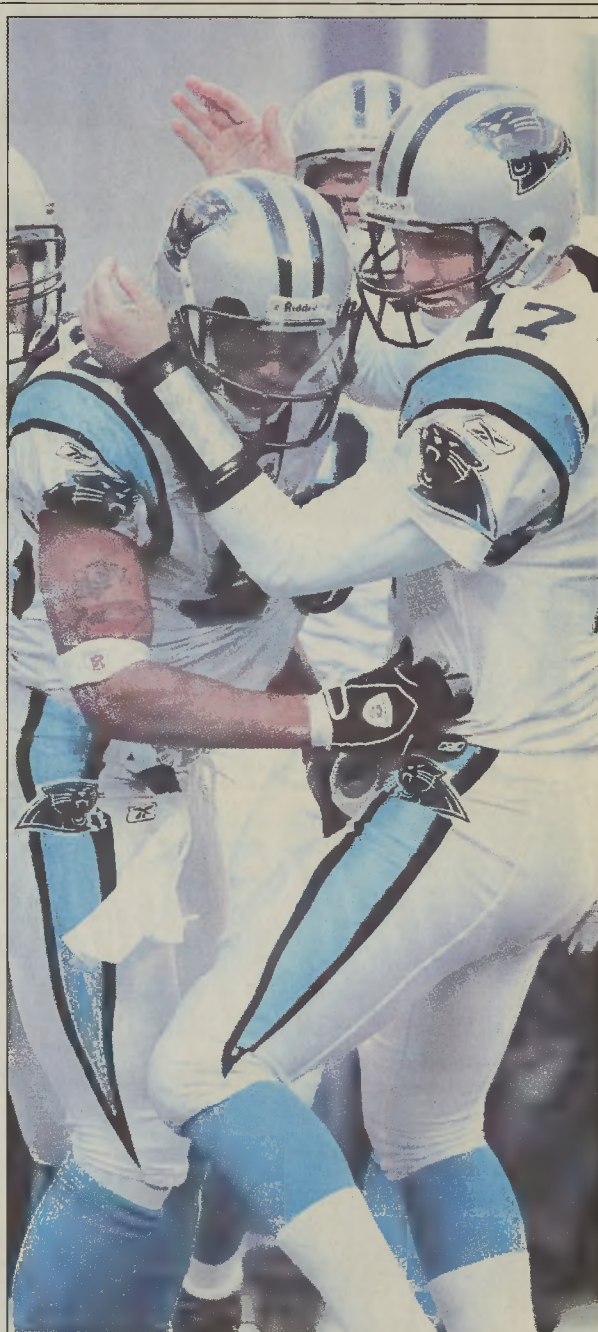
An infusion of rookies helped the Braves win another division crown in 2005, but they were knocked out in the first round of the playoffs for the fourth straight year.

Philadelphia Phillies

After losing Wagner and trading slugger Jim Thome, injured most of last season, new GM Pat Gillick said the Phillies weren't good enough to win the division. Still, look for this club to surprise him and nearly everybody else by capturing the wild card for the franchise's first playoff berth since 1993.

Gillick has already built winning teams in Toronto, Baltimore and Seattle. Philadelphia

See NL/3C



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