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SPORTS

Section

CIAA closing football gap

Attendance at the Pioneer Bowl aside, CIAA football has slightly closed the respectability gap with its still bigger brother, basketball.

Thanks to N.C. Central's progress the past two years, and the emergence of long-time doormats Johnson C. Smith, Elizabeth City State and Virginia Union this year, football was the word on everyone's lips at the conference's Dec. 7 fall meeting at the Durham Civic Center.

"This was supposed to be the year of the quarterback, but it turned out to be last man standing with the ball," Assistant Commissioner Jeff McLeod said.

The Eagles' No. 1 end-of-season Southeast region ranking, plus the Vikings' at-large playoff berth, especially was a source of pride. The last time the CIAA placed two teams in the playoffs was 1991.

But McLeod revealed an interesting tidbit about this year's process. After NCCU defeated ECSU in the championship game and No. 1 Newberry was upset by Presbyterian, the Eagles were the unanimous favorite by the NCAA football selection committee to take over the No. 1 spot. North Alabama was picked second and Newberry dropped to third.

When it came time to pick the all-important No. 4 seed, which basically guarantees a playoff spot, a shocking voice from the darkness spoke.

"Our colleague from the South Atlantic said 'I introduce Elizabeth City State as the No. 4 seed,'" McLeod explained.

"Colleague" is being too kind. The South Atlantic and Gulf South conferences are arch enemies of the CIAA - you can thank basketball for that. Virginia Union, Bowie State and Johnson C. Smith men, and Shaw women have become their worst nightmares.

They are two of the main reasons why the conference is being moved in 2008 to the Carolinas-Virginia Athletic Conference.

So for one of their reps to nominate the CIAA for anything - except to leave the region - is a history-making feat in itself.

"Never underestimate the power of prayer," McLeod said.

Never indeed.

In other news:

- R&B Grammy Award-winning artists Boyz II Men will host Apollo Night at the CIAA Thursday night of tournament week in Charlotte. Local auditions will be held on the campuses of Virginia State (Jan. 25), N.C. Central (Jan. 26) and JCSU (Jan. 27). Students from Shaw, St. Augustine's and Fayetteville State can audition at NCCU.
- Former NBA star Magic

Please see CIAA/3C



Carolina's Steve Smith (left) gets an earful from fellow receiver Keyshawn Johnson during the Panthers 37-3 loss to Pittsburgh last Sunday at Bank of America Stadium. The loss dropped Carolina to 6-8.

PHOTO: CURTIS WILSON

Sinking Panthers play out season of discontent

By Cheris F. Hodges

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The Carolina Panthers playoff hopes died an ugly death.

All they can hope to do is finish the season with dignity. After their final home game where Pittsburgh humiliated the Panthers 37-3, players apologized to the fans and owner Jerry Richardson.

"We didn't give our fans much to cheer about," said wide receiver Steve Smith, who was basically invisible the entire game.

The Panthers, who many thought would represent the NFC

in the Super Bowl, closed the season with a 4-4 record at Bank of America Stadium.

"It's bad," said safety Mike Minter. "It's hard all the way around. But we got to keep fighting."

Carolina's vaunted defense had flashes of brilliance this season, but on Sunday, the Panthers didn't force any turnovers and defensive end Julius Peppers



Fox

Please see PANTHERS/3C



BONITTA BEST



Charlotte Bobcats forward Gerald Wallace, pulling down a rebound against Orlando in a Dec. 12 game in Charlotte, said Bobcats turnovers are the difference between winning and losing.

PHOTO: CURTIS WILSON

One team, multiple issues

By Erica Singleton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte's NBA team might be better named the Chameleons instead of the Bobcats.

One night they snap a four-game losing streak by beating Orlando, the top team in the Eastern Conference, only to come out the next and let the game slip right through their fingers.

The team that showed up for the first half of the December 10 game against Phoenix and

Inconsistent play leaves Bobcats in difficult spots

shot 51 percent from the field, disappeared in the second half, replaced by one that only shot 28 percent.

It's a frustrating situation that has become a pattern. Charlotte falls behind, makes a comeback, and then commits costly mistakes that takes the wind out of the Bobcats' sails and their chances for a win

with it.

Most recently at home against Boston, the Bobcats fell behind 60-50, following a Celtics 25-7 run after Sean May, a bright spot in a dismal December, was taken to the locker room with a right ankle sprain. (May could miss up to 10 days.) The Bobcats rallied to within a point with a minute remaining before two turnovers opened the door for Paul Pierce to take over.

"The determining factor with me was the lack of going to get

Please see BOBCATS/3C

So-so's good enough for Bulls

.500 record at break what Joyner expected

By Herbert L. White

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Taken in context, playing so-so is a good thing for Johnson C. Smith's Golden Bulls.

JCSU is 4-4 at the holiday break, but it meets coach Steve Joyner's expectations for an inexperienced squad that includes six freshmen.

"I was hoping for a .500 first semester based on the maturity of the team and the work ethic of the team," he said.

Joyner is more encouraged by the Bulls' two-game winning streak, which came on the heels of a three-game skid. Although JCSU has been inconsistent, the Bulls are showing signs of growth, especially before the break.

"We feel very enthusiastic to end the first semester on a winning note," Joyner said. "We're excited we were able to get that win at Elizabeth City State after we lost to them at Brayboy (Gym)."

When the season started, the Bulls were a collection of unknowns outside junior guard Maurice Hooper, a 2C

Please see SO-SO'S/2C



Joyner



Hooper

Giants mates happy Bonds in San Francisco

By Janie McCauley

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO - Rich Aurilia played alongside Barry Bonds for nine seasons, so San Francisco's new first baseman knows what to expect with No. 25 as he begins his second tenure with the team.

Bonds certainly has more on his plate now than he did when Aurilia last played with the slugger in 2003. Not only is Bonds 22 homers shy of breaking Hank Aaron's home run record of 755, he is still dealing with steroids questions surrounding his chase and the possibility he could be indicted by a federal grand jury on perjury charges.

"When I was here the first time there wasn't other outside stuff going on," Aurilia said Thursday when formally reintroduced by the Giants. "The way we all dealt with it - and we had the same core of guys for a few years - was that Barry helped us win ball games. Everybody says 'Well, is he a good teammate? Is he a bad teammate?' In the clubhouse, he's a good teammate. He doesn't really bother anybody, he doesn't really put the guys down and I always got along fine with him."

"It's a thing where you just have to accept Barry for who he is. We all know the type of player he is."



Bonds

JCSU's Taylor charging to 100th coaching victory

By Janie McCauley

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Johnson C. Smith women's basketball head coach Vanessa Taylor is slowly creeping up on a milestone.

Taylor is three games away from reaching 100 wins at

JCSU, but that's not her focus.

She's too busy building team chemistry after three players - Tiana Pope, Whitney Barnes and Ashley Chase - were suspended for a violation of team rules.

Pope is one of the Golden Bulls' leading scorers.

Taylor said she doesn't know when the players will return, but the coaching staff is focusing on the nine players now with the team.

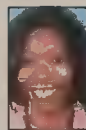
"We're hoping that this

unit can get better and develop some chemistry," she said. "When those young ladies rejoin us they'll be assets."

And about winning 100 games?

"I hadn't given (that) any

Please see TAYLOR/3C



Taylor

Please see TEAMMATES/2C