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Section

SPORTS

Some new year's wishes

The season for giving may be long gone, but there's always room to offer up a new year's helping of best wishes. In this town, that means you have to pull for everybody, unless you're a North Carolina partisan, which usually means a severe case of myopia. But I'm not hating on you guys. What's yours is yours, even if the world doesn't revolve around the Tar Heels.

So let's start with the big leagues, which is where so many folks in Charlotte get to puff out the collective chest.

For those of us who go to games, either by paying for tickets, or that ever-popular hook-up, I can only wish you unabashed, horn-to-horn support for your squad, whether it's a



HERBERT L. WHITE

team or individual. Charlotte's soft sports image is well-deserved on the professional level, where so-called "fans" will walk out in the third quarter of basketball and football games, and it's even filtered down to colleges and high schools. I know. You paid for the ticket or got it at a reduced cost. But hey, stick it out and turn the outing into something memorable, even if it's to boo. In essence, be there for the games. The posing will wait until the clock winds down.

For the Bobcats, a streak of wins that can push this beleaguered franchise to respectability. Folks are looking for a miracle, but there won't be one. As a small-market team bankrolled by a profits-first owner in Bob Johnson, the only peg these Cats can put their hats on is patience and persistence.

The building blocks are young but promising, with Emeka Okafor, Sean May and Raymond Felton. If coach/GM Bernie Bickerstaff can keep this group moving forward, the Bobcats may actually be good in a couple of years. Problem is, will anyone notice by then?

For the Carolina Panthers, some smart offseason decisions. The Panthers were a decidedly below-average 8-8 and exposed a ton of deficiencies on both sides of the ball. What did we learn kids? Dan Morgan is as fragile as he is explosive; Jake Delhomme isn't a franchise quarterback and neither line was especially dominant. Expect some wheeling and dealing in the offseason, especially if coach John Fox wants to stick with his bare-knuckles philosophy of whipping opponents physically. Fox is the best coach in Panthers history, but don't let Carolina mess around with a subpar 2007. If they do, Dan Henning won't be the only unpopular coach around Bank of America Stadium.

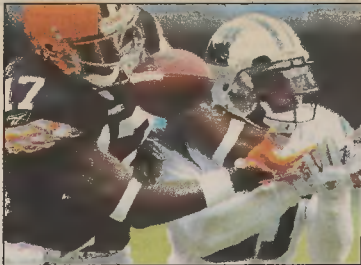
For J.C. Smith, vision. Brayboy Gym is small and intimate, but not the facility to grow a basketball program. A bigger joint - say 4,000 seats - would go a long way toward making the Golden Bulls a more fan-friendly option. It also would open JCSU to being a great spot for bringing other games, like high school playoffs, to Beatties Ford Road. The same for Belk Complex, which hasn't even scratched its potential as a football and track facility. Just a thought.



Calvin Brock lost a heavyweight title fight against Wladimir Klitschko in November, but boxing observers believe the Charlotte native will resurface to challenge for another belt.

Seven for 007

Who'll be on the rise, or under pressure to perform? Here's a list of candidates



Carolina Panthers cornerback Ken Lucas (right) was hurt most of the 2006 season, which didn't help Carolina's lofty expectations.

By Herbert L. White
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It's a new year and time to look ahead. For 2007, there's no shortage of intrigue on Charlotte's sports landscape, with professional franchises, high school heroes and college standouts sharing time in the spotlight. After some research and careful consideration, here's a sample of who and what will have a bearing on headlines this year:

- **CIAA basketball tournament.** The nation's third-largest tournament had a wildly successful debut in Charlotte, pumping \$15.4 million into the local economy. It also overcame shallow thinking: Small-minded white folks feared 155,000 black folks downtown would be a recipe for disaster; small-minded black folks thought Charlotte was too big to make the tournament irrelevant. Wrong on both counts. The week went off without a hitch, save complaints about parking. The show will be even better next month.

- **Bob Johnson.** Only three years into ownership of the Charlotte Bobcats, and the man is already drawing not so flattering comparisons to George Shinn. Johnson has made his share of missteps - overpriced tickets and a regional cable network that

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De'Aundra Dix had four returns for touchdowns in 2006 to help Johnson C. Smith to a 7-4 record. With 16 starters returning in 2007, the Golden Bulls will likely be mentioned as a favorite in the CIAA West Division.

In three years, Charlotte Bobcats owner Bob Johnson has drawn unfavorable comparisons to George Shinn, who ultimately moved the Hornets to New Orleans.



Johnson



More than 155,000 people attended games and events connected to the CIAA basketball tournament during its Charlotte debut.



Marc Davis, 16, continued his rise up the stock-car racing ladder by leading all drivers with six wins last year at Hickory Speedway. He's driving for Joe Gibbs Racing with an eye toward racing in one of NASCAR's top divisions in 2008.

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Bobcats in world of hurt

Injuries take toll on mental and physical state of team

By Erica Singleton
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

When Sean May landed on the back of Emeka Okafor's foot on December 16, the sprained ankle seemed like *deja vu* all over again. Maybe not as serious as the season ending right knee injury that sidelined him in his rookie year, but very reminiscent to the situation.

May, who'd been averaging 12.4 points at that time, led Charlotte in scoring four times this season and rebounds six. It seemed he was just hitting stride and getting back into a groove after missing last season's games, yet, he didn't get in a funk.

"Ankle sprains are a part of the game," said May. "And they're not a real serious injury. The thing is, don't come back too soon to where they can linger on for the whole season."

Lingering injuries are an experience Brevin Knight was dealing with due to a recurring groin injury, until, he suffered a

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With Brevin Knight (middle) sidelined with an abdominal strain, the Bobcats are weighing alternatives at point guard.

Morgan cleared to resume career with Panthers

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Carolina Panthers middle linebacker Dan Morgan said Monday he's been cleared to return to football next season despite multiple concussions.

Morgan suffered at least the fifth concussion of his career in the season opener against Atlanta and missed the rest of the season, putting his playing career in jeopardy.

But Morgan said he was in Pittsburgh last week, where he took numerous tests and a team of physicians led by concussion expert Dr. Mickey Collins gave him the OK to begin playing again during minicamps in the spring. Collins recommended in October that Morgan not return this season.

"It was real exciting. That was a great Christmas present, a late Christmas present," Morgan said Monday after the

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CIAA topped itself in 2006

The year officially began Monday - I know you all were in church - and the saddest folks to see 2006 end should be everybody involved in the recent football season.

Just when you thought nothing could top 2005 - six teams vying for a division title in the last weekend of regular season play - 2006 one-ups it one better. North Carolina Central, Johnson C. Smith, Elizabeth City State and Virginia Union kept fans salivating for more.

Of course, basketball had its share of shining moments as well, but it was football that had fans moaning "Is the season over already?" instead of "Isn't the season over yet?"

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May

PHOTO: CURTIS WILSON

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PHOTO: ED DAVIS