

# 'Misfits' key to Carolina's playoff hopes

By JENNA FRYER  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Al Wallace almost quit football the day he was told he'd been traded to the Carolina Panthers.

It was July 2002, and Wallace had spent the past year out of the NFL, working as an assistant principal at Palm Beach Lakes (Fla.) High School.

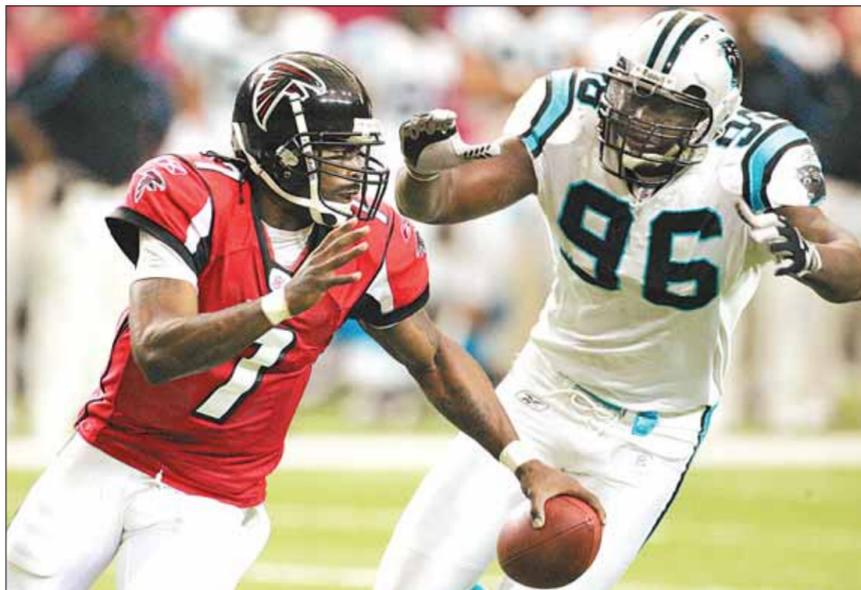
He signed with Miami that spring, open to attending training camp and trying one final time to make it with the Dolphins.

A week before he was supposed to report, the defensive end was sent to Carolina.

"Football was a game that had kicked me around pretty good for a few years," said Wallace, who contemplated telling his agent he was ready to give it up. "I almost called him and said, 'Hey look, this isn't for me. I'm going to move on with my life.'"

Wallace's wife talked him into giving Carolina a chance, and the Panthers are grateful. He's the key backup on Carolina's vaunted defensive line, just one of the many misfits and throwaways the Panthers have relied on to make it to the NFC Championship game.

There's safety Marlon McCree, a free-agent addition who reported to training camp fifth on the depth chart. But when first round pick Thomas Davis struggled in the season-opener, McCree replaced him and hasn't looked back.



Carolina's Al Wallace, right, runs down Falcons quarterback Michael Vick during the second half of their Jan. 1 game in Atlanta. Wallace has played an important role for the Panthers' defense as a part-time defensive end.

Or punter Jason Baker, acquired in a trade with Denver when Carolina was desperately bidding to rid itself of troubled punter Todd Sauerbrun. Baker made the Panthers never miss the talented Sauerbrun by earning first alternate to the Pro Bowl.

And don't forget running back Nick Goings, an undrafted free

agent who will once again be called on to rescue the Panthers. With Stephen Davis and DeShaun Foster out with injuries (Foster broke his leg in the NFC divisional playoff win against Chicago), Goings will be the featured back when the Panthers play the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday.

It's a job Goings has had before:

When injuries ravaged Carolina's running backs last season, he vaulted from sixth-string to starter and finished the year with five 100-yard rushing games.

"He has the confidence of his coaches and his team; I think that's the key," coach John Fox said. "We had a couple of guys in front of him. Those couple of guys got hurt



## NFC CHAMPIONSHIP

Carolina Panthers (13-5)  
at Seattle Seahawks (14-3)

Time: 6:30 p.m. Sunday  
TV: WXIN-Channel 59

a year ago, and those couple of guys have gotten hurt this year. We've been down this road before."

Fox has tremendous confidence in all of his replacement players, largely because they almost always deliver.

Wallace is Carolina's "other" defensive end, the guy called on to spell Julius Peppers and Mike Rucker. Only he's used his limited time on the field (he estimates he plays just 40 percent of the defensive snaps) to earn his own name recognition.

Wallace tied his career high with five sacks this season while adding 34 tackles, five quarterback pressures, two interceptions, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery.

"Of course, my opportunities are going to be limited, playing behind the great guys that I play behind," Wallace said. "I took it as a goal this year not only to go in and just spell those guys, but to go in and actually make some

plays and make a difference.

"If I play 15 or 20 snaps a game, I want to make a game-changing play, whether it's getting my hand on a fumble, making a sack or an interception, something to make a difference."

The Panthers got Wallace only because they insisted the Dolphins add in something extra when they were trying to trade defensive end Jay Williams.

"It was dumb luck, when you get right down to it," Fox said. "He came in here and picked up on the things that we were doing, and it's all history from there."

Wallace has worked out so well that he was awarded a five-year, \$7.5 million contract extension after the 2003 season.

McCree might also be on his way to earning a big payday.

After short stints in Jacksonville and Houston, the Panthers gave him a shot with a one-year contract. They didn't know much about him and were really only looking for a quality backup.

But Colin Branch got hurt in the preseason, and Davis was a disaster in the season-opener, asking to come out of the game when he struggled with assignments.

McCree replaced him that day, and Davis has not been able to reclaim his job since. McCree finished the regular season second on the team with 95 tackles and had three interceptions. Then he picked off Eli Manning twice in Carolina's wild-card win against the New York Giants.

# Seahawks have much to do in preparation for Panthers

By GREGG BELL  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## KIRKLAND, Wash.

Two weeks ago, Seahawks coach and former high school history teacher Mike Holmgren gave his assistants some homework for their playoff bye week: start studying the other NFC postseason teams and compile preliminary scouting reports on each.

Soon, the coaches were scribbling notes on large dry-erase boards in their offices.

But when Washington became Seattle's first-round foe, the assistants erased all the other teams' information.

Thankfully for Holmgren, offensive quality-control coach Gary Reynolds copied the notes on the Panthers.

"Bless his heart," Holmgren said. "So we did get a bit of a start on Carolina."

He's glad they did. What Seattle's assistants saw during their extra studies, and what Holmgren saw on television, was an staunch Panthers defense led by athletic 6-foot-7 defensive end Julius Peppers and former Seahawk Ken Lucas in the defensive backfield.

It's a defensive unit that is sure to provide a stern challenge for Seattle's offense, which led the

league in points (452) this season.

"Defensively, they are very well coached. I know we always say that, but it is really true this time," Seahawks quarterback Matt Hasselbeck said. "I think these guys are the best in the NFC."

Further complicating the Seahawks' week: Right tackle Sean Locklear, who would be opposite Peppers for much of Sunday, was charged with assault Tuesday and released from jail after his arrest early Sunday in what police described as a domestic-violence incident with a woman identified as his girlfriend. His playing status was to be determined.

"It's really unfortunate," Hassel-

beck said of the arrest. "Coach Holmgren is always talking to us about good decisions on and off the football field. I would say 99 percent of the time, we all listen."

"Sometimes, you've got to learn the hard way."

Then there was the uncertain status of NFL MVP Shaun Alexander, who sustained a concussion Saturday. On Wednesday, doctors gave Alexander clearance to play Sunday.

The Panthers don't need to hear about running back injuries.

DeShaun Foster broke his leg in the win against the Bears, leaving third-stringer Nick Goings, Carolina's sixth running option in

training camp, to start Sunday. Three-time Pro Bowler Stephen Davis had already been placed on the injured-reserve list Dec. 17 with a lingering knee problem.

But that just highlights another Seahawks challenge: containing receiver Steve Smith. Against the Bears, he had 12 catches for a career-high 218 yards.

He will test perhaps the weakest part of an improving Seattle defense. Starting cornerback Andre Dyson was just coming back after being out for a month with a high sprain of his left ankle when he missed 1½ quarters of Saturday's win with a right ankle injury.

The Seahawks' best cover man is opposite corner Marcus Tru fant. He played his first game in three weeks Saturday after bruising his lower back.

Now those defensive backs must face what Holmgren calls a special player, one who can take over a game if not contained.

But even with a backup running the ball for the Panthers, Holmgren said interim defensive coordinator John Marshall is not going to stack his defense solely against Smith.

"I think you have to be careful of saying, 'Now we can relax and we can look over there,'" Holmgren said.

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