

LOCAL

FOOTBALL

FC's Sears earns honor

Senior wingback and special teams player Danny Sears is one of two Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference players named to Don Hansen's Football Gazette All-North Region first team.



SEARS

A Whiteland Community High School graduate, Sears averaged 25 yards per kick-off return and led the conference in receiving yards with 855 on 46 catches. He also led the HCAC in all-purpose yards (149 per game) and was named the league's special teams MVP.

Senior running back Mike Lovell of Mount St. Joseph also was named to the All-North Region first team.

GOLF

THOUSAND PALMS, Calif.

Verplank, Rose tied

Scott Verplank spoiled a bogey-free round with a shot that found water on the final hole Thursday, but his 6-under 66 still was good enough for a share of the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic lead.

Justin Rose holed a pair of bunker shots on the way to a 65 that also put him at 12 under and tied at the top through two rounds of the five-day tournament.

Robert Allenby followed his opening 63 with a 70 and was tied with Johnson Wagner at 11 under. Wagner had a 67. Phil Mickelson was eight shots back after a 70.

HORSES

KENNETT SQUARE, Pa.

Barbaro on the mend

Barbaro's pain medicine was reduced, and the Kentucky Derby winner continued to improve following surgery on his left hind hoof.

Barbaro, plagued by the often-fatal hoof disease called laminitis, underwent surgery Saturday and has made steady progress since, said chief surgeon Dean Richardson of the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center.

"Barbaro's comfort level is improving steadily," he said.

Swing

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Hester, the only rookie All-Pro this year, has a dynamic counterpart on the Saints in Reggie Bush.

While Bush didn't come close to being as special on special teams — he had one punt return for a touchdown, while Hester had three, plus two on kickoffs and one on a failed field goal — he remains nearly as dangerous as Hester when the opponent is forced to punt.

Bush averaged 7.7 yards on 28 returns, while Hester was at 12.8 for 47, leading the league with 600 yards. Hester also returned 20 kickoffs for a 26.4 average and had two TDs in one game against the Rams. Plus, he ran back a missed field goal against the Giants 108 yards, trying the league record for longest play.

Japan

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for the first time since tryouts in Tampa, Fla., in October, Archer said the team developed a rapport quickly.

"When everybody gets there, it's like you've known them for a long time," Archer said. "Playing with them is a nice challenge, and I really like that."

Archer was born with arthrogryposis, a muscle disorder that causes joint limitations, which in turn prevents normal muscle development.

FOOTBALL

FLOWERY BRANCH, Ga.

Vick's bottle raises suspicions at airport

Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick on Wednesday reluctantly surrendered a water bottle to security at Miami International Airport that smelled like marijuana and contained a substance in a hidden compartment.

He was not arrested and was allowed to board an AirTran flight that landed in Atlanta before noon Wednesday.

Miami police said Thursday it could be weeks before a decision is made on whether to file charges against the three-time Pro Bowl player.

Falcons owner Arthur Blank, general manager Rich McKay and new coach Bobby Petrino met with Vick, who left team headquarters without speaking to reporters. McKay described Blank as being upset with the quarterback, whose \$137 million contract was richest in the NFL when Vick signed it three years ago.

MIAMI

Ex-IU coach Cameron Dolphins' top candidate

The Miami Dolphins hope to complete their two-week search for a coach by Saturday, and the front-runner appears to be San Diego Chargers offensive coordinator Cam Cameron.

The former Indiana University coach kept his hotel room near

the Dolphins' complex Thursday night after a second day of interviewing with team officials. A Dolphins spokesman said management was still weighing the candidates.

Cameron first interviewed with the Dolphins shortly after coach Nick Saban left for Alabama on Jan. 3. Cameron became available when San Diego was eliminated from the playoffs Sunday by New England.

Cameron was coach at his alma mater, Indiana, from 1997-2001. He was 18-37 with the Hoosiers.

SOUTH BEND

Brown, Powlus to be Notre Dame assistants

New York Jets defensive backs coach Corwin Brown will be introduced as Notre Dame's defensive coordinator today, and former Irish player Ron Powlus will be named quarterbacks coach.

Brown will replace Rick Minter, while Powlus will replace Peter Vaas, two people familiar with the hiring said Thursday. They requested anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information. Both Minter and Vaas were in their second stints at Notre Dame.

Coach Charlie Weis called a news conference today to introduce Brown and Powlus.

Brown has been defensive backs coach with the Jets for the past three seasons. Powlus was a four-year starter at quarterback for the Irish.

BASEBALL

PHOENIX

Investigator to owners: Cooperate in probe

Former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell warned baseball owners that a lack of cooperation with his investigation into steroid use will significantly increase the chances of government involvement.

Speaking to owners at baseball's quarterly meetings, Mitchell said he intends to interview active players and raised the possibility that Congress or other government authorities could compel testimony.

"I believe it will be in your best

interests, and the best interests of baseball, if I can report that I have received full cooperation from your organizations, and from others, in conducting this investigation," Mitchell said in remarks that were released to reporters.

Mitchell cited last week's Hall of Fame vote to underscore the importance of his investigation.

Mark McGwire was picked on 23.5 percent of ballots, far below the necessary 75 percent needed for induction. The vote was viewed by many as the first referendum on how history will judge an age when bulked-up players came under suspicion of using performance-enhancing drugs.

RACING

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Stepmom wants Junior to remain with DEI team

Teresa Earnhardt is willing to discuss a larger role at Dale Earnhardt Inc. with stepson Dale Earnhardt Jr. as part of the ongoing contract negotiations to keep him at his late father's company.

"We are moving full speed ahead with negotiations, moving ahead as we normally would," Teresa Earnhardt said Thursday.

Asked if she was committed to keeping Junior behind the wheel of the No. 8 Chevrolet, she didn't waver.

"Absolutely," she said. Junior's contract expires at the end of this season, and his status with the company has been in question since Teresa Earnhardt seemingly questioned his commitment in a December article in the Wall Street Journal.

The remark angered Junior, who said at preseason testing last week that the two had not spoken since the quote was published because "I figured if anything needed to be said, she'd call me up and say it."

Teresa Earnhardt said the two have since spoken to each other.

LACROSSE

DURHAM, N.C.

NAACP asks for quiet during Duke case review

The North Carolina chapter of the NAACP on Thursday called on those involved with the Duke lacrosse sexual assault case, from defense attorneys to state bar officials, to stop talking publicly while the state attorney general's office begins its review.

"We sincerely believe that the high level of public scrutiny and controversy involved in this matter is unwarranted and threatens to pervert the truth-finding process," said the Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP.

No parties involved in the case have indicated whether they plan to stop speaking publicly.

Until turning the case over to state prosecutors, Nifong led the investigation into allegations that a 28-year-old black student at North Carolina Central University, hired to perform as a stripper, was raped and beaten by three white men, all Duke lacrosse players, at a March 13 party.

wide receiver, running back and defensive back. When the Bears chose him in the second round, it was uncertain what Hester would do other than run back kicks.

He's played some cornerback this season, but his work on special teams has defined Hester.

One concern has been his ball security, though, and losing a fumble on a runback can be as devastating for the Bears as taking one to the end zone might be to the Saints.

"It's hard because of the style of running that I have; I'm more of a speedy type guy," Hester said. "I need my arms to pump a lot. So sometimes I feel like I kind of do tend to have the ball kind of move just because I'm pumping hard and trying to run hard."

Hester handles the punt returns and is back with Rashied Davis on kickoffs. Bush hasn't returned kickoffs this season, although in a pinch he just might join veteran Michael Lewis for them Sunday.

Loyalty

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Seahawks last weekend until this one, Ditka has been playing it coy.

In a handful of interviews, he refused to say where his loyalty lies. Ditka, after all, came out of retirement to coach the Saints briefly, and like everyone else who's ever spent time in New Orleans, seeing the havoc Hurricane Katrina wreaked tweaked the soft spot in his heart.

And no sooner did he take his seat in front of a microphone for his weekly ESPN radio show than the question was asked one more time.

"The only thing dumber than that question," Ditka finally growled at Steve Rosenbloom, one of his co-hosts, "is the person asking it."

Cheers. "Did anybody think that maybe the reason I didn't say anything is because I don't want to jinx them?"

More cheers. "I've been here since 1961," Ditka resumed, now almost indignant, "and I've rooted for them each and every week of the season."

Ditka put down his cigar, looked out over the room and cracked a grin.

For a guy who passes himself off as decidedly low-tech, the 67-year-old franchise obviously knows a thing or two about synergy. For all the talk about not wanting to "jinx" the Bears, the real reason Ditka kept his own counsel this long was simply to put a little extra money in his pocket.

On an otherwise dreary winter morning, the "Hall of Fame" room on the second floor of Mike Ditka's is packed. It's not even noon, but the bar is selling way more drinks than coffee, and waitresses are buzzing between the tables stretching back from the impromptu radio stage.

Every time Ditka & Co. got a station break, patrons form a line to have him autograph miniature footballs or dinner plates, both conveniently emblazoned with his logo. A few school-age kids wander around in jerseys and helmets, apparently playing hooky or else waiting for the question-and-answer portion of the show.

The first question, though, comes from a grown-up. It has to do with whether the Bears' defensive line can get pressure on Saints quarterback Drew Brees without blitzing.

Anybody who's ever watched Ditka coach, and even those who've only seen him working as a TV commentator, knows better than to expect an in-depth answer.

Ditka doesn't do analysis. What he does better than anyone else, though, is come up with new ways of saying that everybody, coaches as well as players, should try harder because, well, that's how Ditka did it.

"At some point," Ditka said, presumably addressing the Bears' tackles and ends, "you've got to buckle up and go."

Cheers. Question No. 2 comes from a youngster fumbling to read the question he's written on paper.

"Hey, coach," he began shyly. "I'm Jason from Elmhurst."

Jason wanted to know how the Bears' defense could stop the Saints' two-headed running attack of Reggie Bush and Deuce McAllister. Again, Ditka's answer is short on specifics and long on effort. "Do I think they can stop the run?" he said finally. "Yeah."

More cheers. On one of the half-dozen flat-screen TVs bolted to the walls, a small picture of Ditka fills one corner as the talking head on one local sports segment wonders whether Da Coach will back Chicago or New Orleans.

Now, everybody has their answer. The distinctive tinkle of glasses being bumped together in toasts fills the place. Ditka picks up his cigar, lights it one more time and grins.

Jim Litke is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to jllitke@ap.org.

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