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THE BATTALION

Tuesday, January 27, 2004

Houston nothing more than a business trip to Panthers, Patriots

By Eddie Pells
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — With his crisply knotted blue power tie and sharply tailored blue blazer, Ty Law could've been mistaken for a CEO.

But no, he's just a CB — a cornerback on a business trip.

Law's New England Patriots and the surprising Carolina Panthers began the biggest business trip of the season Sunday when they arrived in Houston to start the weeklong countdown to the Super Bowl.

"We're here to do a job," Law explained. "We can go hang with the 'in' crowd when we're done playing."

For the better part of the last three decades, the NFL's title game has been as much about the hoopla leading to kickoff as the game itself. The goal for the players and coaches has been figuring out how to handle the distractions and still be ready for the game.

Different coaches have handled things in different ways. Chuck Noll won four titles by rarely setting curfews and actually encouraging the Pittsburgh Steelers to soak in the atmosphere. Bill Walsh dressed up like a bellman to loosen up the 49ers on their first Super Bowl trip. Other coaches, especially in more recent years, have preferred more structure, less fun.

Both John Fox of the Panthers and Bill Belichick of

the Patriots were using the business-trip mantra with their players, and neither was making any apologies for it.

"We're not here to go sightseeing, we're here to play Carolina," said Belichick, who led the Pats to the title two seasons ago. "I don't know how anyone could take this any other way."

Still, there are perks to making a Super Bowl. Near the top of the list for these teams was a respite from the weather.

The Patriots arrived in Texas about an hour behind schedule — "How late are we? A minute? Five minutes?" Belichick said — but not before saying goodbye to about a month straight of cold, nasty weather. The temperature in Boston on Sunday: 2 degrees, about 68 degrees colder than in Houston.

The Panthers, meanwhile, were sent off by about 10,000 fans who braved a nasty sleet storm to line the streets of Charlotte and wish their team luck.

"I woke up this morning and was like, 'It's snowing?'" linebacker Will Witherspoon said. "Then, to see all the people, all the fans, supporting you, you just tell yourself, 'Man, let's bring this home. Let's show them what they're out there in the cold for, what they're cheering for.'"

Almost all the Panthers brought video cameras to record moments from the first Super Bowl appearance in the nine-year-old franchise's existence.

The same was true of the Patriots, many of whom went down this road just two years ago, but wanted to capture some memories, nonetheless.

Yet despite the moments of fun, both teams talked as if they're gearing for a hard week of work.

"I think everyone has to know that this is a business," Panthers receiver Steve Smith said.

The Panthers surprised almost everyone and went 14-5 this season, including playoff wins at St. Louis and Philadelphia, to make it to the Super Bowl.

Carolina is a 7-point underdog against New England, which is on a 14-game winning streak, a run equaled only by the 1972 Miami Dolphins, who went 17-0. "Fourteen straight wins, it's pretty incredible," Patriots quarterback Tom Brady said.

But he knows if they don't get the 15th, it will be Carolina that everyone remembers from this season.

That may have explained why there was so much sincere talk about the biggest football celebration of the year being nothing more than a business trip for these guys.

"A lot of these guys haven't experienced the Super Bowl the same way I have," said Law, a nine-year veteran who also lost a Super Bowl with the Patriots in 1997. "When you lose, that's a terrible feeling, and nobody wants to go through it."

Blair

Continued from page 18

floor, but Blair has gotten team to play outside of themselves. Blair has gotten his to believe that they can play anyone in the country, and so far they have.

Even with the mounting losses, Blair's team is playing good basketball, something that hasn't been seen since Lynn Hill held Blair's job in 1994.

With Blair's excellent year track record, it should just a matter of time before Aggies turn those close losses into wins. At Arkansas, Blair turned a two-year losing streak into a NCAA Tournament team with a 23-7 record years later.

And with one of the recruiting classes in the nation already inked for the 2004 season, Blair has put the Aggie basketball on the national landscape. In the middle of Texas, one of the largest hubs of women's prep basketball, Blair is awakening a potent sleeping giant.

Blair was the best person to hire for A&M's women's basketball program. But don't get in the trap of thanking just Blair when the Aggies reach national prominence. Be sure to thank Byrne as well.



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