



OKLAHOMA TO FACE LSU FOR NATIONAL TITLE

Bowl controversy snubs top team, 1C



LUXURY GIFTS BACK IN VOGUE

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ALSO: Lamborghini sees boom ahead, 8D



The Charlotte Observer

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PART TWO OF FOUR ARE THE PLANES WE FLY MORE AT RISK?



AMES ALEXANDER - STAFF PHOTO

Investigators believe maintenance mistakes at this hangar in Huntington, W.Va., contributed to a plane crash that killed 21 aboard a flight in Charlotte on Jan. 8.

Outsourcing up, inspections down

Inexperience, inconsistent oversight raise concerns about contract shops

BY AMES ALEXANDER, TED REED
AND TED MELLNIK
Staff Writers

No one caught the mistakes.

Late one night in January, in a one-plane hangar in Huntington, W.Va., a mechanic who worked for a contractor tackled a crucial maintenance job adjusting cables that helped control an Air Midwest commuter plane.

He had never done the job on a Beech 1900D before. His instructor was also his inspector. He and other mechanics worked nights, while the hangar manager usually worked days. And the Federal Aviation Administration officer in charge of monitoring the site had visited only once since the mechanics began working there the previous summer.

Investigators believe maintenance mistakes were made that night, contributing to a crash in Charlotte two days later that killed all 21 aboard.

The case of Flight 5481 illustrates much of what can go wrong at contract maintenance shops, critics say.

As they struggle to cut costs, airlines increasingly outsource maintenance. Repair stations can save airlines millions, largely because they hire lower-paid mechanics who tend to be less trained and experienced than those who have historically worked for major airlines.

Contractors now do about half of all maintenance for the major airlines, up from about 37 percent in 1996. And the percentage is expected to grow.

But an Observer analysis shows those contract shops get far less regulatory scrutiny than the airlines' own maintenance shops. Last year, the FAA conducted nearly three times as many maintenance inspections at airlines as it did at all repair stations, The Observer found.

Those who run repair stations say they do first-rate work.

Studies and experts have raised concerns, though, con-
SEE PLANES | 6A

As the tail-heavy plane takes off, a cry for help

PART TWO OF FOUR

THE STORY SO FAR: The two pilots and 19 passengers on Flight 5481 from Charlotte to Greenville, S.C., prepare for takeoff.

BY ELIZABETH LELAND
Staff Writer

It was nearing time to go.

One engine on the prop plane hummed loudly, and in the cockpit the two pilots huddled over paperwork, estimating the weight and balance of the loaded airplane.

Too heavy, and they would have to take off bags or passengers.

"Let's see," First Officer Jonathan Gibbs said and added aloud, "15, 18, 8, 9, 10 ..."

"Is it gonna work?" Capt. Katie Leslie interrupted. "We're close."

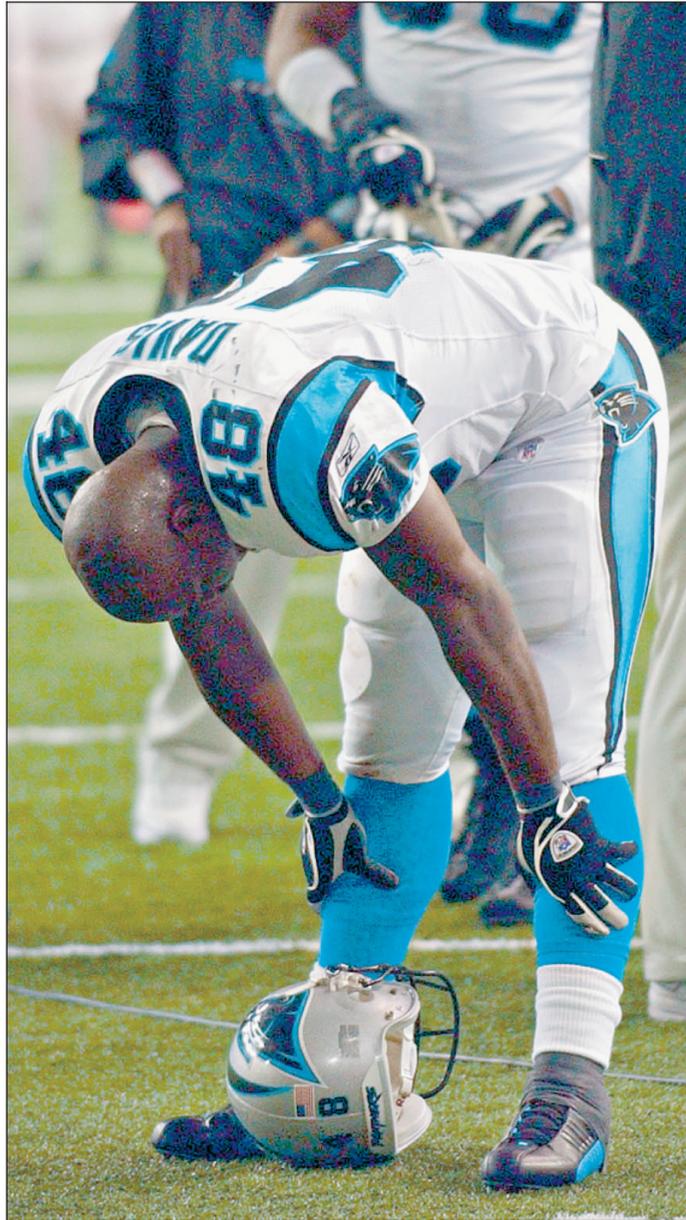
She suggested that he subtract another hundred pounds for fuel burned before takeoff. They were doing what some pilots call "surfing the pencil," looking for anything they might have overlooked that would make the numbers work.

As Gibbs refigured, a baggage handler walked up to the cockpit window.

"How many we gotta take off?" he asked Leslie. They had loaded 31 bags, and two were so heavy it took two men to lift them.

SEE FLIGHT 5481 | 7A

Overtime heartbreak - 20-14



CHRISTOPHER A. RECORD - STAFF PHOTO

ELUSIVE VICK-TORY

Falcons QB runs up Panthers' losing streak

Overtime? No problem. The Panthers have been here three times before - all victories. But this time, Carolina quarterback Jake Delhomme threw an interception that Kevin Mathis returned 32 yards for a touchdown to give the Atlanta Falcons a 20-14 victory.

Atlanta rode the legs of quarterback Michael Vick as he rushed for 141 yards and a touchdown. Carolina running back Stephen Davis (above, at game's end) scored a touchdown, but it wasn't enough to stop a losing streak, now at three games.

See story in Sports, Page 1C.

NEW OUTERBELT STRETCH

Northwest bracing for boom from mall, I-485

Landowners asking top dollar, anticipating cars and shoppers

BY DIANNE WHITACRE
Staff Writer

The quiet countryside of northwest Mecklenburg will soon be transformed by the footprints of giants: Interstate 485 and the region's largest shopping district.

Work on the six-mile stretch of I-485 starts next month. And construction has already begun on the Northlake mall. The 1.7 million square feet of shopping, which includes nearby stores, will be bigger than the new expanded SouthPark or Concord Mills.

The openings of Northlake in 2005 and the freeway in 2007 are expected to create a massive development boom in the semi-rural area, bringing more houses, stores and traffic.

With interchanges at I-85, Brookshire Boulevard and I-77, the outerbelt - and the mall - will draw drivers from Gaston, Lincoln and Iredell counties, as well as Lake Norman, University City and uptown.

Northlake will have something no other mall in the region has: three freeway exits.

Those exits combined with fast-growing communities nearby will make this "a pretty dad-burn unique place," said developer Henry Faison, who started planning the mall about 10 years ago.

SEE OUTERBELT | 18A

Reactor set for journey to S.C.

Barge to travel around Cape Horn

Railroads, Panama Canal authorities and a West Coast dump said no to radioactive parts

BY BRUCE HENDERSON
Staff Writer

Few retirees could ever have gone to such lengths to relocate in rural Barnwell, S.C., as a decommissioned nuclear reactor waiting to be shipped from San Onofre, Calif.

Barnwell's low-level nuclear waste site is the only port in a awfully long storm for the 770-ton reactor vessel. It has been shunned by railroads, Panama Canal authorities and a West Coast dump.

So Southern California Edison will do what it must: barge its radioactive cargo 11,000 miles by way of Cape Horn, at the tip of South America. The voyage will take three months.

Taking the scenic route to Barnwell illustrates a larger problem: what to do with America's retired nuclear plant parts.

Barnwell is the only site open to waste from throughout the United States. But that will change in 2008, when it will close to all states except South Carolina, Connecticut and New Jersey.

Seventeen reactors are being decommissioned, said the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry group. Fifty-one of the nation's 103 operating reactors have had licenses renewed, are under review or are expected to ask for extensions.

"This is a real question: where are these things going to go? What's going to happen to them in the future?" said Tom Clements of Greenpeace International.

Many shut-down reactors will simply stay put, an option environmental groups favor.

But industry experts acknowledge there's no final solution to low-level waste, the mildly radioactive debris that ranges from dirty rags to reactor components.

A 1980 federal law meant to establish regional disposal sites hasn't overcome political
SEE BARNWELL | 10A

Today's Observer

Radio host faces silent future

HEALTH | 1E Longtime Charlotte

radio personality John Hancock is losing his hearing to Ménière's disease, a rare unpredictable disorder that causes periodic hearing loss, tinnitus and vertigo. As he faces a growing silence, he's struggling with what this means to a career that depends on listening.



Hancock

Two deaths possibly linked to flu

LOCAL | 1B Two children who died last week had flu symptoms, and authorities hope to learn today whether one died from the virus. It would be the area's first confirmed flu death this season.

Note for Weekend Subscribers

As part of The Observer's coverage of the Carolina Panthers, weekend subscribers will receive Monday's paper at no additional charge. If you do not want to receive these newspapers, call circulation at (800) 532-5350.

Weather

CLEAR: High: 56. Low: 25. Mostly sunny all day. Clear tonight; not as cold. Full forecast, 8B

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