

CAROLINA PANTHERS OFFICIAL PUBLICATION

ROAR

**SALUTE TO
SERVICE**

**MONDAY NIGHT
FOOTBALL**

Q&A

WITH ZENDAYA
COLEMAN

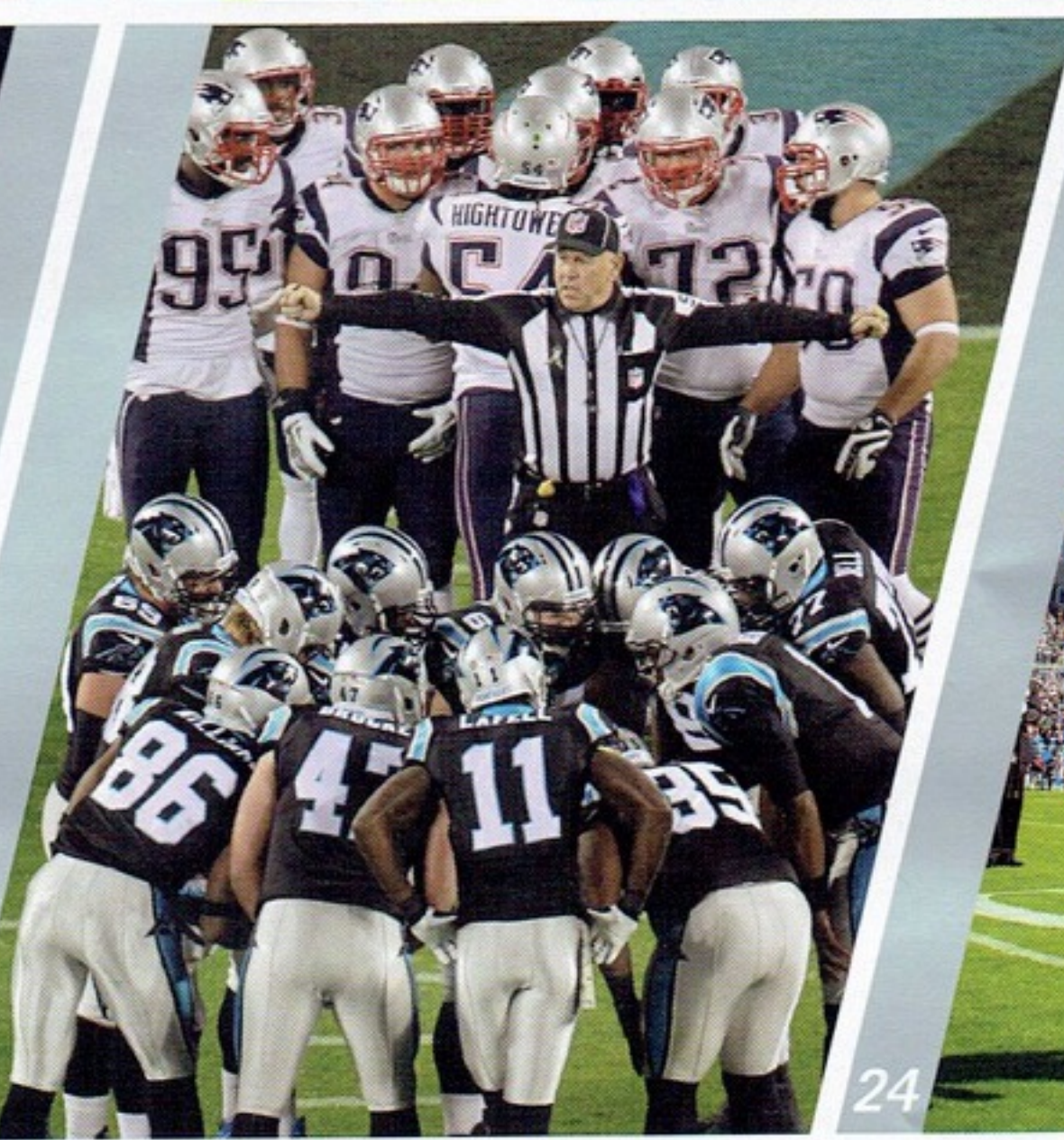




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MOVING IT

By Ryan Anderson

Each time the Carolina Panthers board the airplane to travel to a road game, equipment manager Jackie Miles is challenged with making sure the thousands of pounds of equipment necessary for the game – everything from uniforms to shoulder pads to athletic training tape – makes it to the host stadium.

The men responsible for ensuring the equipment arrives on time and intact are Tom Tulowiecki and Todd Koepke. Owners of T-N-T Moving Systems in Charlotte, Tulowiecki and Koepke have been moving the Panthers since the team's inaugural season in 1995.

Equipment demands for road games have increased exponentially since the start of the franchise, and the team now packs approximately 9,000 pounds of equipment for an away game in a dome. That number climbs closer to 12,000 or 13,000 pounds for an outdoor game in cold or inclement weather.

"When the season schedule comes out, a lot of people might be looking at what holidays we're missing, but what we're looking at is what dome games we have in December," Koepke said.

Around the 1999 season, the Panthers began trucking the majority of the team's equipment to road games. A long-standing practice on the college level, the Panthers were the first NFL team to take most of the equipment off the team plane and transport it by land.

"We started out flying everything and as time went on, people started bringing more. After a couple years, you couldn't fit all the equipment on the plane," Miles said. "One day I sat down with Tommy and Todd and asked how hard it would be for them to have one truck that drives most of the equipment across the country and one truck to take the rest of it to the airport with the team."

Roughly 70 percent of the equipment needed for an away game – video equipment, rain gear and extra shoes among other items – is placed on the truck that departs Charlotte on Thursday and arrives in the host city on Friday afternoon. Thirty percent – mostly player uniforms, pads and shoes – is loaded on the team plane that arrives on Saturday before a Sunday game.

Sending a truck to away games not only helps Miles account for the growing equipment demand; it also allows the team to depart from the airport more quickly.

"Where it might take another team 35 minutes after a game to load the plane, it takes us 10 because the big stuff is driving," Miles said.

"It's what we do. We enjoy it," Koepke said. "People always ask, 'What do you do?'" And I say, 'Think of a rock concert. We set up for the show, and after the show we break it down and head on to the next city.'"

It also gives Miles an insurance policy. In October 2006, the Panthers encountered an unexpected cold day in Cincinnati after the temperature dropped overnight to the high 40s prior to kickoff.

"It was going to be beautiful, but Jackie had us pack some of the cold weather stuff just in case," Tulowiecki said. "It dropped 30 degrees overnight, but we had all the stuff that we needed. Because of the truck, Jackie can bring that kind of stuff to cover anything that can go wrong."

Charlotte's central location typically means that the away game cities are within a 12-hour drive, but that is not always the case. This season, T-N-T Moving Systems trucked the Panthers gear as far as Glendale, Ariz. — a three-day drive — in Week Five before heading directly to Minneapolis, Minn., for the Panthers Week Six matchup. After returning to Charlotte, the crew had driven nearly 5,000 miles on the trip.

"It's what we do. We enjoy it," Koepke said. "People always ask, 'What do you do?'" And I say, 'Think of a rock concert. We set up for the show, and after the show we break it down and head on to the next city.'"

The Panthers biggest move happens each year in late July as the team heads to training camp at Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C. This year, the Panthers spent nearly three weeks at Wofford preparing for the start of the regular season, and T-N-T Moving Systems was there to help transport the team's entire football operation to campus.

Everything the Panthers need for their time at Wofford is moved from Charlotte, including football pads and jerseys, training room equipment and supplies, computers, paper and other office supplies, even much of the team's

weight room.

"It's probably about five working days of moving," Tulowiecki said. "The big moving day has a tractor-trailer, a flatbed truck and two or three straight trucks. Then after that, it's a truck a day for about four days."

Tulowiecki and Koepke are hesitant to guess at the total weight of the items that travel to camp each year.

"It's a lot," Koepke said.

All told, it takes the moving crew about one week to get everything loaded in Charlotte and unloaded in Spartanburg.

"We needed to pay the bills."

Natives of upstate New York and college roommates at Alfred State, an hour and a half south of Rochester, N.Y., Koepke and Tulowiecki did not set out looking for careers as movers, but like much in life, things rarely unfold the way they are planned.

After moving to Charlotte in the mid-1990s at the urging of friends in the area, the pair, in their mid-20s at the time, began looking for jobs in their respective fields. Tulowiecki had previously worked as a computer programmer and Koepke had experience interning with a stock brokerage and securities firm.

"When we moved down here, we had our resumes out, but we needed to pay the bills," Koepke said.

With that in mind, Tulowiecki found a job working with a moving company. Koepke joined him, and the duo worked together on a crew that handled the Panthers during the inaugural season in 1995.

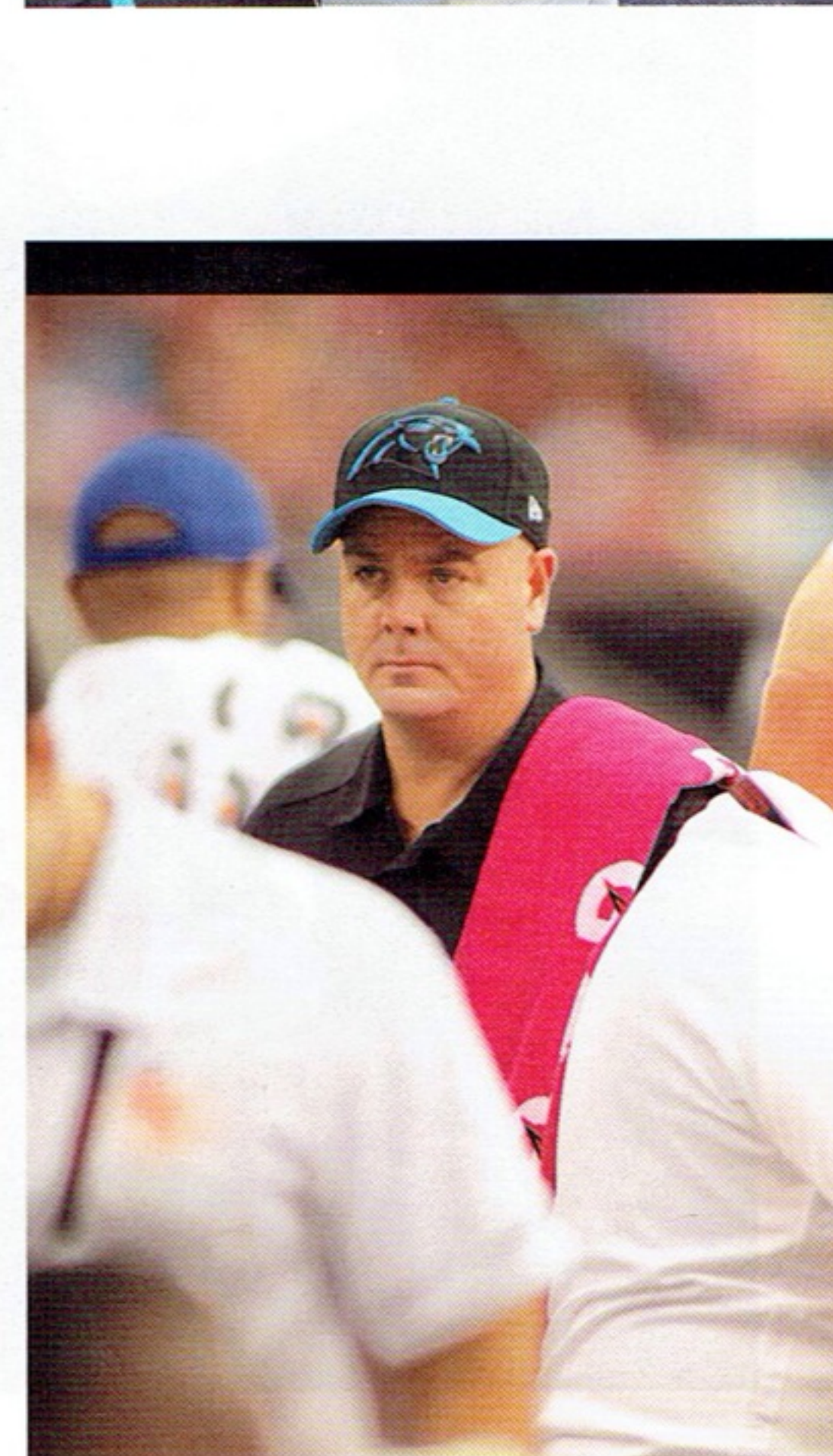
Tulowiecki and Koepke quickly impressed Miles, who has served as equipment manager since the start of the franchise.

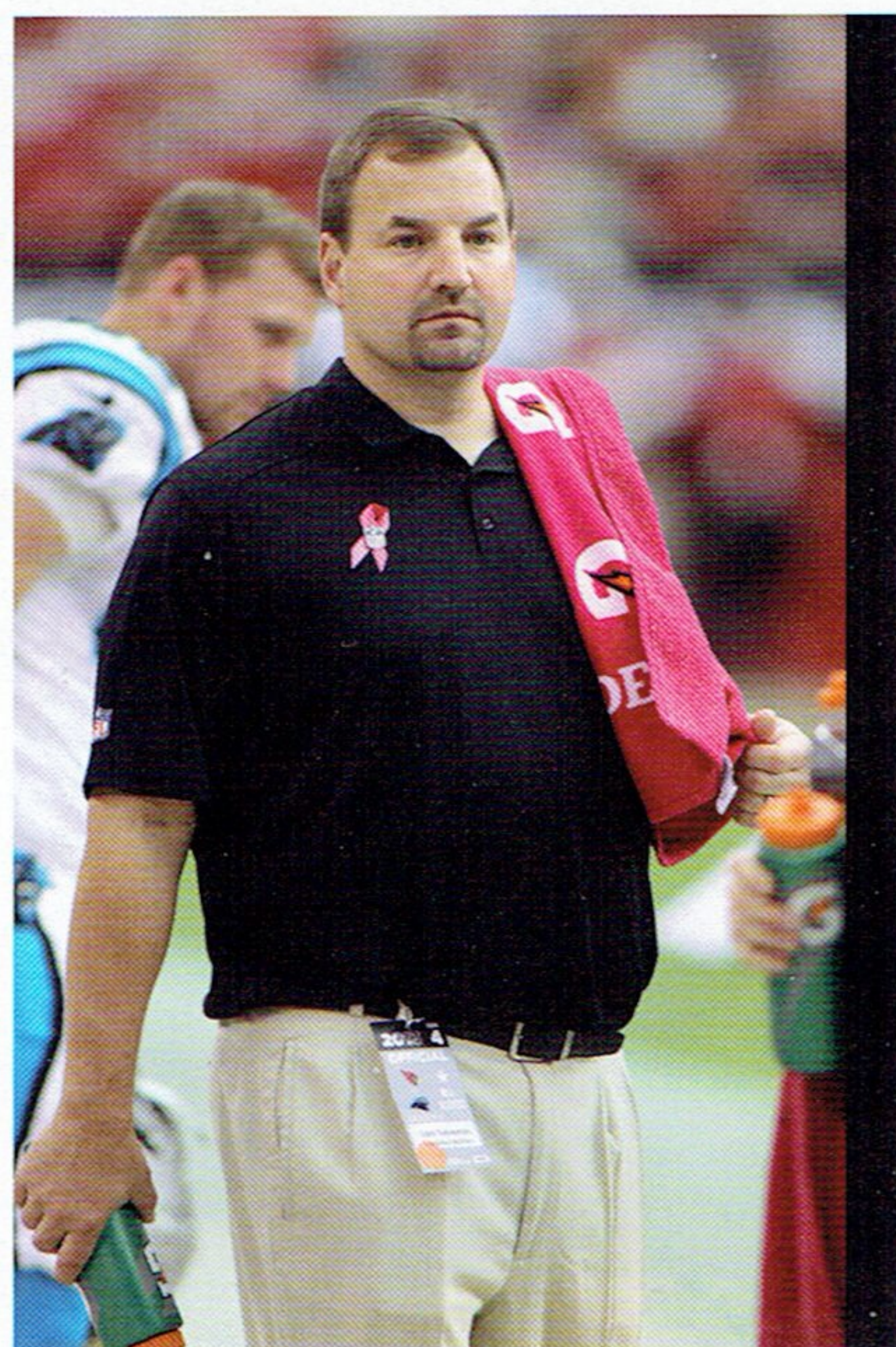
"They were really reliable, hard-working, blue-collar kids," Miles said. "They were on time, they were excellent. I told the owners of the moving company I didn't want anyone else handling our moves except for Tommy and Todd."

Tulowiecki and Koepke helped move the Panthers equipment from the team's temporary home at Winthrop College in Rock Hill, S.C., to Clemson University for each home game while the team's permanent home was being built in Charlotte.

"We would load everything from Winthrop in one truck on Saturday morning, drive it to Clemson and unload around 3 in the afternoon just to take it all back Sunday night after the game and unload it at Winthrop at 9 or 10 o'clock at night," Tulowiecki said.

During those moves, Tulowiecki and Koepke





worked closely with Miles and assistant equipment manager Don Toner, who like Tulowiecki and Koepke, was from upstate New York. Miles called on the movers to do additional jobs on game day such as holding coaches' headset cables and working in the equipment room.

"We tried to integrate ourselves more than just being two moving guys," said Tulowiecki. "We tried to help out as much as possible."

"The Panthers were the catalyst in all of it."

In 1996, the Panthers began playing in Charlotte and no longer needed trucking to and from Clemson, but Tulowiecki and Koepke stayed close to the team. They purchased their own truck and subcontracted the Panthers equipment moves to and from the airport for road games.

However, things took an unfortunate turn for Tulowiecki and Koepke after the 1996 season when the moving company they worked for shut down.

"We had nothing," Koepke said. "We were doing everything we could to make that truck payment, let alone feed ourselves."

With bills to pay, Tulowiecki and Koepke called on the relationship they developed with Miles and asked to remain the movers for the Panthers

independently. Miles gave them the contract.

"They reminded me a lot of myself growing up. I grew up in the inner city of south Philadelphia. It was blue-collar and someone gave me a chance way back when," Miles said. "I could see that they were hard working and they bought into what we were teaching them. When you see young guys buy in like that, you want to help them any way you can."

In their mid-twenties, Koepke and Tulowiecki became the sole movers for the Carolina Panthers.

"We've got a very big loyalty to Jackie," Koepke said. "We owe him a lot because he really believed in us and we had nothing."

At about the same time, Tulowiecki and Koepke decided to open their own moving company, T-N-T Moving Systems, a play on their names, Tom and Todd.

"We tried to do every move that we could...which was slow at the time," Tulowiecki said.

Tulowiecki and Koepke handled household moves for most months, but on the weekends during football season they were moving the Panthers.

"It was definitely a five-year struggle to try to get on our feet and get things going," Koepke said. "The Panthers were the

catalyst in all of it."

"We're all family around here."

Over the years, Tulowiecki and Koepke have become more than just movers for the Panthers; they've become a part of the team.

They can be seen on game day working closely with Miles, Toner and equipment assistant Greg Almond handling a variety of locker room duties, many of which they have done since the Panthers first season.

"On game day they're assistant equipment managers to me. They're not owners of a trucking company," Miles said. "They help strap guys up in their shoulder pads, they help give equipment out, they're on the field helping the players warm up. They're two full-time assistants on game day."

They have become familiar faces in the organization, working in the locker room on the road and at home, traveling to away games and helping to move players, coaches and staff. They've made many friends along the way, including Miles and Toner.

"When you work for a team, there's no weak links. Everybody sticks together, and they're part of that bond we all have around here," Miles said. "I view us all as family, as best friends. The

equipment staff has been intact since day one. There has been a lot of change, but the one thing that has stayed together is the equipment staff — Donnie and I, Tommy and Todd. We're all family around here."

Looking back at their 19 years working closely with the Panthers, it is still hard for Tulowiecki and Koepke to believe how the relationship has developed.

"We pinch ourselves to this day," Koepke said. "We're the smallest of fractions, but it's nice to be a part of it. We feel privileged to be there with everything that goes on."

Tulowiecki and Koepke are now in their 40s. They have seen their business develop from two young men with a single truck working out of an apartment into T-N-T Moving Systems, which has grown to 11 employees and four trucks handling residential and commercial moving throughout the area. Despite the success of the business outside of football, don't expect the pair to be leaving the Panthers any time soon.

"We'll continue to do this as long as Mr. Richardson and his family will have us and as long as Jackie will have us," Tulowiecki said. "Win or lose, we really feel like we've won all the way around. It's been great."