



Captain Courageous

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Quarterback Jake Delhomme. (PHOTO: ANDREW MASON)

CHARLOTTE -- When quarterback Jake Delhomme jogged onto the field for the Panthers' first offensive play of the season Sept. 7 at San Diego, he knew he couldn't go into the huddle before making a detour to the sideline.

He had to give one last message to the men who made his return possible -- head athletic trainer Ryan Vermillion, team doctor Pat Connor and the rest of the Panthers' athletic training and medical staff. From preparation for Tommy John surgery to the final pregame throws leading up to the season opener, they had guided, prodded, encouraged and taken care of Delhomme, ensuring that his right elbow wouldn't just be repaired -- but truly as good as new.

"I told them before I went out for the first snap, 'Thank you,'" Delhomme said, "because it meant a lot to me to be able to come back and play.

"I was lucky to have the doctor that we have and the training staff that we have. Things happen for a reason; I firmly believe that. Being here and being with Ryan -- I'm glad I was here."

Eight weeks later, it's Delhomme who's receiving the thanks of all around him in the halls of Bank of America Stadium. He's thrown at least two touchdown passes in three of Carolina's last four games. He's on pace for more 3,500 passing yards, which would be his highest total in four years.

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Jake Delhomme talks about his honor.

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He's all the way back. A 6-2 start to the season is a nice reward, but Delhomme received another Monday afternoon, as he was selected as the winner of the Panthers' Ed Block Courage Award.

The award is bestowed upon one player from each team that overcame adversity -- be it injuries or other factors -- to contribute to the team's success. It is also part of a program that establishes "Courage Houses" throughout the league's cities, including the Panthers Courage House, which provides assistance and temporary out-of-home care to young men who have battled adversity and crisis in their lives.

The Panthers' 13 previous award winners are honored in the Panthers' training room -- a group that includes wide receivers Muhsin Muhammad and Steve Smith, safety Mike Minter and defensive end Mike Rucker, last year's winner. Another notable honoree was linebacker Sam Mills, who was the Saints' Ed Block award winner in 1994.

"You look in the training room, and there are pictures of the past winners -- and you look at all those guys. Most of the ones up there are guys that I have a ton of respect for," Delhomme said. "Hopefully, guys will feel that same way (about me)."

They do, evidenced by how the award-winner is selected -- by a team vote.

"That's the biggest honor to me -- that it's voted on by your peers," Delhomme said.

Those peers saw just how diligently Delhomme worked in the past 12 months to ensure that the fateful pass that he threw in Atlanta in September 2007 would not be his last. With his first pass at San Diego eight weeks ago, the work was complete.

"I was never the guy that thought (the injury) could have been it, that I would never play again," Delhomme said. "But to get back out on the field doing something that I truly love and cherish -- that was a big moment."

Delhomme and the other 31 Ed Block Courage Award winners will be honored at an offseason ceremony in Baltimore where the league winner is announced.

PAST WINNERS OF THE PANTHERS ED BLOCK COURAGE AWARD:

2007: Mike Rucker
2006: Colin Branch
2005: Steve Smith
2004: Mark Fields
2003: DeShaun Foster
2002: Kevin Donnalley
2001: Patrick Jeffers
2000: Muhsin Muhammad
1999: Mike Minter
1998: Steve Beuerlein
1997: Tshimanga Biakabutuka
1996: Lamar Lathon
1995: Brett Maxie