

## After all this time, Delhomme deserves more credit

By Darin Gantt · 2008 The Herald  
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CHARLOTTE -- The odd part isn't the pass itself, but that people continue to be amazed by it.

After all these years, it's as if a large percentage of Carolina Panthers fans -- much less outsiders -- have yet to wrap their minds around the way quarterback Jake Delhomme and wide receiver Steve Smith work together.

It's as if they think of Delhomme as a helpless child who can do nothing but heave a ball up in the air and hope Smith ducks into a phone booth, changes into his cape and swoops in to save the day.

You'd think, after five years of watching it, folks might realize it was sort of on purpose.

Even coach John Fox had to laugh this week when asked about the way Delhomme "chucked one up" for Smith late in the Panthers' win over the Saints. You know, the 39-yard strike which basically won the game for them.

"I don't really like saying it's just chucked up in the air," Fox said. "There's a lot of work that goes into getting Jake back there to get it out there. No question, that was a great play by Steve Smith, it's not the first time, not even in a big spot. You go all the way back to '03, when it's third-and-whatever, and we hit a touchdown pass.

"Again, it was a great route and a great throw, and our quarterback got leveled as he got rid of it. There have been many other games where we've looked like that, but there's a lot of moving parts that have to happen for that to be successful."

Why Delhomme doesn't get more credit for it still amazes those who work with him daily.

It might go back to the initial and persistent discrimination against Delhomme. After all, he wasn't drafted, so he must not be any good.

We all know that to be a successful NFL quarterback, you simply must attend a BCS-conference school, and then be drafted in the first round, particularly the top 10 picks. Otherwise, you simply won't do.

Then, you must have a throwing motion that satisfies preconceived notions. You must throw the way it says in the textbook, and look like a picture on a 1960s-era football card when you finish. It genuinely helps if you are telegenic and handsome and also blonde.

So no, Delhomme does not fit the mold. He is no Stepford quarterback.

He throws funny, and looks funny doing it sometimes.

When, however, does the fact it lands in the right place more often than not start to count?

It was funny the other weekend when ESPN analyst Keyshawn Johnson called the balls Delhomme throws "hand grenades." Maybe that's why Johnson short-armed one that night against Dallas.

But seriously, we all know they don't look normal.

The point is they're landing in the right spots.

Let's run down the resume one more time.

He has a career passer rating of 85.1, which, according to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, is the 17th-best all-time. Three-tenths of a point behind some Favre guy, by the way.

He's thrown more touchdowns than interceptions (by a 115-76 count), and has a 7.34 yards-per-pass-attempt number (it's 7.94 this year) that proves he's able to stretch the field -- a good thing if your team wants to run the ball.

He has a record as a starter of 50-31 in the regular season (.617), and it gets better as he goes. He's 19-11 from December on, including 5-2 in the postseason.

There's also that third highest-rated-passer-in-postseason-history thing, behind two guys named Joe Montana and Bart Starr. Four of the playoff wins have come on the road, tying him with Roger Staubach and Len Dawson for the most ever.

Those four guys he keeps company with there? They all have busts in Canton.

So, no, Delhomme doesn't look orthodox. He looks better than most, if you're looking for what counts.

That's apparently not what many are looking for, however.

Were you so inclined, you could argue that Delhomme wouldn't even be on the map without Smith. But the reality is Smith might not be as nearly as good without Delhomme, either.

Say for instance the star receiver played with your "traditional" passer of preference, a guy who would always throw those pretty passes that hit him in stride. Congratulations, you've just made Smith another little fast guy, albeit one with fewer bruises.

What makes Smith special is his fight, his willingness and near-singular ability to go up in the air across the middle, jump and fight for the ball and almost always win. He's perhaps the bravest player anyone has ever seen, leading the league in precarious positions and God-is-he-getting-ups per game.

He catches that grenade quite often, it seems.

Glove, meet hand. Seems you two fit together.

"I don't think we talk about it that way," Fox said, when asked about the unusual manner Delhomme and Smith do business in the passing game. "There's no question, at the end of the day, it was a pretty good ball and an excellent catch, and those two guys have done that over time this season and in seasons past. ...

"They do it pretty well."

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