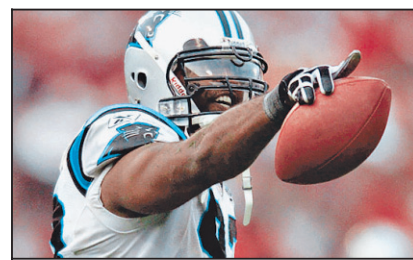




how to splurge & save this season

SPECIAL HOLIDAY EDITION | MONEYWISE



SPORTS | 1C

The Charlotte Observer

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2004

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U.S. 74

Straight ahead: 4 lanes to coast

Widening 2-lane stretch will speed travel from Blue Ridge to beaches

BY DIANNE WHITACRE
Staff Writer

Work starts soon to widen one of the last two-lane sections of U.S. 74, which will give drivers in the southern Piedmont their first four-lane route from the Smokies to the Atlantic.

For Charlotte-area drivers, the \$165 million project west of Interstate 95 will mean a faster drive to Wrightsville and Carolina beaches. And its completion will create better access for trucks shipping cargo from Charlotte to the port at Wilmington.

But that long-awaited construction does not mark the end of the state's 80-year effort to improve U.S. 74, which runs more than 425 miles from the Tennessee line to the coast.

Even as construction starts on that 20-mile stretch near Lumberton, 2 1/2 hours east of Charlotte, engineers are drawing plans to convert the eastern stretches of U.S. 74 to a freeway. They're building a second generation of bypasses to replace earlier ones that have been jammed for decades under the press of traffic and growth.

And crews are making an expressway out of Charlotte's own piece of U.S. 74 - Independence

SEE U.S. 74 | 8A

ROADWORK FOR YEARS TO COME
8A | When to expect other improvements to U.S. 74.

INSURGENTS ROUTED

U.S. forces control devastated Fallujah

BY DEXTER FILKINS
AND JAMES GLANZ
New York Times

FALLUJAH, Iraq — U.S. forces overran the last center of rebel resistance in Fallujah on Sunday after a weeklong invasion that smashed what they called the principal base for the Iraqi insurgency.

But much of the city lay in ruins, isolated bands of rebels still harassed American and Iraqi soldiers, and the military victory appeared to be nearly overshadowed by insurgent violence elsewhere, particularly in the northern city of Mosul.

The governor of Mosul's province, saying he had lost faith in local security forces, called in thousands of Kurdish militiamen for the first time to quell the insurgent uprising there. The U.S. commander in the area, Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, called the situation

SEE FALLUJAH | 4A

MOP-UP DEADLY FOR OFFICER
13A | Commander shot in house-to-house search in Fallujah.

VERY TIGHT CHASE INTO FINAL RACE



MARY ANN CHASTAIN - ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson (center) gives a high five to his crew as they celebrate winning the Southern 500 in victory lane Sunday at Darlington Raceway. The win was his fourth in five weeks.

Sun sets on an old Southern darling of NASCAR

DARLINGTON, S.C. — In a land of cotton fields, white-steepled Baptist churches and roadside stands advertising "Boiled P-nuts," the last Southern 500 was raced on Sunday.

Jimmie Johnson won it.

But as the checkered flag flew, the sport of stock-car racing lost a piece of its soul.

The immediate story to come out of Darlington

COMMENTARY



Scott Fowler

was the tightening NASCAR points race. With only one race left this season, Kurt Busch's overall lead has shrunk to 18 points over Johnson and 21 over Jeff Gordon, who could have won Sunday except for a mistake in the pits. The final race will be held Sunday

at 1 p.m. in Homestead, Fla., as Busch tries to hold off

SEE FOWLER | 14A

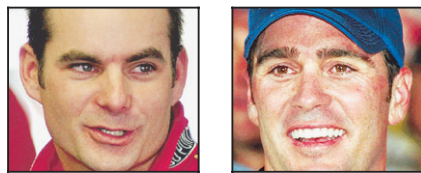
THE NEXTEL CUP: WHAT THEY NEED TO DO TO WIN

THE LEADER



Kurt Busch wins if he finishes third. Different winning scenarios are tied to other finishes.

THE CONTENDERS



Jeff Gordon (left) and Jimmie Johnson need to finish several spots ahead of Busch - and Gordon needs to finish a few spots ahead of Johnson - to overtake the leader and win the title.

THE LONG SHOTS



Dale Earnhardt Jr. (left) and Mark Martin have little chance at winning the title unless Busch, Gordon and Johnson all finish outside the top 20, which hasn't happened in the same race all year.

DWI DISMISSALS: WRECKED LIVES

Evidence present, suspect missing

Many arrested don't show up for court, avoid convictions and return to the highways

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

BY AMES ALEXANDER
Staff Writer

A driver with a suspended license crashed into a car on Charlotte's Central Avenue, then told police he'd had six beers and was drunk.

Another driver ran over a stop sign and drove off, forcing several cars off the road before police stopped him.

A third suspect caused a four-car accident, then tried to walk away.

All those Mecklenburg County drivers had at least three times the legal amount of alcohol in their systems.

But all had their DWI charges dismissed simply by failing to show up in court.

In North Carolina, that happens in more than 5,000 drunken driving cases each year involving defendants who test over the legal limit or refuse alcohol tests.

The state suspends their licenses. The cases remain open for prosecution if the suspects are found, but that's rare in North Carolina.

Fewer than a third of DWI suspects who failed to appear in court in 1999 have since been convicted, according to state motor vehicle statistics. And experts believe many of the defendants continue to drive.

"They're likely to be hard-core offenders who find reasons not to come to court," said Ike Avery, a former lawyer for the state Highway Patrol, who serves on a state task force trying to improve the way the state fights drunken driving. "...It's obvious we have a problem with people who don't show up."

SEE NO-SHOWS | 10A



Avery

OBSERVER INVESTIGATION

This two-part Observer special report continues an occasional series examining what happens when people drink and drive in the Carolinas.

READ PART ONE AND THE ORIGINAL SERIES, DWI: SOBERING ACQUITTALS, ONLINE AT

www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/news/special_packages/dwi/

Farmers face real tree dilemma

N.C. growers fight competition from artificial holiday imports

BY MIKE DRUMMOND
Staff Writer

Earl Deal clambers up a damp hill on his Smokey Holler Tree Farm in Laurel Springs, shrugging off Gothic weather on the eve before this month's harvest.

He halts to size up a 17-foot Christmas tree he hopes will grace the White House next year - and help boost sales of North Carolina's famed Fraser firs.

With overall sales of real Christmas trees facing more competition from artificial imports, growers

need all the marketing fuel they can muster. Indeed, trade-group associations, alarmed at the overall slump of real tree sales, are encouraging retailers to improve display methods and enhance the consumer experience.

A Smokey Holler fir took grand champion at the National Christmas Tree Association's biannual competition earlier this summer - the ninth time an N.C. tree has earned the award, more than any other state. The contest, born in 1966, includes presenting the First

Family with a Christmas tree. (This is Smokey Holler's first national title, and the first for North Carolina since 1997.)

Deal, his wife, Betsy, and son, Buddy, elected to present the White House a tree in 2005. That should give the slow-growing Fraser enough time to reach the required height of 18 1/2 feet.

The extra time also gives Deal two years to milk the award. When Christmas trees go on sale later this month, signs at certain retail-

SEE TREES | 11A



JOHN D. SIMMONS - STAFF PHOTO

Smokey Holler Tree Farm, which won a national competition in August, will present the White House its Christmas tree next year. Owners Earl and Betsy Deal, and their son Buddy Deal, hope the honor boosts sales of North Carolina's famous Fraser firs.

Do your feet hurt?

2A | Check out our expert advice on how to treat your tired tootsies

What stress does to your brain

1E | By rewiring your emotional circuits, too much stress can bring on depression, causing a physiological reaction

Clear and windy; cold tonight

BLUE SKIES: High: 59. Low: 29. Slightly warmer with light wind today. Cold overnight. Full forecast, 10B

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