

Cowboys' hopes end in Carolina

■ **NFC PLAYOFFS:** The Panthers will play against Green Bay next weekend at Lambeau Field for a Super Bowl berth

By Dave Goldberg
The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — An early exit for the Super Bowl champions, another expansion team in a conference championship.

The Carolina Panthers joined their expansion brethren from Jacksonville on Sunday, ending Dallas' troubled season; Carolina will be heading to next week's conference finals.

The Panthers beat the Cowboys 26-17 and head to Green Bay for the NFC title game Sunday.

The Cowboys first possession took them to the Car-

olina 3-yard line.

But as has happened so often this season, they couldn't get the ball in the end zone. Mills stopped Emmitt Smith on the third down, and the Cowboys had to settle for Chris Boniol's 22-yard field goal and a 3-0 lead.

Carolina (13-4) scored on its next two possessions, Collins throwing a 1-yard touchdown pass to Wesley Walls on a 68-yard, six-play drive, then capping a 42-yard, 11-play drive with 9-yard pass to Willie Green.

But the key might have come on the first series of the second half after the Cowboys, down 17-11, recovered Winslow Oliver's fumbled punt return at the Carolina 17-yard line. Dallas reached the 5, but the 37-year-old Mills stopped Smith on second down when he appeared to have a hole, and Dallas settled again for a field goal by Boniol, from 21 yards.

AFC playoffs: Martin takes the praise in Patriots win

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Bowl by Dallas.

"Losses are always tough," Steelers cornerback Rod Woodson said. "It's tough when you lose like this. The last thing you want is to get blown out in a playoff game."

The Steelers were coming off a rout of their own, a 42-14 wild-card win over Indianapolis. Jerome Bettis ran for 102 yards, and Pittsburgh's blitz produced four sacks in that game.

Pittsburgh's defense was ranked second in the NFL, but was outplayed by a New England defense that now has allowed just four touchdowns in its last six games. One week after scoring a club playoff record 42 points, the Steel-

ers' only points came after an interception, and they were out-gained 346 yards to 213.

"We'd heard a lot about their defense and, quite frankly, our players were a little tired of hearing that," Patriots coach Bill Parcells said.

It bothered Pro Bowl offensive tackle Bruce Armstrong.

"He wasn't too happy with the fact that everybody was giving Pittsburgh the ball game, yet we were the ones with 11 wins and the bye and the home game," quarterback Drew Bledsoe said. "There were a couple of guys on our line that played with a chip on their shoulder."

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