

Private search on for missing NFL athletes

Special to Sentinel-Voice

TAMPA, Fla. — Family and friends refused to give up the search for two NFL players and a third man missing four days in the Gulf of Mexico, enlisting private boats and planes to comb the waters off the Florida coast.

The Coast Guard called off the official search Tuesday for Oakland Raiders line-backer Marquis Cooper, free-agent NFL defensive lineman Corey Smith, who played for the Detroit Lions last season, and former South Florida player William Bleakley. The friends have been missing since their boat overturned Saturday in rough seas.

Authorities were done, but about a dozen charter boats motored out Wednesday, some with friends of the families aboard, to try to locate some signs of the men, according to dock workers at John's Pass near St. Petersburg. Three private planes also flew over the endless stretch of water, according to Cooper's father.

"Everyone around here, they've either known someone or heard of someone who's been lost out at sea," said David Scott, who works at a marina at John's Pass. "It's just one of those situations. Everyone really comes together in times like these."

A fourth man on the fishing trip, Bleakley's former South Florida teammate, Nick Schuyler, was rescued Monday after a Coast Guard cutter crew found him clinging to the hull 35 miles off Clearwater. His doctor said it's a "miracle"

Schuyler survived in the 63-degree Gulf water for nearly two days.

Dr. Mark Rumbak said the 24-year-old was in good condition but will remain in intensive care in case there are

complications. Schuyler probably could have lived only another five to 10 hours, Rumbak said.

"I think he is extremely fortunate," Rumbak said. "I can't explain it. Some divine providence, I really think."

Authorities located 26-year-old Cooper's 21-foot boat, which had drifted 50 miles west of Sarasota, said Jim Manson, an investigator with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. It took two private boats three tries to right the vessel and it appears to be in good shape, Manson said. Inside were 5-gallon gas cans, a life jacket, water bottles and some bagged sandwiches. It was being towed back to the Tampa Bay area.

The men left Clearwater Pass in calm weather, but heavy winds picked up through the day and the seas got heavy, with waves of 7 feet and higher, peaking at 15 feet. A relative alerted the Coast Guard early Sunday after the men did not return as expected.

The missing men's families have set up an e-mail address for experienced pilots and boaters to contact them to help. Coast Guard Capt. Timothy Close said the agency wouldn't prevent private searches, but discouraged them, saying they could be dangerous. He said authorities believed if there were more survivors, they would have been found.

Free-agent defensive tackle Tank Johnson, a childhood friend and college teammate of Cooper at Washington, was taking a lead role in the renewed search. Johnson, who played for the Dallas Cowboys last season, said the family has not given up hope that the

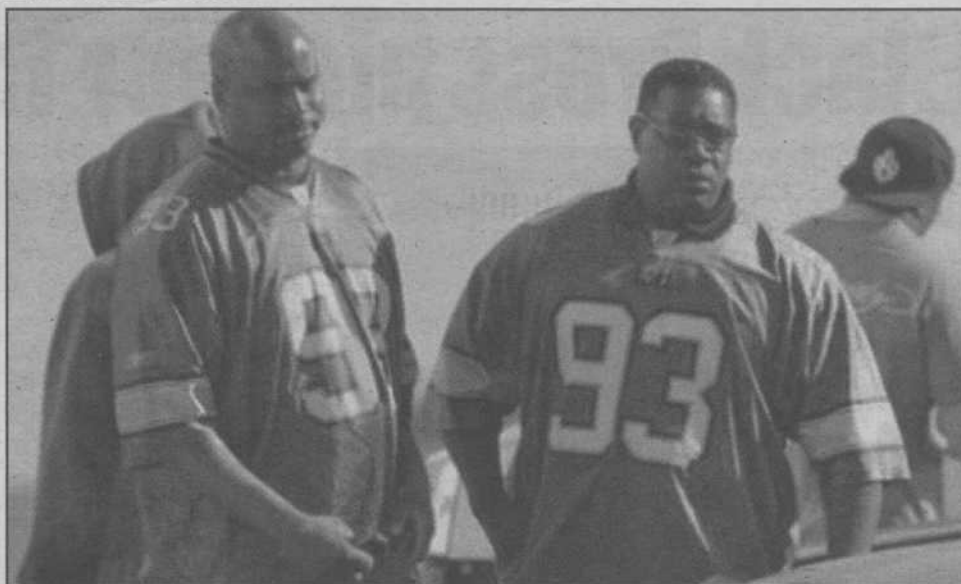
men are still alive.

"I truly believe he is out there somewhere being strong," Johnson said.

Raiders coach Tom Cable described Cooper as a good teammate and strong leader.

"In our opinion, they're still fighting, they're still battling, they're still doing everything they can to survive to be found," Cable said.

Even if the men aren't (See NFL, Page 11)



Members of missing fisherman Corey Smith's family leave the U.S. Coast Guard station in St. Petersburg, Fla., Tuesday after being told the search for three missing fishermen would be called off at sunset. Four friends went fishing; only one survivor has been rescued.

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Ravens sign 3-year deal with Ray Lewis

Special to Sentinel-Voice

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Linebacker Ray Lewis will finish his career with the Baltimore Ravens after reaching agreement on a three-year deal with Baltimore.

"To be with the same team with the same fans for an entire career, that doesn't happen in the NFL," Lewis said after concluding negotiations on a deal worth nearly \$22 million. "I don't think an athlete can have a greater legacy than to be able to stay in one place for an entire career."

Lewis earned his 10th Pro Bowl this season after leading the NFL's second-ranked defense with 160 tackles. He also had 3-1/2 sacks, 3 interceptions and two fumble recoveries.

Lewis has been the dominant linebacker of his generation and a tackling machine. Lewis, a first-round draft pick in 1996, was voted NFL defensive player of the year in 2000, the season the Ravens won the Super Bowl, and in 2003.

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