Written by Max Henson
Monday, 17 September 2012 06:38

After a 35-27 victory over the New Orleans Saints on Sunday, Panthers head coach Ron Rivera was proud of the way his team responded to the season-opening loss to Tampa Bay. Proud, and

quite relieved. Rivera's well aware of how troublesome an 0-2 start to the season can be, particularly when those two losses come in the division.
"That would have been tough," Rivera said. "It would have been disastrous."
Fortunately for the Panthers, that's not a scenario they have to face.
"I said to the guys before the game that this was a must win, and it really was," tackle Jordan Gross said. "We couldn't go 0-2 to start the season and lose at home and lose to the Saints. It was huge for us to get this win."
Carolina's attack was balanced and efficient on third down (6-for-12), leading to an explosive all-around offensive performance. The Panthers rushed for 219 yards and three scores – courtesy of quarterback Cam Newton and running backs DeAngelo Williams and Mike Tolbert. That production from the run game helped set up big gains through the air off play-action, and Newton finished with 253 yards passing and one touchdown pass to running back Jonathan Stewart. But it was the defense that did the initial scoring for Carolina, registering a first quarter turnover that brought Bank of America Stadium, and the Panthers, to life.
The Saints produced an 11-play, 80-yard touchdown drive on the game's opening possession and quickly got the ball back at their own 7-yard line after Carolina's offense went three-and-out. On second down, quarterback Drew Brees rolled right and tried to fit the ball in to tight end David Thomas, despite the presence of Panthers safety Charles Godfrey.
"I was licking my chops," Godfrey said.
Godfrey anticipated the throw and stepped in front of Thomas for the interception, then sprinted nine yards untouched into the end zone to level the score.
"That always sparks the team when we score on defense," cornerback Captain Munnerlyn said. "We knew that we had to get a few turnovers to beat this team."
After Garrett Hartley converted a 22-yard field goal for New Orleans in the second quarter, Newton quickly moved the Panthers downfield with 40-yard scamper on an option keeper down the right sideline.
The Saints defense stiffened in the red zone, leaving Carolina with a fourth-and-one from the 4-yard line. The Panthers went for it, and Newton fumbled an option-pitch to Tolbert, allowing the Saints to take over on downs.
"I got greedy on that," Rivera said. "But I'll do it again. Against this football team, you just can't sit there and kick field goals."
New Orleans added another field goal on its ensuing possession to extend their lead to 13-7, but the Panthers then grabbed the lead and never trailed again.
Newton floated a screen pass to running back Jonathan Stewart, and with center Ryan Kalil leading the way, Stewart stormed 17 yards into the end zone to give Carolina a 14-13 lead. Tolbert plunged his way in from two yards out to extend the lead to 21-13 just before halftime and after the break, Williams charged in for a 3-yard score.
Saints running back Mark Ingram cut the lead to eight in the fourth quarter with a 1-yard rushing

touchdown, but it didn't take long for the Panthers to strike back.
On the first play of the next drive, New Orleans completely lost track of Steve Smith. The star wideout was left wide open deep down the right sideline, and Newton found him for a 66-yard gain.
"I was just as shocked as you guys were," Newton said.
Five plays later, Newton powered his way across the goal line to give the Panthers a 35-20 advantage with 9:58 remaining.
Brees scored on a 1-yard quarterback sneak immediately following the two-minute warning, and the Saints' onside kick attempt moments later was thwarted by tight end Greg Olsen, who trapped the bouncing ball as it skipped toward him.
New Orleans ultimately got the ball back with 48 seconds left and no timeouts, but linebacker Jon Beason sealed victory for Carolina by intercepting Brees' pass over the middle for tight end Jimmy Graham.
Now the Panthers must quickly turn their attention to a Thursday night matchup against the defending Super Bowl-champion New York Giants, aiming to build on their Week 2 success.
"We can enjoy this a few hours, but then we've got to get right on to New York," Gross said. "We've got a lot of work to do in a short amount of time, but we'll be ready."
The Panthers welcome the New York Giants to town Thursday night (coverage begins at 7:30 p.m. on Mix 102.3 FM).

Photo Courtesy: Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers