For once, North Carolina didn't have to dig out of an early hole. Instead, the Tar Heels pushed ahead and then put the game out of reach with another strong second-half performance. Giovani Bernard scored two touchdowns in his

return from a knee injury and North Carolina took over after halftime to beat East Carolina 27-6 on Saturday.

Bryn Renner threw for 321 yards and two touchdowns for the Tar Heels (2-2), who had fallen behind in the first half of the past two games then rallied after the break only to suffer close losses. This time, North Carolina led 10-6 at halftime then broke the game open with two quick touchdowns in the third quarter to beat the instate Pirates for the fourth straight season.

"I wouldn't say it was a great game, but we played a complete game," first- year UNC coach Larry Fedora said. "We played hard the entire game."

The biggest news for North Carolina was the return of Bernard, who had missed two straight games since hurting his left knee in the season-opening win against Elon. He had a 14-yard scoring catch from Renner in the first quarter and added a 4-yard TD run in the third. After hearing three weeks of will-he-play speculation about Bernard, UNC fans greeted the sophomore's name in the pregame starting lineup announcements with a loud roar Saturday.

"I knew coming into today I'd be ready," Bernard said. "I told myself that once I felt the weird feeling that I had (in the knee), I wasn't going to go back to playing unless I felt I could play at my potential."

Bernard didn't have a big rushing day, finishing with 50 yards on 18 carries. But his presence certainly demanded plenty of defensive attention and opened up things for Renner, who completed 27 of 43 passes a week after throwing for a career-high 363 yards and five touchdowns at Louisville. By comparison, the Pirates (2-2) struggled to sustain drives, twice settled for first-half field goals after stalling inside the 10-yard line on long drives and finished with 233 total yards.

"One thing we've learned traveling and being on the road is that you have to start fast and sustain it," third-year Pirates coach Ruffin McNeill said. "There's not any room for error, especially against a talented team."

It was North Carolina's first home game since the 62-0 win in its first game under Fedora. The Tar Heels lost 28-27 at instate Atlantic Coast Conference rival Wake Forest the following week after giving up the go-ahead touchdown with about 2 minutes left, then nearly pulled off a stunning comeback from a 29-0 deficit before falling at Louisville 39-34.

North Carolina's slow starts in those games prompted Fedora to say he was still trying to figure out "what buttons to push" with his new team. One thing is certain: whatever he's saying at halftime is working. The Tar Heels have outscored opponents 78-10 after the break this year, including 52-0 in the third quarter.

"I guess we've got a mentality that we know what we're capable of," said receiver Erik Highsmith, who had eight catches for 66 yards. "We hate when we start off slow. I don't know why we've been doing it. But the second half, we know, `Hey man, we've got to go out and do it.' And we do."

North Carolina took control in the third quarter when Renner went deep downfield to Sean

Tapley, who got behind defender Joshua Hawkins for the catch then shed Hawkins' desperate tackle attempt for a 62-yard touchdown that made it 17-6. Shane Carden fumbled on a sack on the next possession to give the ball to the Tar Heels at the 15, and Bernard ran it in four plays later to push the lead to 24-6 with 7:55 left in the third.

Carden threw for 124 yards and overthrew an open Danny Webster in the back of the end zone on the second field-goal drive of the first half. He was also sacked seven times, UNC's best total in a game since 2000.

"There was a little pressure here and there," Carden said, "but I've got to do a better job of getting rid of the ball."

Photo Courtesy: Sean Tapley, UNC Athletics