With a one-point lead and 1:09 left in the game, the Panthers executed their punt to perfection. Kealoha Pilares and Kenny Onatolu combined to down Brad Nortman's 49-yard punt at the Atlanta

1-yard line. The Falcons had no timeouts remaining. The Panthers had their undefeated division rivals cornered in the Georgia Dome.

"We couldn't have asked for a better punt. We couldn't have asked for better coverage to put the ball where you needed it," head coach Ron Rivera said.

Then disaster struck.

Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan avoided the rush and hurled a deep pass down the left sideline. Wide receiver Roddy White got behind safety Haruki Nakamura and snatched the ball for a 59-yard gain before stepping out of bounds.

"All we have to do is keep the ball in front of us and not let anybody behind us, and we screwed that up," Rivera said. "We can't accept that. That's the bottom line."

After a pass interference penalty and two short completions, Matt Bryant converted a 40-yard field goal to give Atlanta a 30-28 lead with five seconds left. On the game's final play, Panthers quarterback Cam Newton was sacked by John Abraham.

"Absolute disappointment," Rivera said. "This was an opportunity for us, and we failed to capitalize on that opportunity."

Carolina took a 28-24 lead at the 8:03 mark of the fourth quarter.

Newton started the scoring drive with a 34-yard completion to Olsen down the right sideline. Facing third-and-10 at the Atlanta 36-yard line four plays later, Newton fired a quick screen pass left to Pilares, who received several downfield blocks and sprinted untouched into the end zone.

"I was ready for it and it was a great call," Pilares said. "They blitzed everyone. It was basically untouched."

After Bryant knocked in a 33-yard field goal for Atlanta with five minutes left, both teams proceeded to go three-and-out.

Carolina took over at its own 32-yard line with 2:26 remaining. Newton picked up a first down with a 10-yard run and after two runs from Williams, and Atlanta's final two timeouts, the Panthers could seal the victory with a conversion on third-and-two.

Newton took the shotgun snap and ran directly left for the first down, but fumbled. Mike Tolbert recovered for Carolina and after an official review, the ball was spotted a yard short of the first down marker.

"In this league you have to protect the football," Newton said. "And I fumbled. A lot of guys are trusting the ball carrier, and I was the ball carrier to get the job done. I fell, and I dropped the ball."

The Panthers punted on fourth-and-short, and Atlanta took advantage of the opportunity, however desperate it may have seemed.

"When you give that team a chance, they'll come back and get you," Rivera said, "and that's what happened. They got us."

At halftime, the Panthers trailed 17-14.

Ryan and White connected for two first half Atlanta touchdowns (49 and 14 yard strikes) and the

Panthers scored courtesy of tight end Greg Olsen's 17-yard touchdown catch and running back DeAngelo Williams' 14-yard touchdown run.

Each team had produced one takeaway – Falcons cornerback Dunta Robinson stripped the ball away from Steve Smith on an end around, and Nakamura intercepted Ryan's third-and-goal pass for Julio Jones at the goal line.

Bryant's 41-yard field goal, which came six plays after Smith's fumble, was all that separated the teams at halftime.

Atlanta opened the scoring in the second half with running back Michael Turner's first career receiving touchdown – a 60-yard catch and run on a well-timed screen up the middle. Turner picked up a head of steam before breaking a tackle and avoiding another on his way to the end zone.

On the ensuing possession, the Panthers efficiently marched downfield and didn't face a third down until they reached the Atlanta 19-yard line for third-and-8. Newton quickly detected a heavy blitz and escaped through the middle of the pocket for a 15-yard gain.

Newton charged into the end zone for the 4-yard touchdown on the next play, cutting the deficit to three late in the third quarter.

But after Pilares' fourth-quarter touchdown catch-and-run gave Carolina a four-point lead, Atlanta rallied back with two field goals from Bryant for the 30-28 victory.

And with that, the Panthers are now presented with an early turning point in their season. Rivera believes his team will absorb this painful Week 4 defeat and respond.

"We're not going to let it be demoralizing," Rivera said. "It takes the air out of you, most certainly, but we are going to build on it. We came out and played a very good football team and gave them a run for their money in their house. We will use that. The arrow will be pointing up."

"This is a turning point," Rivera added. "It's up to us what direction we want to head."

Photo Courtesy: Haruki Nakamura, Carolina Panthers