Entering Sunday's game against the Broncos, the Panthers had only one loss by more than a single possession. Denver's decisive 36-14 victory at Bank of America Stadium became the second.

"We've given ourselves a chance down the stretch to win football games, so to have one of these, especially after coming off the Washington win, is tough," head coach Ron Rivera said. "It's a tough pill to swallow right now."

Added cornerback Captain Munnerlyn: "We didn't expect the game to get out of hand like this."

The Broncos utilized 29 unanswered points to pull away from the Panthers, and scores came from all three phases.

Quarterback Peyton Manning, who started the game completing 16 of 17 passes, led two touchdown drives, the defense recorded an interception for a touchdown and a safety, and Trindon Holliday returned a punt for a touchdown.

"The biggest disappointment was giving up the (punt) return for the touchdown," Rivera said. "At that point, we had played pretty well. You can't give up points on special teams. When you do that it hurts your opportunity to win football games, and that's exactly what happened."

The Panthers jumped out to a 7-0 lead in the opening quarter when quarterback Cam Newton connected with tight end Greg Olsen on a delayed, backside screen for a 4-yard touchdown. Olsen's score capped a 6-play, 77-yard drive.

Denver tied the game late in the first quarter when Manning rolled right and found wide receiver Brandon Stokley open underneath for a 10-yard touchdown.

Carolina proceeded to go three-and-out on the ensuing possession. On the first play of the second quarter, Brad Nortman booted a 59-yard punt to Holliday, who fielded the ball between the hashes and sprinted behind several blockers down the right sideline for a 76-yard touchdown return.

Following another Carolina three-and-out, Matt Prater nailed a 53-yard field goal to extend the Broncos' lead to 17-7, and he and Panthers kicker Justin Medlock each missed a 43-yard attempt before the first half ended.

The third quarter began with each team going three-and-out. Then the Panthers forced the game's first turnover.

Defensive end Charles Johnson sacked Manning and stripped the ball before fellow-defensive end Greg Hardy pounced on it for the recovery. Carolina took over on its own 34-yard line, but on the next play the Denver defense put points on the board.

Newton initially scrambled away from Von Miller, but the linebacker got a piece of Newton's ankle, causing him to fall as he released a pass for Brandon LaFell down the left sideline. Cornerback Tony Carter jumped in front of the pass for the interception and scored on a 40-yard return, giving the Broncos a 24-7 advantage with just under 10 minutes to go in the third quarter.

"I was just trying to make a play," Newton said. "I saw Brandon flash

in front of me, not knowing there was a guy behind him. I should have just thrown it out of bounds. After an excellent play by the defense getting the ball back in our hands, I've got to be more mature, knowing that it's better to be second-and-10 instead of a pick-6."

The Panthers forced another turnover when Hardy stripped the ball from running back Willis McGahee and safety Charles Godfrey recovered at the Carolina 22-yard line. But the offense went three-and-out and was forced to punt.

"The defense played their tails off. They gave us a chance to win, and we didn't do anything on offense," said left tackle Jordan Gross. "You want those guys to believe in the offense, and right now we're not doing well enough."

Prater extended the Denver lead with a 27-yard field goal at the start of the fourth quarter. The Denver defense added to the lead when safety Mike Adams sacked Newton for a safety on third-and-19 from the 2-yard line. It was the Broncos seventh and final sack of the game.

"We knew once they got that lead that they were going to unleash those pass rushers and they want to rush the passer," Olsen said. "In the second half, time starts becoming your number one enemy and you can only do so much in the run game to keep them honest."

Newton connected with Olsen for a 5-yard touchdown before the Broncos countered with a 5-yard touchdown run from running back Ronnie Hillman in the closing minutes.

"You can't beat them and hope to overcome the punt return, the drops, missed blocks, everything," Olsen said. "You've got to play well and let the chips fall where they may. We didn't give ourselves a chance."

Photo Courtesy: Broncos Converge on Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers