

Panthers pounce on Falcons

Written by Max Henson

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Panthers head coach Ron Rivera was calm and composed as he discussed his team's impassioned 30-20 victory over the division rival and NFC South champion Atlanta Falcons. "This shows exactly what we're capable of," he said.

Then he spoke about the recipient of the game ball, linebacker Thomas Davis, who has torn his right ACL three times and whose fourth-quarter interception – his first since 2009 – helped secure Carolina's fourth victory of the season.

"I told the team that last spring, Thomas and I sat down with our owner and we didn't know exactly where Thomas was (physically)," Rivera said. "Thomas looked me in the eye and told me he would come back.

"He really wanted to make it through both Atlanta games. As a head coach, when you have a guy that looks you in the eye coming off three knee surgeries and he makes you believe in him... That's what it's all about."

Emotions got the best of Rivera after those words and he left the post-game press conference. The Panthers made it clear throughout the week – this Week 14 matchup against the Falcons was particularly meaningful.

Meaningful in light of Carolina's heartbreaking 30-28 loss at the Georgia Dome in Week 4.

Meaningful because of Davis' goal to face Atlanta twice. And when something is important to Davis, it's important to his team.

"When he talks, everybody listens," quarterback Cam Newton said. "Offense, defense, special teams, coaches – everybody listens to Thomas. He has that big of an impact on this team."

From the start, Carolina played like a team with a purpose.

After winning their first coin toss of the season, the Panthers received the ball and produced an 11-play, 77-yard scoring drive. Tight end Greg Olsen made a leaping, 25-yard catch over safety Thomas DeCoud in the back of the end zone to give Carolina an early 7-0 lead. The Panthers had three more first half possessions, all of which resulted in Graham Gano field goals. At halftime, Atlanta trailed 16-0 and had been limited to just 35 total yards.

"That was very big for us," quarterback Cam Newton said. "We wanted to come out and set the tone early."

There were 58 offensive plays in the first half. Carolina had 45 of them, possessing the ball for 23:48. The Falcons were 0-for-3 on third downs, while the Panthers were 7-for-11.

"We couldn't sustain drives on third down and we couldn't even come close to getting them off the field on third down," Atlanta head coach Mike Smith said.

The Panthers continued where they left off in the third quarter. Atlanta's drive to open the second half stalled at midfield, and Carolina took over on its own 14-yard line.

After fullback Mike Tolbert plowed forward for a conversion on third-and-1, Newton produced the game's longest play to extend the lead.

Newton stood in the shotgun with tight end Greg Olsen to his right and running back DeAngelo Williams to his left. He faked a handoff to Williams, followed Olsen's block on a blitzing DeCoud and exploded through a gigantic hole on the left side.

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"It's like you drew it up on paper," Olsen said.

Wide receiver Steve Smith sprinted downfield and blocked three Atlanta defensive backs before Newton somersaulted his way into the end zone for a 72-yard touchdown.

"The only thing I kept thinking was, 'I just can't get caught, I just can't get caught,'" Newton said.

"As I was running, Smitty helped me out a lot, blocking those guys and I got into the end zone."

The Falcons responded with touchdowns on their next two possessions. Wide receiver Roddy White made a 4-yard touchdown grab with 4:53 left in the third quarter, and Julio Jones scored on an 11-yard reception early in the fourth quarter.

After Jones' touchdown, White failed to haul in the two-point try, and Carolina led 23-13.

Atlanta forced a punt and drove to midfield, but the drive ended when Davis intercepted Matt Ryan's hopeful fourth-down pass for White.

"Our D-line, they got a great rush and they forced him to throw a bad ball and I was able to come away with the interception," Davis said. "Definitely a great feeling. It took possession away from them and our offense went down and did what they were supposed to do."

Four plays later, Williams turned a screen pass into a 53-yard touchdown. Atlanta running back Michael Turner added a touchdown in the final minute before the Panthers recovered an onside kick and closed the game in victory formation.

"Nobody really gave us an opportunity to win this game. That's all we listened to is how well they are going to play and their record. All that stuff is out the door when you take the field and you line up," Davis said.

Davis has experience proving doubters wrong. It's a feeling he and his teammates thoroughly enjoyed on Sunday.

Photo Courtesy: Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers