

Panthers Fall Short In Preseason Finale

Written by Max Henson
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It was another down-to-the-wire preseason game for the Carolina Panthers, but after two narrow victories, their preseason slate ended with a 17-16 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers at Heinz Field.

“We had a chance, and unfortunately we didn’t get it done,” head coach Ron Rivera said. “But (these close games) are great learning tools, and we will build off of those things and our players will learn from those experiences.”

Down 17-10 with 3:10 left, the Panthers were determined to make the most of their preseason finale. Quarterback Jimmy Clausen completed a pass near the left sideline to wide receiver Lamont Bryant, who fought off a defender and sprinted into the end zone for a 79-yard score. A two-point conversion attempt intended for Bryant fell incomplete in the end zone, but the Carolina defense forced a three-and-out to give the offense another chance to take the lead with two minutes remaining.

“I felt good about what we were doing defensively,” Rivera said. “I thought we would have a chance to stop them and get the ball back and see what happens. We set ourselves up to get in field goal range.”

Clausen and the offense moved the ball down to Pittsburgh’s 32-yard line with 38 seconds left, allowing Justin Medlock to come on for a potential game-winning 50-yard field goal. The kick had the distance but missed wide right.

“The good thing is it happened now. I was hoping for that situation, and I’ll be hoping for it again,” Medlock said. “It’s unfortunate that it happened. I just have to come back next week and be ready.”

Distance was not an issue in either of Medlock’s misses (he earlier was wide left from 56), and Rivera is confident in his kicker’s ability to convert from long range.

“(Justin) has a leg. He’s just got to continue to work and he’ll make kicks,” Rivera said. “I’m pretty excited about what he can give us as far as the distance with his leg.”

Medlock accounted for all of the Panthers’ scoring in the first half with a 31-yard field goal. The Steelers held a 10-3 halftime lead, with Emmanuel Sanders on the receiving end of a pinpoint 37-yard touchdown pass from Charlie Batch six plays into the game.

A small group of Carolina’s first-team defense saw action on the opening series before being quickly replaced. Neither team played any of its offensive starters.

Pittsburgh punt returner Chris Rainey returned two punts to the end zone in the first half – one for 78 yards and the other for 90 yards – but both were called back due to holding penalties.

“All you have to do is put the tape on and you’ll see it,” Rivera said. “Those penalties came on guys in position to make plays.”

The Panthers tied the count on their first possession of the third quarter. Clausen led a 10-play, 87-yard drive that culminated with a 3-yard touchdown strike to wide receiver Jared Green.

“Jimmy did a nice job,” Rivera said. “It was indicative of what he’s capable of.”

The Steelers regained the lead early in the fourth quarter, when quarterback Jerrod Johnson connected with tight end Weslye Saunders for a 6-yard score. Carolina countered with Bryant’s 79-yard touchdown, but the missed two-point try and missed field goal kept the Panthers from

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leaving Pittsburgh with a victory. Still, Rivera was proud of the effort his young players put forth in their extended opportunity.

“We learned a lot about our young guys,” Rivera said. “We learned that we’ve got some young guys that will fight and battle and give us a chance at the end of the game. We learned that some of our guys will step up when called upon, and I’m pretty excited about going forward.”

Photo Courtesy: Jimmy Clauson, Carolina Panthers