

Panthers Come Up Short Again

Written by Max Henson

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For the Carolina Panthers, Sunday's 19-14 loss to the Dallas Cowboys felt frustratingly familiar. "Someone said déjà vu, and that's what it is," left tackle Jordan Gross said. "It's a different team,

but the same scenario."

The Panthers faced fourth-and-1. Again. This time from their own 40-yard line with 2:11 remaining in the game, trailing 16-14. Quarterback Cam Newton fired a short pass to wide receiver Louis Murphy with cornerback Morris Claiborne draped over him in coverage. There was contact, and spirited appeals for a flag, but pass interference was not called.

Thus, another failed fourth down conversion in the fourth quarter.

"Same script, by the same director," Newton said. "It's always coming down to the end when we have our opportunities."

Adding to the frustration was the timeout awarded to the Cowboys just prior to Newton snapping the ball on fourth down. Newton noticed the Cowboys were in the midst of several late defensive substitutions, so he quickly snapped the ball while defenders were trying to get off the field.

His short pass to tight end Greg Olsen was completed for first-down yardage, and flags were thrown. The alert improvisation was an apparent success.

"I snapped the ball as quick as I could because if we didn't get it, it was going to be offsides," Newton explained.

But the officials ruled that Dallas had called a timeout just in time.

"(The officials) said they called a timeout prior to the ball being snapped," head coach Ron Rivera said. "That's the judgment of the referees."

After taking over and running six plays, Cowboys kicker Dan Bailey converted a 38-yard field goal to give Dallas a six-point lead with 58 seconds left.

With no timeouts, the Panthers had one last chance to produce a game-winning touchdown, but the Cowboys sacked Newton before shutting down Carolina's last-second series of laterals for the victory.

"It feels like we've been finding a way to lose a game rather than win it," Newton said.

Tony Romo connected with wide receiver Miles Austin in the back left corner of the end zone for a 26-yard touchdown to give Dallas a 10-7 advantage midway through the third quarter. After a 49-yard field from Bailey, Carolina went back in front, 14-13, on a 2-yard touchdown plunge from fullback Mike Tolbert with 11:38 to go in the fourth quarter. The Panthers went with a no-huddle, up-tempo offense, and they briefly found a rhythm, reaching the end zone after a 9-play, 75-yard drive.

But Carolina turned in a three-and-out on its next possession, and Brad Nortman's 42-yard punt was fair caught by Dez Bryant at the Dallas 41-yard line. A penalty on Colin Jones for running out of bounds and returning to the field of play tacked on another five yards.

With the ball at midfield, the Cowboys capitalized, moving 44 yards in 10 plays before Bailey knocked in a 28-yard field goal to re-gain the lead for good.

"We feel like we played OK on defense, but at the end of the day, if they don't score we win," cornerback Captain Munnerlyn said. "We didn't play well enough. It's very frustrating."

Carolina held a 7-3 halftime lead thanks to an 80-yard touchdown drive set up by a takeaway.

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Austin was running downfield after a 15-yard catch when linebacker Thomas Davis punched the ball free and fellow-linebacker Luke Kuechly recovered.

Ten plays later, Newton completed a pass to LaFell sprinting across the field at the 2-yard line, and the wideout reached the ball over the pylon with 14 seconds left in the first half.

"If everything breaks down I'm dragging backside," LaFell said. "I had a chance to get the ball and I just dove in. If I catch the ball at the 2 (yard-line) there wasn't any way I was going to let someone tackle me."

The lead could have been more substantial if not for a costly red-zone interception earlier in the second quarter. On second-and-goal from the 6-yard line, Newton spotted Murphy open in the back of the end zone, but defensive tackle Josh Brent hit Newton as he threw, and the wobbling pass was hauled in by cornerback Morris Claiborne for a touchback.

"We missed an opportunity," Rivera said. "It kind of epitomizes what has happened."

Photo Courtesy: Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers