

Defense, Special Teams, Lead Panthers To Victory

Written by Max Henson
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Offensively, it was a struggle, but the Panthers defense and special teams made up for it in a 34-27 win over the Baltimore Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium Thursday night.

Carolina recorded three defensive touchdowns and one game-turning special teams score, courtesy of new return man Ted Ginn.

"Ted Ginn ignited us as a football team," head coach Ron Rivera said.

The Ravens got off to a flying start, forcing a Carolina three-and-out before completing a nine-play, 69-yard touchdown drive on their opening possession.

But Baltimore was forced to punt after three plays on their second possession, and that gave Ginn his first opportunity to return a punt in a Panthers uniform.

Ginn made one man miss and 74 yards later the game was tied.

"For me to go out and do what I did today and give my team a spark – It's just a blessing," Ginn said. "Nine times out of 10 when you make that first guy miss and your guys are blocking up, you have a great opportunity. I just tried to seize it."

The second quarter was seized by middle linebacker Luke Kuechly, who spearheaded a relentless defensive playmaking effort.

Kuechly and cornerback Captain Munnerlyn combined to pressure Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco into an errant throw – one that was easily picked off by cornerback Drayton Florence and returned 71 yards for a touchdown.

On the second play of the next Ravens series, Kuechly diagnosed a handoff to running back Bernard Pierce and shot into the backfield. The linebacker smashed into Pierce in an instant, forcing a fumble that fellow linebacker Tomas Davis pounced on for a 2-yard score.

The Ravens moved the ball deep into Carolina territory on their next possession before Kuechly's pass breakup led to safety Charles Godfrey's interception. But Kuechly's hit on wide receiver Aaron Mellette was flagged for unnecessary roughness, allowing the Baltimore drive to continue.

It didn't last much longer.

Two plays later, Kuechly picked off a pass intended for Shiancoe and returned it 29 yards to the Carolina 35-yard line.

"I was able to read the quarterback and make a play on it," Kuechly said. "It was good.

Turnovers are great, and we got a couple today."

Kuechly's interception led to a 54-yard field from Graham Gano, giving the Panthers a 24-7 halftime lead.

Baltimore scored 10 consecutive points in the third quarter before Gano hit a 42-yard field goal.

Quarterback Tyrod Taylor entered the game for Baltimore, and his second pass attempt was intercepted by Carolina cornerback D.J. Moore, who returned it for a 33-yard touchdown.

Ravens running back Damien Berry added a touchdown run in the fourth quarter and Justin Tucker kicked a 36-yard field goal to close out the scoring.

It wasn't enough scoring for the Carolina offense, who failed to produce a touchdown for the second consecutive game and finished with just 173 yards of total offense.

"When you score (three) touchdowns on defense and (one) on special teams the offense doesn't get back out there," Rivera said. "Now having said that, 3.7 yards an average offensive play is not good enough – not in this league. If we expect to win football games, we cannot accept that."

The Panthers aren't about to.

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"Not acceptable," said quarterback Cam Newton, who completed 10 of 19 passes for 99 yards. "Tonight was supposed to be a challenge for us, and it was a challenge for us."

"When the defense plays like that," he added, "it just felt like we let those guys down. Those guys played lights out."

Members of the Carolina offense thoroughly enjoyed watching their defensive teammates light up the scoreboard, but they know they need to contribute more.

"We obviously have a lot of things that we can work on," tight end Greg Olsen said.

"Fortunately, the regular season hasn't started. And, fortunately, we won the game because the defense and special teams played so well, so there's a positive to that. But we know we need to get better."

NOTES: Linebacker Jon Beason made his preseason debut, lining up for 14 snaps. ... Left guard Amini Silatolu suffered a hamstring strain and was taken out of the game for precautionary reasons. ... Rookie running back Kenjon Barner suffered an ankle injury and was in a walking boot after the game. ... Rivera said there is concern for wide receiver Kealoha Pilaes, who suffered a knee injury and will have an MRI. ... Linebacker Chase Blackburn did not dress as he's still recovering from a minor back injury suffered against the Eagles last week.