

Manual Rallies Bills Over Panthers

Written by Max Henson

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Settling for field goals eventually caught up with the Carolina Panthers, and so did the Buffalo Bills, who erased a six-point deficit in the final two minutes to defeat the Panthers 24-23 at Ralph Wilson Stadium.

"About as bad as it gets," head coach Ron Rivera said. "We had an opportunity to win the game, an opportunity to close it out, and we didn't do it."

Following a 11-play drive that took 5:35 off the clock, the Panthers elected to kick a 39-yard field goal on fourth-and-1 with 1:42 remaining. Kicker Graham Gano's third conversion of the day gave Carolina a 23-17 lead. Rivera said he considered going for it on fourth down, but elected to take three points.

"The thought process was kick the field goal, go up by six and make them go the length (of the field)," Rivera said, "Unfortunately it worked out for them."

The Bills had no timeouts remaining and needed to produce an 80-yard touchdown drive. After eight plays, 78 yards and a Colin Jones' interception that was erased due to a pass interference penalty on linebacker Luke Kuechly, the Bills were two yards away from the end zone with six seconds left.

Aided by a miscommunication between cornerback Josh Norman and safety D.J. Moore, Buffalo rookie quarterback E.J. Manuel found wide receiver Stevie Johnson wide open in the left corner of the end zone for the game-winning score.

"We could have put this game away early and we didn't," linebacker Jon Beason said.

"Everything that could have went wrong did."

At halftime, the Panthers held a 7-3 advantage courtesy of an effective two-minute drive of their own. Carolina marched 90 yards in 10 plays and found the end zone when quarterback Cam Newton fired a strike over the middle to tight end Greg Olsen for a 13-yard touchdown with just 13 seconds left in the half.

A Dan Carpenter field goal cut the lead to one in the third quarter before the Panthers took advantage of a costly Bills' special teams penalty to push the lead to eight. Carolina punter Brad Nortman's punt was fair caught, but Bills fullback Frank Summers was flagged for holding, giving the Panthers an automatic first down. Four plays later, Newton and wide receiver Ted Ginn connected for a 40-yard touchdown.

"Cam made a great throw and I got open," Ginn said. "That's all you can ask for."

But running back Fred Jackson answered with a 4-yard touchdown run on the ensuing Bills possession, and wide receiver Robert Woods hauled in a quick slant for the two-point conversion to tie the game with 4:15 remaining in the third quarter.

The Panthers defense proceeded to force two successive turnovers – a strip-sack by safety Quintin Mikell that defensive tackle Dwan Edwards recovered, and an interception by Kuechly. But despite the ideal field position those takeaways provided (Buffalo 16 and 26-yard line), the Panthers settled for a pair of field goals and a 20-14 lead.

"Our efficiency in the red zone has to be better," Newton said.

Carpenter converted a 48-yard field goal midway through the fourth quarter and his extra point in the final seconds effectively dropped the Panthers to 0-2 on the season.

"We didn't make enough plays," Newton said. "We've got a bunch of relentless guys on this team, and there's no doubt in my mind we will continue to push forward to become a better team. And as far as quitting, there will be none of that at all."

The Panthers return home to play the New York Giants Sunday at Bank of America Stadium.

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Coverage begins at 12 noon on 102.3 FM.