

Panthers Win Third Straight

Written by Max Henson
Friday, 25 October 2013 09:15

The Panthers entered Thursday night's game against the Buccaneers intent on putting doubt in the minds of their winless opponents early.

After taking a 14-3 lead less than three minutes into the second quarter, the Panthers left no doubt, earning a 31-13 victory at Raymond James Stadium.

"You need to win these games. It's in the division, short week, on the road," tight end Greg Olsen said. "I know they were struggling, but this is still the NFL. To handle our business is what good teams should do. This is starting to show a new step that we've taken."

With the win, Carolina improved to 4-3 – the franchise's first winning record since 2008.

"We have a winning record. It's great for these guys," head coach Ron Rivera said. "I'm very excited for these players."

"At no point did I ever doubt this group. I believed it was just a matter of time."

The Panthers produced two touchdown drives on their first two possessions to take control of the contest.

Following the opening kickoff, the defense quickly forced a three-and-out by Tampa Bay. From there, the offense took over.

Carolina converted four third downs en route to taking the lead. Quarterback Cam Newton faked

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a handoff on third-and-goal, avoided the oncoming rush, and lofted a pass across the field to Olsen, who was wide open in the left side of the end zone for a 1-yard score.

After that 15-play, 70-yard drive ate up nearly nine minutes, the Buccaneers took over and cut into the lead with a 47-yard field goal from Rian Lindell.

But Carolina responded, taking only six plays and 3:42 to move 80 yards on their next touchdown drive.

"We are starting to see what comes from hard work," Olsen said. "You start to see these results. Winning becomes contagious."

Thanks to a 22-yard run by fullback Mike Tolbert and a 35-yard catch and run on third-and-three by wide receiver Ted Ginn, Carolina moved into the red zone quickly. On the next play, running back DeAngelo Williams made two defenders miss on his way to a 12-yard touchdown run.

"Execution was the key to this game. We came out on fire on offense, put up 14 points," Newton said. "We hit a lull point, but at times, we felt like we were clicking."

Williams' first touchdown of the season gave Carolina a 14-3 lead in the second quarter, and Ginn was in prime position to extend it. But on the first play of the Panthers' third possession, he let a perfectly thrown deep ball slip right through his grasp. Instead of a 73-yard touchdown, the Panthers went three-and-out.

Lindell converted a 48-yard field goal on the ensuing Tampa Bay possession, and the Panthers entered halftime with a 14-6 lead.

Carolina took advantage of good field position to extend its lead in the third quarter.

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Starting on their own 47-yard line following a Buccaneer punt, the Panthers faced fourth-and-1 at the Tampa Bay 28. Tolbert gained two hard-fought yards and the drive continued.

Newton then charged up the middle for a 19-yard gain and later took it into the end zone himself for a 6-yard score on third-and-goal, giving the Panthers a 21-6 lead midway through the third quarter.

Moments later, Buccaneers punt returner Eric Page made a devastating mistake that paved the way for Carolina to put the game out of reach.

Page called for a fair catch and muffed the punt with gunner Colin Jones sprinting toward him. Jones alertly pounced on the ball for the recovery at the Tampa Bay 29.

Four plays later, Newton hit Tolbert on a play-action pass for an easy 3-yard touchdown, and the Panthers led 28-6 five seconds into the fourth quarter.

Kicker Graham Gano added a 29-yard field goal before the Buccaneers scored a touchdown late in the fourth quarter.

After the Buccaneers recovered an onside kick, the Panthers held them out of the end zone. But it came at a cost, as defensive end Charles Johnson, who had two of Carolina's three sacks, was helped off the field with a groin injury.

"There is concern," Rivera said. "We'll see. It was disappointing that it happened. As far as the extent of it, I'm not quite sure."

Said Johnson: "It was just awkward. It's unfortunate that it had to happen, but I'll be good."

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The Panthers return home to play the Atlanta Falcons next Sunday, November 3. Coverage begins at 12 noon on 102.3 FM. And running back Jonathan Stewart, who has been hampered by an ankle injury most of the season, will make his debut in that game.

Photo Courtesy: Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers