

Panthers Win Seventh Straight

Written by Max Henson

Monday, 25 November 2013 08:32

The Carolina Panthers did not play their best football in a 20-16 victory over the Miami Dolphins at Sun Life Stadium on Sunday.

"It was pretty obvious," linebacker Luke Kuechly said. "But we cleaned things up, and we were able to make some plays when we needed to."

When the game was on the line, the Panthers delivered, and this win - Carolina's seventh in a row - was another reminder of how much this team has grown.

"This team is doing an incredible job learning how to keep composure and move on to the next play," center Ryan Kalil said. "In seasons past, we've been so all over the place. Whether we got too up or too down, we got too comfortable with one extreme or the other."

For the third consecutive week, the Panthers trailed in the fourth quarter and came back to earn a victory.

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Their comeback hopes Sunday hinged on a fourth-and-10 from the Carolina 20-yard line with 2:33 remaining in the game and the Panthers trailing 16-13.

"We called that play like it was first down in the first quarter," tight end Greg Olsen said. "There was no panic in the huddle."

Quarterback Cam Newton fired a strike to wide receiver Steve Smith for a 19-yard gain to keep the drive alive.

"Just Agent 89 doing what he does the best," Newton said. "He's been doing that his whole career, making big outstanding catches when we need it. He made the play and still had some yards after the catch as well, which lifted our morale."

Two plays later, Carolina faced third-and-two. Newton gained eight yards on a designed run, and safety Reshad Jones was flagged for a late hit out of bounds, advancing the ball to the Miami 29.

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After four plays and three timeouts by Miami, the Panthers had second-and-goal from the 1-yard line. Newton faked a handoff and connected with Olsen in the back of the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown.

The Dolphins began their final possession from their own 14-yard line with 38 seconds left.

Quarterback Ryan Tannehill completed a 26-yard pass to wide receiver Brian Hartline before spiking the ball with 18 seconds remaining. Tannehill then targeted wide receiver Mike Wallace - who had already recorded two catches of 50-plus yards in the game - deep downfield. Wallace got his hands on the ball, but safety Mike Mitchell did just enough to force an incomplection.

Defensive tackle Dwan Edwards ended the game with a sack on the next play.

"Today's game maybe epitomizes our season a little bit, with the terrible start and then we just keep working and pushing and something positive happens at the end," left tackle Jordan Gross said.

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For the majority of the first half, the Panthers were disjointed and frustrated.

Cornerback Josh Thomas reeled in a tipped pass for an interception to start the game, but the Panthers failed to turn that takeaway into points, as Graham Gano's 35-yard field goal attempt was blocked.

Gano gave Carolina a 3-0 advantage later in the first quarter on a 52-yard field goal, but Miami quickly responded with a 53-yard touchdown pass to Wallace.

The Dolphins then extended their lead, but Carolina limited the damage with two red zone stops. Miami settled for three field goals in the second quarter to build a 16-3 advantage.

The Panthers offense had four second-quarter possessions. The first two were three-and-outs, and the third ended with an interception. The fourth led to unlikely, and much needed points before halftime.

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Carolina began the drive at its own 20 with 1:01 left. A 10-yard run by running back Jonathan Stewart on third-and-two allowed Newton to spike the ball with 17 seconds left.

The Panthers gained 15 yards on the next two plays and had eight seconds left. Newton then bobbled a low shotgun snap before finding wide receiver Brandon LaFell for a 28-yard gain. LaFell ran out of bounds with one second left, and Gano converted a 46-yard field goal as time expired.

"To me, that field goal is the play of the game," LaFell said. "That was big-time for us. After we got in a rhythm just before halftime, we started to feel good about ourselves, and we came back out in the second half on the first possession and pounded away."

Carolina opened the second half with a 14-play, 83-yard touchdown drive. Newton reached the end zone on a 5-yard read-option up the middle to cut the Miami lead to three.

The Dolphins were held scoreless in the second half as the Panthers rallied from a 10-point halftime deficit to earn their seventh straight victory -- tying the franchise record set in 1996.

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"We feel good that we won. We don't feel great about how we played," Olsen said. "We made a lot of mistakes. We have to play better. And we will."

NOTES: Saints-Panthers game moved to prime time

The NFL has announced that NBC is flexing the Saints-Panthers game on December 8th in the Superdome.

Instead of being a 1 p.m. game, it will be played at 8:30pm.

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Photo Courtesy: Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers