

## Brees, Saints Halt Panthers

Written by Max Henson

Monday, 09 December 2013 08:10

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The Panthers' eight-game winning streak ended Sunday night at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome with a humbling 31-13 loss to the New Orleans Saints.

"I'm surprised and I'm disappointed," head coach Ron Rivera said. "I think we are a better football team than the way we played today."

Highlighted by a 21-point second quarter, the Saints scored 31 consecutive points and moved into sole possession of first place in the NFC South with the victory.

"Those guys were better than us today," quarterback Cam Newton said.

Carolina's offense started with two methodical scoring drives, but both ended with field goals from Graham Gano – the first from 45 yards and the second from 24 yards. The Panthers had a 6-0 lead, but they knew they needed to find the end zone to keep pace with New Orleans on its home field.

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"We had two great opportunities, two great field positions that we just didn't capitalize on," Newton said. "When you are playing a team like this, field goals aren't going to cut it. We know that."

Following a three-and-out on their first series and after gaining just one yard on the first two plays of their second possession, the Saints faced third-and-nine late in the first quarter.

That's when quarterback Drew Brees connected with wide receiver Marques Colston for 21 yards. And that's when the Saints seemingly found their groove.

Brees capped a nine-play, 80-yard drive with a 6-yard touchdown pass to Colston to give New Orleans a 7-6 lead early in the second quarter.

After the Panthers punted from midfield, New Orleans produced an 11-play, 86-yard touchdown drive. Brees found Colston in between safeties Quintin Mikell and Mitchell for a 15-yard touchdown strike.

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Carolina mistakes then fed right into New Orleans' second quarter surge. Wide receiver Brandon LaFell dropped a second-down pass that would have been enough for a first down. On the next play, Newton was sacked by defensive end Cameron Jordan for a 12-yard loss.

The Saints took over on their 24-yard line with 2:01 left in the first half. Seven plays and 1:43 later, Brees connected with tight end Jimmy Graham for a 5-yard touchdown.

At halftime, Brees had completed 17-of-21 passes for 183 yards and three touchdowns, and the Saints led 21-6. The All-Pro quarterback was given time to throw, and he and his receivers took full advantage.

"We didn't execute," linebacker Thomas Davis said. "That's what it boils down to. When you are on the road you have to be able to handle adversity. We didn't do a very good job of that today."

A 19-yard field goal from Saints kicker Garret Hartley was the only scoring in the third quarter. Gano missed a 49-yard attempt – just his third miss of the season – on Carolina's first drive of the second half.

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Graham scored his second touchdown on an 8-yard catch early in the fourth quarter, extending the New Orleans lead to 31-6.

Carolina responded with its lone touchdown on the ensuing possession. After the Saints' fifth sack of the game created fourth-and-goal from the 17, Newton fired a pass to wide receiver Steve Smith for a 17-yard touchdown in the corner of the end zone with just over five minutes remaining.

"Credit to them," Rivera said. "They did some good things and got after us."

The Panthers are now 9-4 and must win the rematch against the Saints in Week 16 at Bank of America Stadium to have a chance to win the division. Carolina returns home to host the New York Jets next week as they look to rebound from their first defeat since October 6.

"We have to put this loss behind us right now," Davis said. "It's a thing we can't let linger. We have to correct the mistakes and keep moving."

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Photo Courtesy: Ron Rivera, Carolina Panthers