

Smith Has Sprained Knee

Written by Bryan Strickland
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The pop that Panthers wide receiver Steve Smith felt in his left knee Sunday wasn't the air coming out of his season after all.

An MRI on Monday revealed a sprained posterior cruciate ligament, an injury that likely will keep Smith out of the regular season finale against the Atlanta Falcons but doesn't signal the end of his postseason hopes.

"It was very good news considering the alternative," head coach Ron Rivera said. "He's highly doubtful for this week, but it will be week-to-week. There's a lot of good news there."

After learning the results, Smith returned to Bank of America Stadium for treatment and a brief chat with Rivera.

"He's very optimistic," Rivera said. "I said to him, 'Hey, it's good news.' And he said, 'Well, it doesn't feel very good right now Coach, but you know me.'"

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"We do know Steve. He's tenacious, and he'll do everything he can, believe me. He's going to work very, very hard."

Smith suffered the injury on the Panthers' second drive in their dramatic 17-13 victory over the New Orleans Saints, a win that clinched a playoff berth. It was a non-contact injury, with Smith going down in obvious pain on a slant route across the middle.

Smith, who hauled in a 44-yard reception on Carolina's opening drive, returned to action for one play midway through the second quarter but couldn't continue. The offense struggled without him on a day in which both defenses were dominant, but that changed just in time for the Panthers.

Ted Ginn got the last-minute, game-winning drive going with a 37-yard reception before Domenik Hixon – who had played very little this season behind Smith – went to the ground to secure a 14-yard touchdown catch with 23 seconds left.

"It's time for other guys to step up, which was evident yesterday," offensive coordinator Mike Shula said. "It's a big concern because Steve is such a warrior on game day and a productive player that presents a lot of problems on defense. He's a playmaker."

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"You're never truly going to replace a guy like Steve and what he does, but we do have a plan. (Wide receivers coach) Ricky (Proehl) has done such a nice job with those guys. They're pretty versatile with what they can do. They can pretty much play all the positions."

Shula said Smith would be replaced "by committee," with Brandon LaFell continuing in his starting role and Ginn and Hixon seeing close-to-equal playing time. If another receiver is activated for the Atlanta game, Shula said Marvin McNutt has the edge over Tavarres King at this juncture.

The Panthers have had their share of injuries on offense this season, predominantly along the offensive line where starting guards Amini Silatolu and Garry Williams are among five linemen on injured reserve. But the response to change along the offensive front has been remarkable, and Rivera expects no less from Smith's fellow receivers while he recovers.

"We went through it our first two years, putting 18, 19 guys on injured reserve. That's tough," Rivera said. "We have depth this year. We've been very fortunate that a lot of young guys have come through for us and a lot of our young guys have played key roles for us."

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"Until Steve is back on the football field, those guys have got to step up and pick up the slack, and we've got to rally around the guys that are going to play a little bit more. It's going to be interesting to see exactly what we do."

The Panthers play in Atlanta Sunday. If the Panthers win, they win the NFC South and earn the No.2 seed in the NFC playoffs with a first-round bye. The win would also guarantee Carolina a home again in that second-round game. Coverage begins at 12 noon on 102.3 FM.