



Panthers give it away; four turnovers lead to defeat

Posted Oct 25, 2009

By Andrew Mason



Jake Delhomme threw for a season-high 325 yards -- a figure nullified by three interceptions. (PHOTO: MATTHEW BRINKLEY / PANTHERS.COM)

CHARLOTTE -- The Panthers thoroughly controlled the tempo of Sunday's game with the Buffalo Bills. But they couldn't control the football, and that made all the difference.

Four turnovers -- three of which led to 17 Buffalo points -- were the undoing of the Panthers. Their massive advantages in total yardage (425-167) and first downs (20-9) were rendered moot by giveaways, penalties and a pair of missed field goals, all of which doomed them to a 20-9 loss on Sunday.

"The only stat that is important is the scoreboard. We were victim to that today," head coach John Fox said.

In an all-too-familiar refrain for the Panthers, two of Jake Delhomme's interceptions gave the Bills short fields that allowed them to score both of their touchdowns. They only needed to march seven and 27 yards to their two scores -- a 7-yard Marshawn Lynch run and a 2-yard pass from Ryan Fitzpatrick to Lee Evans.

"Usually I'm not too much at a loss for words. I'm almost numb," a crestfallen Delhomme said after the game. "We moved the ball up and down the field (and then had) two crucial turnovers. Two overthrows. Other than that, I'm not giving you an excuse or anything. That's it.

"Disappointing. Just crushing."

Those touchdowns were the sixth and seventh scored on the Panthers this year after interceptions. Two of them were returned directly for scores, and five others -- including Sunday's touchdowns -- gave the opponent possession inside the Carolina 30-yard-line.

Delhomme absorbed the blame for both of the errant throws that led to scores.

"(In the first quarter), Gary Barnidge (was) going down the seam, and I missed him. I overthrew him. I don't know what else to tell you. It's my fault," Delhomme said. "The one to Steve (Smith, in the third quarter), I just tried to go right over (Buffalo linebacker Paul Posluszny's head, and Steve

gave a good effort for it and it went right to 31. It's one of the first plays we've run since I've been here ... I was just trying to put a bucket throw right over Posluszny's head, but it was a little bit out of (Smith's) reach."

Yet the interceptions and the scores they spawned were not enough to knock out the Panthers, thanks to a defense that nearly forced as many Bills punts (eight) as first downs allowed (nine). On seven of 14 series, the Bills didn't even get a first down -- including a three-and-out with just under six minutes remaining.

At that juncture, the Panthers' rash of giveaways flared up once again. Kenneth Moore -- who was filling in for Captain Munnerlyn, who was hurt earlier in the second half -- muffed Brian Moorman's punt at the Carolina 15-yard-line, allowing Buffalo tight end Derek Fine to recover at the 20. Seven plays later, Rian Lindell drilled the 22-yard field goal that provided the final margin -- and the last of the 17 Bills points set up by Carolina turnovers.

A final interception on a deep Delhomme pass for Barnidge with 90 seconds remaining accounted for the fourth giveaway and dropped the Panthers' turnover margin to a league-worst minus-14 -- four lower than the 31st-ranked team, the Tennessee Titans.

All losses are painful, but Delhomme said this one hurt more than most.

"Yeah, it does," he said. "I wish I could find the answer. I'm not looking for an excuse by any means. I don't know. You work hard; you put the work in, but obviously that's not getting it done enough right now."

A pair of missed John Kasay field goals -- including a 39-yard misfire, his first miss from less than 40 yards since Dec. 16, 2007 -- and nine penalties for 67 yards also conspired to short-circuit the Panthers. But the nature of the sport is that quarterback faces the harshest spotlight.

"Quarterback, hands down, is the toughest spot on the field," said left tackle Jordan Gross. "Anybody else can have a bad day and it's not going to all get blamed on one person. Everybody's got to help him more. He got hit a lot. He got a roughing-the-passer at the end there. We've got to run our routes clean."



Jarius Byrd intercepted two passes for the Bills, including this one intended for Steve Smith. (PHOTO: MATTHEW BRINKLEY / PANTHERS.COM)

Delhomme's recent numbers paint a grim picture. His 13 interceptions through six games are more than he had during the entire 2008 regular season, and are just four shy of a single-season career high. His passer rating is 56.5, and his touchdown-to-interception ratio in the seven games this calendar year is five-to-18.

In the locker room, teammates rallied to their quarterback's side.

"I went up to him at the end there and said to him (that) he's our guy," said Gross. "He's won too many games here ... It's not my call. But Jake's my guy. I have faith in him."

Fox said he didn't consider changing quarterbacks during Sunday's loss.

"No, just like there wasn't a thought of changing kickers. We were forced to change the punt returner," he said. "Like all positions, we'll evaluate it and whatever changes we need to make, we'll make."

Delhomme offered a realistic assessment when he was asked whether he'd done enough to retain the starting slot.

"In my heart, yeah. But let's be honest; I'm not a dummy. When you're not playing well offensively, you have to look at the quarterback. I don't think there's any doubt," he said. "I'm certainly not looking to give it up by any stretch of the imagination, but let's be real here: two big turnovers today really affected us."

"We've been down the road of the quarterback shuffle a few years ago (in 2007) and that didn't work out too well," Gross said. "There's a lot of time to evaluate quarterbacks, from the spring all the way through camp. It's not like there's some magic hidden gem. I've got faith in our backups, but that seems like a 'break glass, pull handle'-type of thing if you do that."

But at 2-4, and with a demanding part of the schedule looming, the Panthers sit in a dire spot as October ends.

"There's not many teams below .500 on our schedule," Gross said. "This was a home game we really needed to win.

"We had a million opportunities to win. Our defense did great. We just couldn't get it done."