

Concerned Panthers defeat Saints in “curtain closing” shootout; eye more productive future

Written by Levi Johnson, Sports Editor
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Hoping to finish the season with momentum for the 2013 campaign, Carolina, on the strength of its shootout win Sun. (Dec. 30) opposite New Orleans likely gained some of that impetus.

Boosted by a strong ground game, mostly via the standard setting rushing of running back DeAngelo Williams, the visiting Panthers bested the host Saints by six (44-38) and put a brighter face on a future that was very cloudy and outright dismal looking when they headed into Week 11 with a 2-8 mark. Williams, who carried the pigskin 21 times, netted 210 yards; and in the process broke the single game mark (206) of fellow back Jonathan Stewart, who was sidelined due to an injury to his leg.

However, in winning five of their final six games, including the aforementioned "curtain closing" triumph over the Saints this past weekend in the Big Easy, the Panthers concluded season play with a bang instead of a fizzle.

Ron Rivera, whose continuance as Carolina coach was still uncertain as of this writing, nonetheless praised his players for their down the stretch upbeat showing, which helped them to finish strong.

"I'm proud of how my players handled themselves all season long," the Panthers coach said. "We had a lot to overcome; but we never gave up. That's the sign of a good team."

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Facing a four point (13-17) deficit at the break, Rivera’s participants, also saved by a defense that made key stops when needed, out pointed the Saints by 10 (31-21) over the final 30 minutes of action to seal the National Football Conference (NFC) South Division victory.

En route to finishing the campaign at 7-9, the Panthers while topping the Saints compiled 543 yards in total offense, with 273 coming via the overland route.

In ending its ‘12 slate with a 7-9 worksheet, host New Orleans, with a running game that totalled only 63 yards on 18 trips into the line of scrimmage, ended the day with 441 yards to its credit.

Although happy with the way they finished, many Carolina players reflected on the season with the regret of not being eligible for post season play.

But in seeing his Panthers somewhat change the face of a season that looked positively ugly in the beginning and on to the top of its stretch run, Ron Rivera exited with much hope for the Panthers and his future as their sideline leader.

Responding to a question about whether he thinks he’ll return as Carolina coach, Rivera answered thusly, "Well, I want to be back. We’ll see."