

Beat: Sports

PANTHERS TRAVEL TO PHILADELPHIA FOR MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL

PANTHERS (2-8) at EAGLES (3-7)

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USPA NEWS - Trying to find a bridge to a favorable finish, the Carolina Panthers play the Philadelphia Eagles on Monday Night Football at Lincoln Financial Field. Philadelphia is also looking to bounce back after a loss to the Washington Redskins.

The scene in Philadelphia will be very familiar for Carolina head coach Ron Rivera and defensive coordinator Sean McDermott, who were long-time members of Andy Reid's Eagles coaching staff, but Rivera says sentimentality is not the focus.

"We have a group of players who have been very resilient in the face of some tough losses and it is important to win for them," Rivera says. Rivera, whose team has lost six games by six points or less. Those six losses have come by a total of 23 points.

Last week's game fit that pattern as Carolina built an 11-point lead with six minutes to go only to see Tampa Bay kick a field goal and score a touchdown followed by a two-point conversion to tie the game in regulation on their final two possessions before winning in overtime.

The Panthers also got an interception from safety Haruki Nakamura, but it was still not enough to prevail as they loss for the third time in the final five seconds of a game.

For the defense, the ending spoiled a strong 3 ½ quarter performance that reflected the continued improvement over the season.

Defensive end Greg Hardy teamed with Andre Neblett for a sack to raise his season total to seven and bring Hardy's combined sack total with teammate Charles Johnson to 15.5.

Rookie middle linebacker Luke Kuechly continued his outstanding play with 12 tackles to raise his team leading season total to 120. Kuechly also had a fumble recovery in the end zone to prevent a Tampa Bay touchdown.

The result has been inconsistency in the running game, where the Panthers are an uncharacteristic 16th in yardage after rushing for more yards than any team in the NFL since 2008. Newton leads the team with 394 yards on the ground and triggers a passing game that is 18th. The strength of the passing game has been its downfield ability where Carolina ranks eighth in average yards per play with Smith averaging 16.1 yards per reception and LaFell 16.9 yards per catch. However, it is tight end Greg Olsen who leads the team in catches with 45, one more than Smith.

"I feel like we are doing a lot of things right, but we have to find a way to translate those things into victories," Rivera says.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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