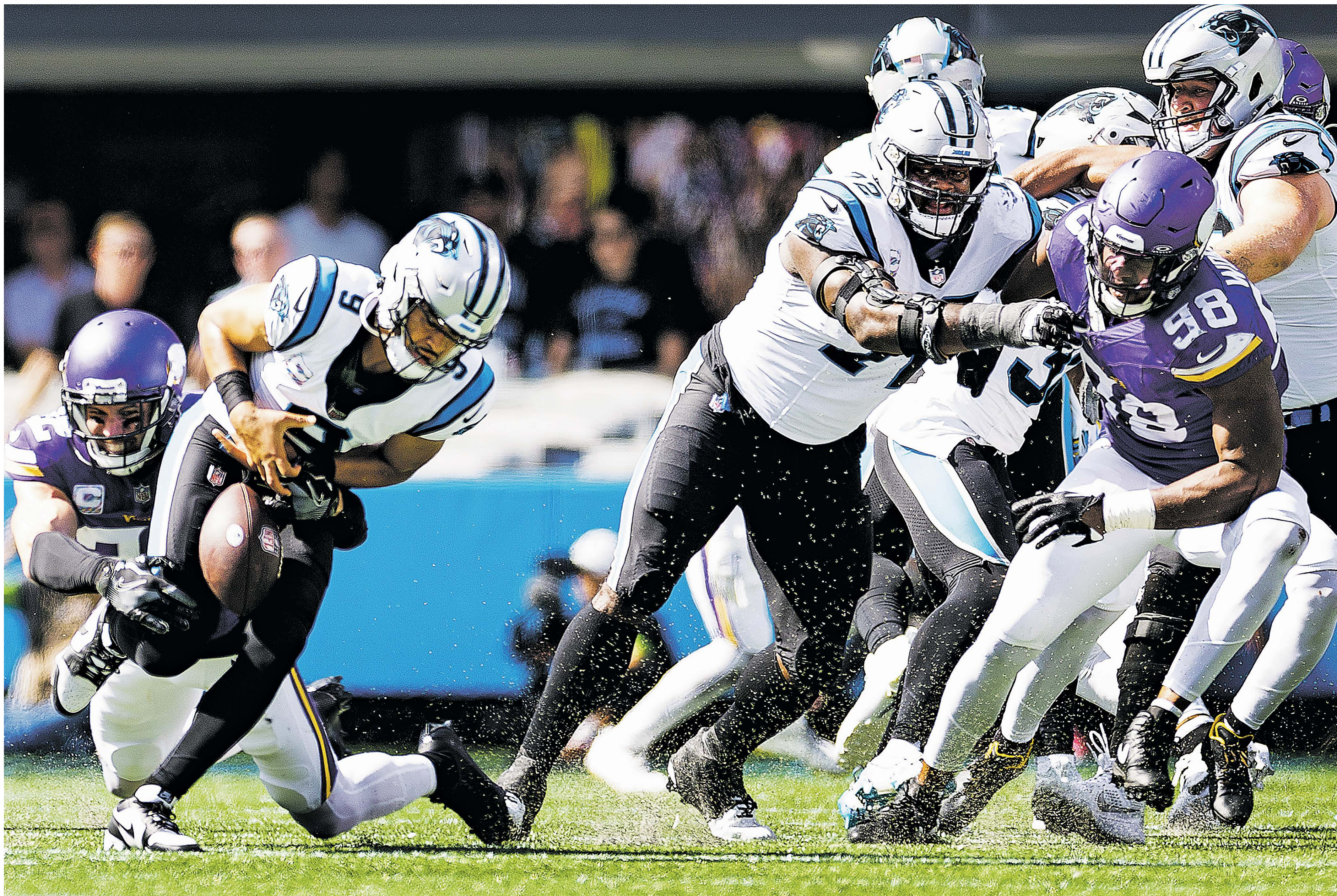


VIKINGS 21, CAROLINA 13



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Defense creates chaos, points as Vikings top Panthers

VIKINGS INSIDER

BEN GOESSLING

CHARLOTTE, N.C. - During a training camp in which the Vikings' pass rushers swirled around him while their deceptive coverages frayed his nerves, Kirk Cousins met with the defenders to tell them why he believed his frustration would be vindicated through the season. It was Sunday, with No. 1 over-all pick Bryce Young pursuing a two-touchdown lead after a pair of Cousins interceptions gave the Carolina Panthers 10 points, that the Vikings' defense came through when their quarterback needed it most.

The Vikings, and not the Panthers, got their first win of the season because of a second-half tour de force from Flores' defense, which sacked Young on five of his 26 drop-backs and allowed Carolina to gain only 2.9 yards per play in the game's final two quarters. Safety Harrison Smith had a career-high three sacks in the Vikings' 21-13 win; his first of the day, which came when he ran unblocked toward Young as part of a six-man rush, pro-

we're still able to get that confirmation from him that it's hard to go against."

Bynum held on to Cousins' words during an 0-3 start, believing that even after the Vikings gave up 259 rushing yards to the Eagles in Week 2 and 445 passing yards to the Chargers in Week 3, their approach would be vindicated through the season. It was Sunday, with No. 1 over-all pick Bryce Young pursuing a two-touchdown lead after a pair of Cousins interceptions gave the Carolina Panthers 10 points, that the Vikings' defense came through when their quarterback needed it most.

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Blitzing Vikings safety Harrison Smith forced a fumble from Carolina quarterback Bryce Young (top) in the third quarter, which D.J. Wonnun scooped up and returned 51 yards for a touchdown. Justin Jefferson (above) was also part of the Vikings' second-half surge, catching a 30-yard touchdown pass at the end of the third quarter during a 21-13 win.

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duced D.J. Wonnun's fumble return touchdown that gave the Vikings the lead for good.

"I think it's huge," O'Connell said. "And I also think it's huge for the offense to understand that we cannot do those things and what caused them and how to execute it better. But then, it's a huge thing for team building, when the defense says, 'You know what? I got your back,' and they go out there and make some critical plays."

Had the Vikings hired Ejiro Evero, the ex-Denver Broncos defensive coordinator they planned to interview before he accepted the Panthers job in January, their approach might have resembled the Vic Fangio-influenced scheme Donatell brought to Minnesota last year. Instead, O'Connell hired Flores with visions of days like Sunday, when Smith would return to the multifaceted role he had enjoyed under Mike Zimmer and the Vikings would rarely be accused of passivity on defense.

The approach found a fuller expression Sunday than it had in the first three games of the season, with edge rusher Mar-

cus Davenport playing a full game for the first time this year once early work showed the Vikings his injured ankle was doing well enough for them to expand his role. Davenport finished with four tackles, stopping Miles Sanders for a 1-yard loss in the first half, and counted his first full sack since 2021 among three second-half pressures.

At times, Flores put four edge rushers — Davenport, Danielle Hunter, Wonnun and Patrick Jones II — on the field together. In the first half, Flores lined Davenport and Hunter up on the same side of the Vikings' line, when Hunter drew a holding penalty on Panthers center Bradley Bozeman.

"Just watching him practice all week, I was so happy to see how he was moving and how fresh he was," Hunter said of Davenport. "It didn't matter; whoever he was going to go against, it was going to be a hard time, because he's fresh. The ability to come out there, be on whichever side he wants and apply that pressure, I think that's a plus for the defense."

It was only the sixth time in O'Connell's 21 games as head coach that the Vikings have held an opponent under 20 points. On Sunday, the Panthers' offense only accounted for two field goals and didn't drive longer than 51 yards after putting together a 63-yard field-goal drive to open the game.

That the Panthers still had a chance to send the game to overtime Sunday was because of the Vikings' continued issues with turnovers.

With the Vikings threatening to score a touchdown on their opening drive, Cousins fired late for K.J. Osborn on an flat route from the Panthers 5 and threw the ball too close to the wide receiver's inside shoulder. Safety Sam Franklin Jr. stepped in front of the throw and brought it back from the Carolina goal line to the Vikings' end zone for a 99-yard score, as cornerback D'Shawn Jamison leveled Cousins while the quarterback attempted to knock Franklin out of bounds.

"I think it's a touchdown to K.J. if I'm faster [to throw to him]," Cousins said. "I

think it's a touchdown to T.J. [Hockenson] if I let the safety jump the flat [route]. I saw the safety put hands on T.J., so I'm thinking, 'I've got to get to the flat now, so the safety can cover both. If I let him make his decision and work off of it, it'll be a touchdown to one of those two. So I've just got to be quicker to the flat, or wait a tick for T.J.'"

Cousins was trying to throw deep to Jordan Addison just before halftime when Yetur Gross-Matos beat right guard Ed Ingram, bounced off right tackle Brian O'Neill and hit Cousins' arm, sending the ball fluttering in position for Kamu Grugier-Hill to pick it off at the Carolina 11. Eddy Piniero hit a career-long 56-yard field goal before halftime to give the Panthers a 13-7 lead.

In the second half, the Vikings had only five successful plays: a 17-yard run from Alexander Mattison on their first play of the third quarter, two runs and a 9-yard pass to Cam Akers in the third, and the thunderbolt that produced their final score of the day in the last play of the third.

The bipartisan crowd of 72,842 at Bank of America Stadium was subdued enough for Cousins to use a hard count and get Panthers nose tackle Shy Tuttle to jump into the neutral zone. The quarterback used the free play to fire deep for Justin Jefferson, who leapt over the 5-9 Jamison for his second touchdown of the day. For the NFL's reigning offensive player of the year, it was only the fifth multicore game of his career.

Smith and Davenport would combine for three fourth-quarter sacks of Young to make sure it was enough.

"It's not always going to be three sacks, but [it's] creating pressure in different ways, playing coverage in different ways," Smith said. "Everybody was doing their job. It wasn't anything special. It doesn't matter who gets it. It's just, whoever gets the play, make it, and then we'll move on. That's really all it needs to be."

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EXTRA POINTS

Flores takes advantage of rookie QB

1. B-Flo gets preferred QB
Marcus Davenport's first sack as a Viking was one of many examples of rookie Bryce Young being as overwhelmed by Brian Flores' blitz-happy defense as Justin Herbert was unfazed by it a week earlier. With the Panthers in field goal range and facing third-and-8 early in the fourth quarter, Flores showed pressure, rushed four and used Jordan Hicks to spy on Young. Young panicked, hesitated and, well, bye-bye field goal. Frank Reich's offense was too conservative — gaining 2 or fewer yards on 10 first-down runs — and didn't challenge the Vikings' suspect secondary deep.

2. Take a bow, Vikings fans

None of Carolina's six penalties for 80 yards hurt more than wide receiver Terrace Marshall Jr.'s false start on third-and-goal at the 3 in the first quarter. The Panthers had nine false starts at Seattle, but this never should have been a problem at home. Then again, Vikings fans are a large and very noisy bunch on the road. Kevin O'Connell owes y'all a shoutout for helping the Panthers settle for a field goal after that false start. Another killer flag: tackle Ikem Ekwonu's illegal man downfield penalty negating a 13-yard completion down to the Vikings 8. Two plays later, Harrison Smith's strip-sack led to D.J. Wonnun's game-changing 51-yard touchdown return for a 14-13 lead.

3. O'Connell outcoaches Reich

Offensive-minded coaches don't get game balls when they post 265 yards while going 1-for-8 on third down. But O'Connell's decision to go for it on fourth-and-2 from his 44 early in the second quarter was brave, a difference-maker at a critical moment and a high-percentage call that saw Justin Jefferson grab an easy 5-yard reception to sustain a calming 10-play, 64-yard touchdown drive at a point when Carolina led 10-0. Meanwhile, Reich sat on two timeouts as roughly 17 seconds — two plays — ran off the clock with his offense at the Vikings 41 right before halftime. Carolina settled for a 56-yard field goal rather than test the Vikings with anything down the field.

4. More Cam, please

How's this for a healthy one-two backfield punch in Cam Akers' first game as a Viking? Of the Vikings' 14 first-down runs for 104 yards (7.4 yards per carry), Alexander Mattison carried 10 times for 71 yards and a 7.1-yard average while Akers carried four times for 33 yards and an 8.25-yard average. Akers is a smoother runner, and Mattison runs harder when he's fresher and fighting for his carries. The Vikings had six first-down runs of 9 or more yards. Mattison had first-down runs of 17, 13 and 12 yards. Akers didn't have a first-down carry under 7 yards. His second 9-yard first-down run set up a Jefferson 30-yard touchdown pass off play action on second-and-1.

5. What's up, Kirk?

Kirk Cousins has lost games when he has been spot on. And he's won games like Sunday's when he's been anything but. His 99-yard pick six was thrown painfully late and was unacceptable for a smart veteran. Another one of those Kirk Konundrum moments came after Davenport's fourth-quarter sack — a deflating three-and-out that took only 1.29 off the clock and handed the ball to Carolina with 7:20 left in a one-score game. A 9-yard Mattison run on first down was followed by a 1-yard loss by Mattison. On third-and-2, Cousins overthrew Jefferson near the sideline and took a seat until the defense clinched the win.

MARK CRAIG

The Star Tribune did not send the writer of this article to the game. This was written using a broadcast, interviews and other material.