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Bengals wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase, left center, and quarterback Joe Burrow jump in the air to celebrate a touchdown during their game against the Panthers on Sunday at Bank of America Stadium.

# The Panthers showed promise vs. Bengals, but it wasn't enough on 'a day of near misses'

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The home fans at Bank of America Stadium saw another loss Sunday for the Carolina Panthers, and there was nothing unusual about that. But the way the Panthers lost? That was actually encouraging. Yes, the Panthers have fallen far enough that they are allowed to have encouraging losses, and that's what Cincinnati's 34-24

win over Carolina was. "A day of near misses," Carolina head coach Dave Canales would call it later, and that's true. But it was the right *type* of near misses, the "you did the right thing and it still went wrong" sort of errors that you can live with — especially if you're a supporter of a team that went 2-15 and looked hopeless throughout 2023. The Panthers went for it on fourth-and-inches inside the Cincinnati 1 on their first drive. Didn't make it. They called a fake punt and had a first down all but assured after punter Johnny Hekker threw a great pass. Reserve tight end Felipe

Franks dropped it. "I loved the mindset, the mentality," quarterback Andy Dalton said. And yet despite those critical fourth-down misses, the Panthers kept coming. And in doing so, a little of their fraught relationship with their fans was repaired. "The energy is just different," said Panthers wide receiver Dontae Johnson, who scored one touchdown but had his hands on another that he said later he should have caught as well. "To me, I feel like it's a different team." After the Panthers got bombarded with boos in their home opener Sept. 15 — a 26-3 loss to the

L.A. Chargers that was also the last game Bryce Young started at quarterback — this time the Carolina fans were far more positive with Dalton in charge. And they should have been. In danger of being blown out when they went down 31-14 in the late in the third quarter, the Panthers instead scored 10 straight points. Then, with the deficit cut to 31-24, Carolina forced a punt and got the ball back. With 4:42 to go, the ball was in Dalton's hands — albeit at the Panthers' 8-yard line — with a chance to tie the game if Carolina could go 92 yards. Alas, that's where it fell

apart. Jonathan Mingo dropped an easy 7-yard pass on first-and-10. Then Dalton threw two more incompletions and the Panthers punted when Canales chose to trust the defense instead of go for a fourth-and-10 at his own 8 with 4:31 to go. Cincinnati ran the clock down and kicked a game-clinching field goal, and that was that. Still, much like last week and the win in Las Vegas, there was some hope for Carolina. Dalton threw for 220 yards and two touchdowns, including the first career TD for rookie Xavier Legette and a dart of a 21-yarder to Johnson. Chuba Hubbard rushed for 100-plus yards again behind a steady offensive line that also didn't allow a sack. Dalton's only interception came when left tackle Ickey Ekwonu allowed Cincinnati defensive end Trey Hendrickson to hit the quarterback's arm as he threw, resulting in a flutterball that was easily picked off. Otherwise, though, the offense was pretty good. The Panthers scored 24 points and none of them came cheap. All three of their TD drives covered at least 65 yards. Except at the 1-yard line, they ran the ball well again. "This is exactly my dream of how this thing works from an offensive standpoint," Canales said. It was the defense and the fourth-down misses that let Carolina down in this one. The Bengals scored touchdowns on four straight drives spanning the second and third quarters. On one remarkable play, wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase pinballed through and around three Carolina defenders for a 63-yard TD that made all the Bengals fans in attendance (and there were a lot of them in the lower deck) roar in glee. Panthers safety Xavier

Woods had the most egregious missed tackle on that play, as he lowered a shoulder and hit Chase, but didn't wrap him up. The Panthers saw their fundamentals lacking on several similar plays. Woods would make up for some of that, however, by intercepting Joe Burrow in the fourth quarter and returning the ball 33 yards to set up a field goal. Of course, nothing that happened on a football field in Charlotte matters a bit compared to what's going on in western North Carolina right now. It was an incongruously sunny day where football seemed secondary after the devastating flooding and loss of life caused by Hurricane Helene in the Carolinas over the past several days. Canales acknowledged that tragedy at the beginning of his news conference. But if you're only talking about football, the Panthers lost one the right way Sunday. If they had scored on that first drive, as they should have — they ran *four straight plays* at the Cincinnati 2- or 1-yard line — things might have been different. My only quibble is that fourth-down play was run out of the shotgun when they only needed a few inches. Still, Carolina should have been able to bang that one in. "That's going to haunt me tonight," Panthers offensive guard Robert Hunt said. The belief in this team is there," Canales said. "But we just have to pair it with our execution." That's right. The Panthers hit rock bottom a couple of weeks ago, getting outscored 73-13 in their first two games. At least, for now, they've stopped digging. Scott Fowler: 704-358-5136, @scott\_fowler

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