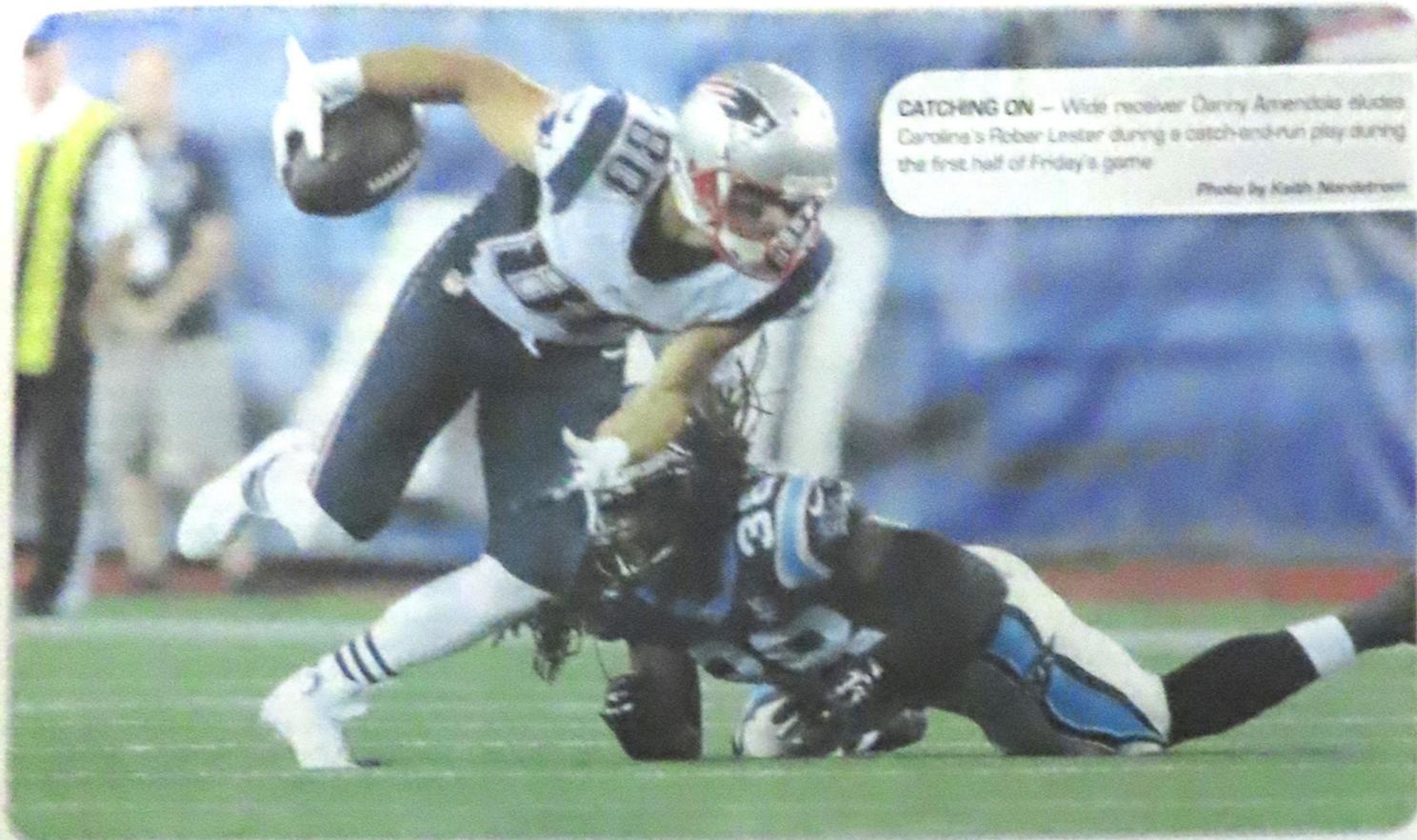


READ & REACT



CATCHING ON — Wide receiver Danny Amendola eludes Carolina's Robber Lester during a catch-and-run play during the first half of Friday's game.

Photo by Keith Nordstrom

makes him a trustworthy backup plan in the event of an emergency.

What a rush!

The Patriots applied the pressure early and often defensively Friday, a welcomed sight following a season in which the pass rush was non-existent at times. The majority of the pressure came from third-year defensive end Chandler Jones, who played primarily as a pass-rushing outside linebacker with the Patriots opening the game in a 3-4 formation.

Jones halted Carolina's opening drive on 3rd-and-5 when he broke through the line of scrimmage and sacked quarterback Cam Newton for a six-yard loss and earned another sack later on the Panthers next possession when he dragged down Newton for a loss of nine on 3rd-and-2 from the Carolina 27. Jones showed up in the running game, too, limiting DeAngelo Williams to two yards on the first play of Carolina's third offensive series.

"Knowing we were going up against a good team with a quarterback that scrambles, we had a good game all around," Jones said. "It felt good. It's all about doing your assignments. We went out and executed and did our job."

Rob Ninkovich also got in on the act in the opening half with a sack on Newton on Carolina's first play from scrimmage. With Jerod Mayo and Dont'a Hightower out of the lineup, the Patriots gave second-year linebacker Steve Beauharnais the start while fellow second-year linebacker Jamie Collins wore the green dot on his helmet, meaning he was equipped with the communication device and was in charge of relaying plays from the sideline to his teammates.

The Patriot flushed Newton out of the pocket repeatedly in the opening half and also did the job in containment once he tucked the ball and ran, limiting him to 12 yards on three carries with seven of them coming on one scramble. The ability to disrupt Newton also speaks to the performance of the secondary, which provided

ample coverage and made it difficult for Carolina's receivers to get open, another welcomed sight given the sporadic defense in 2013.

Element of surprise

As expected, Tom Brady earned the start Friday in what is widely considered the most important game of the preseason, but head coach Bill Belichick added an unexpected wrinkle when he put backup Ryan Mallett into the game on New England's third offensive possession.

The first thought was Brady might be injured seeing as though he got tangled up with Devey on the previous series, but those fears subsided once Brady was seen tossing the ball on the sideline during the next drive. The more realistic premise is Belichick wanted to catch Mallett off guard and give him a taste of what it's like to be a backup and have to enter the game without prior warning, a practice he utilized during the preseason several years ago when Brian Hoyer was the backup.

Mallett led the Patriots to a field goal in limited first-half action before Brady reentered the game in the second quarter. He did not play the rest of the night. The Patriots instead went with Garoppolo in the second half. Garoppolo finished 9 of 12 for 105 yards and a touchdown to continue his impressive preseason and keep the pressure on Mallett in the battle for the backup job.

Know the drill

Getting the ball back with 1:47 remaining in the opening half turned out to be ideal for the Patriots first-unit offense as it got a much-needed opportunity to execute its two-minute drill in live game action for the first time in the preseason. The Patriots started at their own 9 with all three of their timeouts, but only got to the Carolina 42 thanks to a 5-yard loss on a run by Vereen and a false start penalty by Brady.

Back-to-back completions of eight and 13 yards to Edelman wiped out the Brady penalty and another eight-yard reception

by Edelman pushed the ball into Carolina territory, where Stephen Gostkowski salvaged the drive with a 60-yard field goal, not exactly a play you can rely on consistently. The offense looked sharp for most of the night, but stubbed its toe twice during that two-minute drill, an uncharacteristic letdown for a unit that typically excels both in the two-minute offense and while operating out of the no-huddle.

Secondary concerns

Defensive back Patrick Chung got the start Friday at strong safety alongside Devin McCourty in the secondary, which again raises the question about where Duron Harmon, last year's third-round pick who started three of the 15 games in which he played, fits into the Patriots plans with the regular season just a week away.

Chung has been spotty in coverage during the preseason, again giving up big plays in the secondary Friday. Harmon didn't see the field until the second half, splitting time with cornerback-turned-safety Kyle Arrington, who has been experimenting with his new position the past two weeks.

The Patriots also gave undrafted rookie Malcolm Butler a third consecutive start at cornerback opposite Darrelle Revis, but the bigger surprise was the extended absence of projected starter Brandon Browner, who also didn't play until the second half. Alfonzo Dennard made his preseason debut after coming off the physically unable to perform list in July and, despite playing mostly as a slot corner in the first half Friday, figures to be the Week 1 starter opposite Revis while Browner serves his four-game suspension, unless Arrington reenters the picture within the next week.

Clutch when it counts

Making the most of his opportunity to play extensively over the course of an entire game, Beauharnais made the defensive play of the night in the second half when he jumped the route on a pass intended for Philly Brown at the New England 4 for his

RIISING STOCK

Chandler Jones

The third-year defensive end out of Syracuse was the best player on the field against the Panthers. Jones recorded six tackles, including two first-quarter sacks. The Patriots had a total of two sacks in their first two preseason games.

Marcus Cannon

Sebastian Vollmer missed the week of practice leading up to the Carolina game (reportedly a foot injury) so Cannon got the start at right tackle. He looked good run blocking and in pass protection.

Stephen Gostkowski

Gostkowski showed his value when he made a 60-yard field goal with eight seconds left in the first half. He also kicked a 47-yard field goal to open the scoring in the first quarter, and a 21-yarder to make it 23-0 early in the fourth quarter.

FALLING STOCK

James White

Rookie running back out of Wisconsin has looked average at best in three preseason games. White gained 15 yards on four carries against the Panthers. He entered the game with 36 yards rushing on 14 attempts (2.6 yards per carry) during the preseason.

Josh Boyce

The second-year wide receiver didn't see any action against the Panthers until late in the third quarter — not a good sign for a player battling to earn a roster spot.

Danny Amendola

Amendola made two catches for 13 yards, but was hit with a pass-interference penalty in the second quarter that put the Patriots in a 2nd-and-20 situation from their own 10-yard line. That's the type of penalty no team can afford when the games start to count.

first NFL interception and raced 61 yards to the Panthers 35 before being pushed out of bounds. ... Defensive linemen Jerel Worthy and Ben Bass, acquired in a trade with Green Bay and Dallas, respectively, during the week leading up to Friday's game, made their Patriots debuts in the second half against Carolina. ... With Tyler Ott off the roster, Ninkovich showed some additional versatility lining up as the snapper on the field-goal unit for Gostkowski's 47-yarder in the opening quarter. ... Along with Dennard, linebacker James Anderson entered the game on nickel coverage with Beauharnais and defensive tackle Joe Vellano on the sideline. **PFW**