

Football: Injuries, turnovers loom large in 21-6 loss to Rabun Gap

By Todd Forrest
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For the third consecutive week, the Union County offense failed to break 20 points, resulting in a 21-6 loss to Rabun Gap - the Panthers' lowest home scoring output in seven years.

Turnovers have played a major role in the recent offensive struggles as Union County was plagued by four turnovers vs. Rabun Gap, bringing the giveaway total to a dozen over the last three weeks. On top of being careless with the football, the offense has failed to surpass 300 total yards in three straight outings. Following lackluster performances at Banks County (278 yards) and vs. Elbert County (266 yards), the Panthers managed just 107 yards against Rabun Gap despite gaining 90 yards on their first two possessions.

Meanwhile, the Union County defense continues to shine, holding its third straight opponent, and fourth in five games, under 300 total yards. Against Rabun Gap, the D forced a three and out to open the game, setting up the offense with excellent field position at their own 46. The Panthers fed Jonah Daniel early and often before the senior running back left the game with an ankle injury after the second offensive series.

Three straight gives to Daniel went for 5, 7 and 10 yards on the opening series. Junior quarterback Logan Helcher, who also suffered a first-half injury and didn't return, rushed twice for 2 and 6 yards, sandwiched around a 6-yard pickup by Daniel.

The drive would eventually stall in the red zone, but senior Mason McCombs spotted the Panthers an early 3-0 advantage with a 35-yard field goal.

"It wasn't fair for some of those guys [that replaced the injured players] because they didn't get very many snaps at those positions during the week," Union head coach Allison said. "But we were able to do exactly what we wanted to do on offense during the first half. We just wish we could have scored touchdowns instead of kicking field goals. We controlled the ball, we hit the bubble [screen], we were hitting Jonah up in there and that's what we wanted to do."

"I feel like we're getting better but we keeping having



Senior quarterback Kaston Hemphill (3) and sophomore running back Cayleb Rogers (21) took the majority of snaps in the Union County backfield due to the Panthers playing without their starting quarterback and two running backs. Photo/Todd Forrest

to deal with injury after injury. And we've had to do some things differently and haven't been able to be as wide open as we've been the last seven years."

The Eagles responded with a 13-play, 75-yard scoring drive, capped by a 9-yard strike at the 10:35 mark of the second quarter. Rabun Gap finished the series 3-for-3 on third-downs, including a pair of conversions on third-and-11.

"[Rabun Gap] has a Michigan commit at tight end and the other guy has an offer from Georgia Tech," Allison said regarding the Eagles' duo of tight ends. "I felt really good about what we did in the first half, but in the second half, we just suffered some bad luck."

"We're already down a defensive lineman, and we had to take a linebacker, Gage Barnes, and move him to defensive end and he did a good job. I can't say enough about how hard we battled that whole ball game."

Union answered with a 13-play drive of its own but couldn't find the endzone and settled for a 41-yard field goal from McCombs.

On 2nd and 7 from the 23, Daniel tore off a 22-yard run, followed by a 5-yard completion to Keyton Chitwood, moving the Panthers into Rabun Gap territory. A second-and-5 handoff to Daniel went for

4 yards, and two plays later, Helcher moved the chains with a first-down keeper on fourth and 1.

Faced with a third-and-13, Helcher found senior Kaston Hemphill for 24 yards inside the Eagles' red zone, but the drive stalled as Rabun Gap dropped Helcher for loss on third down bringing McCombs onto the field to trim the deficit to 7-6 with 4:37 before the break.

The offense had one last-shot before the intermission after the defense forced three straight incompletions after surrendering two more first-down completions on third and long.

However, a Panthers' fumble on the first play awarded the visitors a free possession at the Union 14-yard line with 1:09 on the clock. With its back against the wall, the defense would not budge, forcing a 35-yard field goal attempt in the waning seconds that sailed wide left.

"We played well on defense in the first half and we preach all the time to force field goals," Allison said. "We forced the field goal, they missed it and we went in 7-6, but we could have easily been up 10-7."

Hemphill took over behind center as the Panthers received the second-half kickoff trailing 7-6. Two handoffs to Cayleb Rogers went for a no gain, and Hemphill kept it himself for a short pickup on third



The Union County defense turned in another stellar performance against the high-powered Rabun Gap offense, holding the Eagles to a season-low 21 points. Photo/Todd Forrest

down, forcing a Union punt.

Starting from its own 26, Rabun Gap used a 30-yard completion on first down to spark a drive deep into Panthers' territory, but junior cornerback Trace Wright came down with a jump ball in the endzone to deny the Eagles.

Union would cough up the football again at its own 30, giving it back to Rabun Gap after two plays. Still, the Panthers defense continued to deliver when called upon, forcing a fumble at the 13-yard line with 3:11 left in the third.

The momentum swing was short-lived as a bobbled pass on first down fell into the arms of an Eagles' defensive back and returned to the 6-yard line. On third-and-goal, Rabun Gap stretched its lead to 14-6 with a 5-yard touchdown pass.

The Eagles picked off another Union County pass, this one coming on the third play of the next series. Starting from just inside midfield, Rabun Gap put the Panthers in dire straits with a 24-yard touchdown hookup on its fifth play of the drive. The score opened up a 21-6 lead with 9:35 remaining.

Down two scores, Union had one final shot at making things interesting after starting its next drive from the 45 and a 7-yard run by Rogers into Eagles' territory. Unfortunately, the Panthers punted

after suffering a 4-yard loss on third-and-2.

However, Rogers' punt provided Union County fans with a rare smile as his kick bounced sideways inside the 5-yard line and rolled out of bounds inside the one.

Starting from just outside the goal line with 6:42 left, Rabun Gap ended the Panthers' comeback hopes by orchestrating a lengthy drive into Union territory that eventually ran out the clock.

Up next is a visit to third-ranked Rabun County, fresh off two of the most massive blowouts in program history. Two weeks ago, the Wildcats dismantled Banks County 71-0 before taking down Elbert County 63-7 last Friday.

Averaging 49.3 points per game, Rabun County is well ahead of its 2018 school-record scoring pace of 46 points a game. Even if the season ended today after nine games, the 2020 campaign would still mark the sixth-most points scored (444) in Rabun County history.

The Wildcats' last two games alone (134 points) produced more points than the entire season output of 15 other Rabun County teams.

"Our guys know how good Rabun is," Allison said. "They're practically the same team they had last year, so we're going to play it one quarter at a time then see where we're at.

Then we'll come in at halftime and see where we're at.

"We're going to try and keep it as close as we can, but as one of our coaches said, 'in life, you have days that your best may not be enough to win.' And this might be one of those times where we can play our butts off and it may not be good enough to win. But you won't know until you try and that's why you play the game."

As for Union County, the Panthers' 21-6 loss to Rabun Gap marked the lowest-scoring home output vs. a non-region opponent since a 20-0 loss to Gilmer in 1996 - Allison's first season.

Both Daniel and Helcher suffered early injuries and did not return in the loss to Rabun Gap. While neither injury appears to be serious, Allison believes that both players are doubtful for Rabun County.

"[Helcher] had a spine injury a few plays after [Daniel] came out," he said. "His head hit a Rabun Gap kid's thigh and his head went back in a whiplash-type situation. Nothing is broken, but I don't know what his status is."

"[Daniel] tweaked his ankle again and it swelled up on him. Maybe he could have gone back in, but I don't know what his status is either for this week. If I had to guess, I would say that both will be out."

Union County, Rabun County prepare for 54th installment in series

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This Friday marks the 54th meeting between Union and Rabun - the most vs. any opponent for both squads - with the Wildcats leading the series 37-16 and currently riding a six-game winning streak.

Immediately prior to Rabun's streak, the Panthers notched five straight victories between 2007-11 and went 6-2 vs. the Wildcats from 2004-2011.

The longest winning streak in the series belongs to Rabun, but it's not the current one. The Wildcats won the first nine meetings between 1958-1966. Outside of a 25-13 Union victory at home in 1967, Rabun opened by taking 12-of-13 contests, including a 64-6 win in Tiger in 1970 - the rivalry's most lopsided outcome.

The Panthers would gain revenge in 1971, knocking off Rabun County 28-16 in the early days of Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium. Following a 12-8 Wildcats' victory in 1972, Union County would score consecutive wins over Rabun County for the first time in 1973 and 1974. Coming off a 41-21 home victory in 1973, the ninth-ranked Panthers went on the road and thumped Rabun 40-6.

But like the Panthers three years earlier, the Wildcats would get their paycheck a year later, upsetting ninth-ranked Union County, 19-12 in Blairsville. The 1974 and 1975 Wildcats were under the direction of head coach Doug Stockton -- the uncle of current Rabun quarterback and South Carolina commit, Gunner Stockton. The 1974 contest would spark five-straight Rabun victories, including a 3-0 win at Union in 1977 when the Wildcats entered with a No. 5 ranking.

The Panthers halted the streak with a 27-7 victory in 1979; however, the Terry Rogers era would get underway in 1980 with three consecutive defeats. The eighth-ranked Panthers would score another 27-7 home win in 1985, fol-



Seniors Noah Underwood (16) and JJ Littles (26) will face Rabun County for the fourth and final time on Friday night in Tiger. Photo/Todd Forrest

lowed by a 27-14 road victory a year later over the Bill Hall-coached Wildcats.

Rogers' career would close with three-straight losses to Rabun before the series took a break between 1990-1995. Brian Allison arrived in 1996 and suffered a pair of one-sided losses in his first taste of the rivalry. Another hiatus followed in 1998-1999, but Allison's Panthers visited Tiger in 2000 and handed Rabun a 23-13 loss. In the meeting, Union's Wing-T offense set the tone right off the bat, taking the opening kickoff and using the entire first quarter to take a 7-0 lead on the game's opening drive.

The Panthers overpowered Rabun again in 2001, pulling away 30-7 en route to a 9-2 season. With Allison gone in 2002, the Wildcats stunned Union County 21-20, dealing a

crushing blow to the Panthers' playoff hopes.

Following ugly losses in 2003 and 2004, Union recorded a 21-14 victory in 2005. In 2007, head coach Todd Peugh routed the Wildcats 31-14, quelling the sour taste of Union's 41-0 loss in 2006.

Allison's return coincided with four straight wins over Rabun County between 2008-2011. Three of the meetings were decided by 14 points or less, while the 2010 contest in Blairsville ended in 38-14 Panthers' victory.

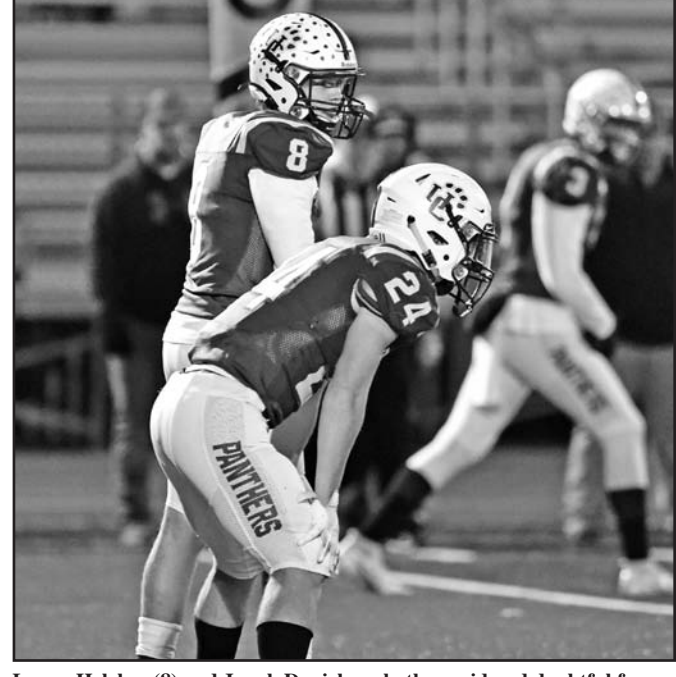
Since Rabun's father-son duo of Lee and Jaybo Shaw took the reins in 2012, only one Union-Rabun meeting has been competitive entering the fourth quarter. During the 2014 de facto Region 8-AA title game in Blairsville, the Panthers trailed 38-31 late in the fourth quarter but were unable to even

the score after they were turned away by a Rabun County goal-line stand.

The Wildcats' offense put the game away with a 99-yard scoring drive, sealing Rabun County's 45-31 victory.

In 2013, Union County led 18-14 before the Wildcats rattled off 28-straight points for a 42-18 final.

Two years ago, a questionable block in the back penalty on an interception return prevented the Panthers from building a 14-0 advantage. Rabun County quickly seized momentum and pulled away 56-28. However, the game was still up for grabs until a batch of second-quarter turnovers derailed Union's Region Championship hopes and forced them to play from behind unsuccessfully.



Logan Helcher (8) and Jonah Daniel are both considered doubtful for Friday night at No. 3 Rabun County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Hey, fellow Jeep enthusiasts, come and join us. Monthly meetings are held the second Friday of each month. We meet at the Blairsville Skillet Cafe, where we enjoy delicious food and excellent service. We eat lunch together at 12 PM and the meeting begins at 1 PM.

We are thrilled that cooler weather is here and we can get down to some serious jeeping! We still have trails to blaze and community activities to participate in. We will ride the Cherohala Skyway and other forest service roads to cool destinations.

We are a happy bunch of folks, who love getting together to ride, explore and sometimes get muddy. If you are like-minded, read on, or better yet, come and join us. We don't sit around and talk about jeeping, we do it! Weather permitting, we ride once or twice a week on various kinds of rides: easy street rides, forestry roads, and

the men (and a few adventurous ladies) take on more challenging rides such as Beasley's Knob.

If all this activity is too much for you, attending each event is optional; you only do what appeals to you. There are no participation requirements. We don't have a long list of rules or bossy officers, and we do not collect membership dues. Sound good? If you own a Jeep and think this might be your cup of tea, we welcome you to come and enjoy life with us.

For more information, please attend a meeting or contact us via our website, www.blueridgemountainjeepers.com. You can view our calendar of events and see pictures and videos of recent rides. Also, "like" us on Facebook.

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Learn to play Pickleball

Learn to play Pickleball: Beginner's Lessons every Saturday, 10 AM (weather permitting). No charge and all equipment provided. Courts are located behind the Health Department. For more information contact: blairsvillepickleball@gmail.com.