

Sports

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Panthers win first playoff game, 19-15 over South Atlanta

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State playoff victory? Check. Ten-win season? Check. Union County football made history on Friday night with its first-ever State playoff victory, setting a single-season program record with 10 victories in the process.

After his Panthers were denied on seven occasions in the first round, four coming at home, Union County Head Coach Brian Allison can finally put an end to the question that has followed him around in recent years.

Questions regarding the “monkey on his back” are now a thing of the past and Coach Allison isn’t ashamed to admit that those repetitive preseason inquiries were becoming tiresome.

“I am very happy about that,” he said when asked about putting those questions to bed. “This win has been a long time coming and I am honored to be a part of it. I’m excited for the football program and all of our present and past players.”

In the early going Friday night, it appeared the Panthers were still reeling from the previous week’s loss to Rabun County as South Atlanta’s first possession saw them march down the field and put seven on the board.

Later, the Hornets would open the third quarter by driving 73 yards for a touchdown and two-point conversion to regain the lead at 15-12.

Still trailing by three to begin the fourth, Drake caught a pass for 20 yards on the quarter’s first play, then Daniel ripped off a 12-yard scoring run to put the Panthers on top for good at 19-15.

“To come back like that and take the lead, our kids battled hard and I’m proud of what they did and what they’ve been able to accomplish,” Coach Allison said.

The Union County defense forced a three-and-out and the offense took over at its own 31 with 10:06 remaining. The drive would stall and the Hornets set up shop in their own 20 with under six minutes to play.

With 3rd-and-14 from the 16, Daniel read a South Atlanta screen pass, dropping them for a 4-yard loss and forcing another punt. With 4:16 left, Union County took over at the South Atlanta 46-yard line. After burning nearly two minutes off the clock, the Panthers were faced with 3rd-and-3 when Pierson Allison rolled right and found Cayden Rich in the flat for four yards.

With a much-larger defender draped all over him, Rich managed to fight forward for enough yardage to move the chains.

“I knew I needed to get open and pick up that first down so we could chew some more clock and win the ball game,”



The Panthers celebrate as the final buzzer sounds on their first-ever State playoff victory and 10-win season. Photo/Todd Forrest

Rich said. “It will definitely go down as one of my all-time favorite catches.”

Pierson Allison praised the consistency of his wide out and never had any doubt that Rich would deliver in the clutch.

“He’s one of my best options, he’s got great hands and he’s an automatic first down,” said the Union County quarterback.

The offense would go on to kill the clock with three hand-offs to Daniel as the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band and the student section counted down the final 30 seconds in unison with the scoreboard.

“This win means a lot to me and there is no team I would rather do it with,” Pierson Allison said after the game. “These guys are my brothers and this is the best team I’ve ever played with.”

The Union County offense found some early success in the passing game but each of its first two drives stalled out on fourth down in South Atlanta territory.

On the second play of the game, senior quarterback Pierson Allison went up-top to Sawyer Drake for a 31-yard hookup. Unfortunately, a first down sack derailed the drive and the Panthers’ 4th-and-6 attempt was snuffed out.

On their second drive, Rich hauled in a 7-yard catch on 3rd-and-4, then Drake moved the chains with catches of 10 and 12 yards. With a first down inside the South Atlanta 35, a jet sweep to Drake was dropped for a 5-yard loss. Starting behind the chains, the Panthers were eventually turned away on 4th-and-7 and the Hornets took over at their own

31-yard line.

The Union County defense forced a turnover on downs when South Atlanta rolled the dice and elected to keep its offense on the field, where they failed to convert a 4th-and-2 from the 39. Following the change of possession, the Panthers needed just five plays to even things up.

On third down, Allison hit Drake on an out route just shy of the goal line, but before falling out of bounds, the senior receiver stretched the ball across the pylon for the score.

Earlier in the drive, Drake and Allison connected on a 20-yard gain before they were tagged with a personal foul on the next play. Faced with 2nd-and-23, a Mason McCombs catch made it 3rd-and-9 when Drake’s touchdown put Union on the board.

“The offense had lot of chances, we missed some open receivers and we had some penalties but I thought we played well against a team that was big, fast and aggressive,” Coach Allison said. “Throughout the year we were able to create some big plays but those (South Atlanta) guys closed so much faster than anyone we’ve played all year.”

Tied at 7-7, South Atlanta’s returner was unable to field the kickoff and the ball bounced off his fingertips, out-of-bounds at the 8-yard line.

After a three-and-out, the defense forced its first punt of the game and junior Noah Underwood got into the backfield and blocked the kick, which was eventually recovered by the Hornets in the end zone for a safety.

“I came straight up the middle and there was nobody there to block me so I just went

all in to try and get a hand on the punt,” Underwood said. “To do that in our first-ever Win, that play ranks pretty high up there for me.”

Leading 9-7, Union took over at the South Atlanta 45 following the free kick but were once again denied on fourth down. Starting from their own 37, the Hornets had issues holding onto the football as an errant shotgun snap resulted in an 11-yard loss, then a fumble dropped them back another five.

With 1:28 remaining in the half, Union County got the ball back at its own 28 and picked up a quick first down by drawing the defense offside on 2nd-and-2. From their own 41, Allison went deep down the far sideline to Drake to set up a 1st-and-goal but the play was negated on an ineligible receiver penalty.

Union still moved the chains and advanced into South Atlanta territory with two throws to Drake and one to Rich. With a first down inside the 30-yard line, the Panthers were tagged with a questionable intentional grounding penalty for tipping the ball to kill the clock. Pushed back to the 38 with six seconds left on the clock, Union County went to Drake for a quick 10-yard strike before calling timeout and bringing the field goal team on for a 45-yard attempt.

With the buzzer sounding, McCombs split the uprights for a career-long kick that extended the Panther lead to 12-7 at the break.

“Coach (Howard) McCombs made the call to run one more play before the field goal,” Coach Allison said. “He told me, ‘we need seven more yards to get

into range.’

“He called a hitch but we needed to make sure that we got down on the ground quickly as soon as we picked up the yards. We did and I was able to get the time out to set up the field goal.”

The Hornets would come out of halftime and drive 73 yards, capping things off with a 15-yard touchdown run and a two-point conversion to go back on top 15-12 at the midway point of the third quarter.

Union County’s offense would begin the third with a three-and-out but the defense stepped up and forced South Atlanta into a fake punt attempt that was blown up by Nathaniel Ledford, handing the ball back to the Panthers with 1:09 left in the third.

Starting from its own 41, Union went to Jonah Daniel for 13 yards, then Kyle Morlock got involved with a 10-yard grab on 3rd-and-8 to keep the drive alive and set up Daniel’s game-winning score.

Morlock has been injured since the first play of the Elbert County game back on Oct. 4. And despite playing one snap vs Rabun, last Friday’s South Atlanta game was his first real action since the injury.

“It felt amazing (to be back out there),” Morlock said. “I’ve been waiting for this for five weeks and to come back for this game and have us make history, I don’t even know how to feel right now. It’s all surreal.”

“I thought (Morlock) looked good and it was great to see him out there,” Coach Allison added. “I know he wanted the ball more but with another week of practice, I’m sure he’ll be back

to his old self.”

Drake finished with a career-high 12 catches for 146 yards and a score. Daniel rushed 21 times for 95 yards to account for the Panthers’ other touchdown. He also caught one pass for 7 yards.

Allison went 21-for-32 with 218 yards and one touchdown. He rushed three times for 11 yards.

Rich caught four passes for 30 yards, McCombs had two receptions for 20 and Morlock had two grabs for 15.

Sloan Sutton led the way with seven tackles; John Mancuso had six and JJ Engle had four.

Up next is a visit to Metter to face the 10-1, Region 2-AA Champion Tigers. Metter is led by Region Athlete of the Year TJ Davis. They also feature First-Team All-Region running back Ahmod Collins, second team running back Aaron Collins and honorable mention quarterback Taj Hobbs.

Overall, 17 Tigers were named to the All Region team with five receiving a first-team nod.

“They run really well on both sides of the ball so we are going to have to weather that early storm, which we didn’t do a great job of (vs South Atlanta),” Coach Allison said. “But once you get into this part of the season, everyone is really good. And yes, we’re happy to be here but we’re still not content by any means.”

Kickoff is scheduled for Friday, Nov. 22 at 7:30 p.m. at Metter High School. The school is located at 34905 GA Highway 129 S, Metter, GA 30439.



Junior linebacker Noah Underwood (16) bats down a South Atlanta punt in the second quarter. The ball was recovered in the end zone for a safety, giving Union its first lead of the night at 9-7. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Jonah Daniel (24) weaves his way through the South Atlanta defense for a 12-yard, fourth quarter touchdown run that gave Union County the lead for good at 19-15. Photo/Todd Forrest