

Football: Elbert County pulls away late from turnover-prone Panthers

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Five Union County turnovers resulted in 24 points as a 10-10 third-quarter tie deteriorated into a 31-10 Elbert County victory at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Friday night.

All square at 10-10 late in the third, Union's fourth and fifth giveaways of the night sparked a 21-0 Elbert County outburst over the final 15-plus minutes.

Despite outgaining the visitors 266-258 in total yards and holding a 17-14 edge in first downs, the Panthers (3-3, 1-1) were unable to overcome four interceptions -- two returned for scores -- and a costly first-quarter fumble that denied Union an early lead.

"We did some good things, it's just the mistakes that we're making are monumental mistakes," Union County head coach Brian Allison said.

As a result, the Panthers will likely finish as the region's No. 3 seed and will not host an opening-round playoff game for the first time since 2017.

After forcing an Elbert County punt to open the contest, Union took over at its 7-yard line and drove 91 yards before a fumble negated a first-and-goal from the Blue Devils' 1-yard line.

Running back Jonah Daniel was the focal point early as the senior took a Logan Helcher screen pass 14 yards on Union's first play from scrimmage. Following rushes of 5 and 3 yards, Daniel gained 45 on a third-down screen pass to move inside the Elbert 30.

Junior Carson Walker gained 12 on another screen before a short gain by Helcher and an offsides penalty gave the Panthers a 2nd-and-4 from the Blue Devils' 8-yard line.

With the goal line in sight, Helcher kept it himself, picking up the first-down yardage before losing the football at the 1-yard line while battling for the end



Senior Noah Underwood uses a stiff arm to break free for his 40-yard, game-tying touchdown reception in the third quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest zone.

The Union defense would force Elbert to punt from its own end zone, but the offense went nowhere after starting the series in plus territory.

Still scoreless in the second quarter, the Panthers missed another scoring opportunity when a 4th-and-3 pass attempt fell incomplete at the Elbert County 31. Once again, the defense did its job and forced another punt, and this time, the special teams provided a much-needed spark when Elijah Helton blocked the kick, allowing Union to take over inside the 40 with 6:34 before halftime.

On the ensuing play, Helcher faced pressure up the middle and his short throw to Noah Underwood in the flat was jumped by the Elbert County outside linebacker and returned 59 yards for the score.

"To be honest, we didn't do a good job protecting our quarterback," Allison said. "El-

bert was bringing pressure and [Helcher] was getting hit as he threw it. Elbert County is a very athletic football team and they played well and they created some tough matchups for us."

Moments later, faced with 3rd and 10 and trailing 7-0, a tunnel screen to Mason McCombs was picked by the inside linebacker, setting up the Blue Devils at the Union County 31.

The defense held Elbert to a 22-yard field goal after Aaron Helton stuffed a 3rd-and-goal run from the 2-yard line.

Trailing 10-0 at halftime, the Panthers took the second-half kickoff and drove inside the Elbert 10-yard line but settled for 3 points on a 29-yarder by McCombs. On the next Blue Devils' possession, a blitzing Underwood sacked the Elbert quarterback, jarring the ball loose and allowing the senior linebacker to recover it at the Blue Devils' 40-yard line.

On first down, Union



Seniors Conner Cook (57) and Hunter Young (20) led the Union County defense with 6 solo tackles apiece. Cook assisted on 7 tackles and Young assisted on five. Photo/Todd Forrest

went back to Underwood, who hauled in the pass from Helcher and raced 40 yards for the game-tying score at the 7:12 mark of the third.

"I thought we did a good job on defense," Allison said. "We gave up 31 points and 24 came off turnovers. Our defense sparked us and we had that little spurt in the third quarter where we showed what we're capable of, but we're just not doing it on a consistent basis right now."

With momentum finally on the Panthers' sideline, the defense came up with a necessary stop, denying Elbert on 4th and 8 from the Union 33. Looking to take its first lead of the day, Union moved out to midfield on a 15-yard carry by Daniel. Unfortunately, the turnover bug bit once again when the Blue Devils intercepted Helcher and returned it to the 6-yard line.

Elbert connected three plays later on a go-ahead touchdown pass for a 17-10 lead with

2:06 left in the third.

Union responded by driving inside Blue Devils' territory with a 16-yard keeper from Helcher and a 24-yard reception by Daniel. With a 3rd-and-5 to begin the fourth, Elbert County picked off Helcher once again, taking it back for a score and a 24-10 advantage.

"I think some of the credit goes to Elbert," Allison said. "Coming in [Elbert] had been playing a lot of loose man coverage, but they tightened things up against us and forced us to make some tougher throws."

The Panthers never threatened again as the Blue Devils put the game out of reach with a 49-yard touchdown run with 5:16 to play.

Helcher finished the day 15-for-42 with 204 yards. Daniel had 34 yards on the ground and 89 through the air on four grabs. Underwood caught five passes for 56 yards and Kaston Hemphill had two receptions

for 26 yards.

Underwood, Conner Cook and Hunter Young led the defense with six solo tackles each. Daniel and JJ Littles had five solo stops each; Hemphill, Wilson Walker and Trace Wright had four apiece.

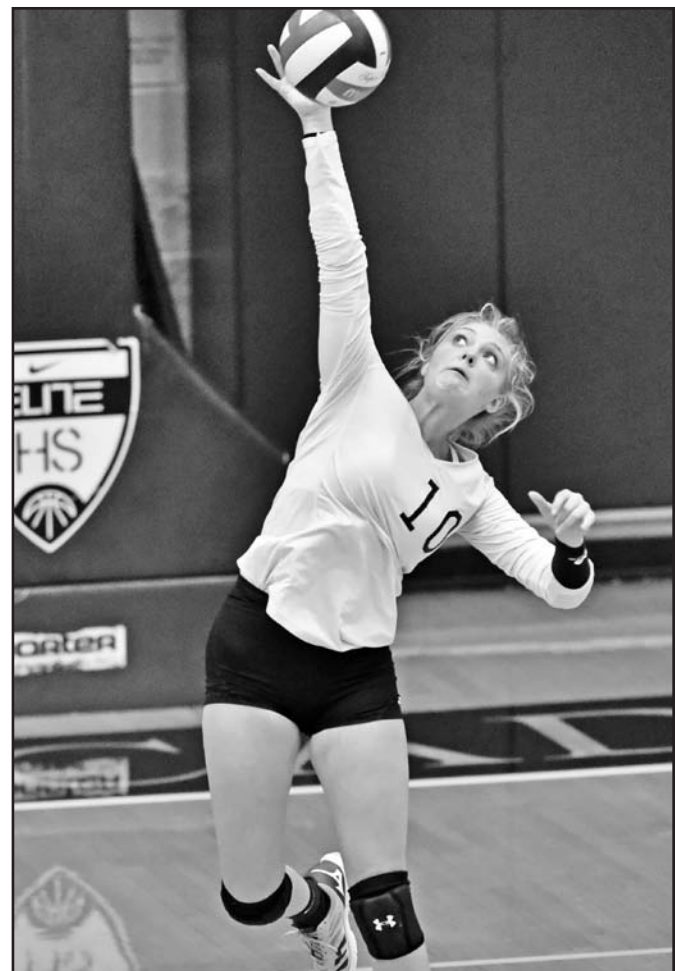
Up next is a Thursday contest with Rabun Gap. Kickoff is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium

"[Rabun Gap] is a very good football team with a couple of tight ends that are 6-foot-6, and they're big and physical on both sides of the ball," Allison said. "We're going to try and get some younger guys some playing time, but we're also going to treat it like a region game since this one is replacing the Riverside game."

"We want to prepare for next week [at Rabun] and stay healthy, but we also want to keep pushing and come away with a win on Thursday."

Photos: Union County Volleyball at Davidson Fine Arts, Pace Academy

Photos by Todd Forrest



Local Racing Report: Tri-County

By Blake Lynch
Racing Reporter
North Georgia News

Brasstown, NC - Tri-County Racetrack hosted a race this past Saturday Night with a full racing program plus the Blue Ridge Outlaw Late Models. Here are the top five finishers from each class.

Modified - Coming in first was No.44 Bobby Elkins. Coming in second was No.727 Baillie Lowe. Finishing in third was No.3 Floyd Self. Coming in fourth was No.17R Ronnie Wren.

Crate - Coming in first was No.12 Drew Deaver. In second was No.9 Brian Kinnersley. Coming in third was No.17 Brett Shook. Coming in fourth was No.1 Junior Whitener. Placing fifth was No.25 Jacob Hamby

Pony - Coming in first was No.22 Tucker Anderson. Coming in second was No.01 Tyler Wood. Coming in third was No.441 Matt Gerrin.

FWD - Coming in first was No.192r Robby Lynch. In second was No.19r Sean Rice. Coming in third was No.14 Josh Smith. Finishing in fourth was No.10 Blake Lynch. Placing

fifth was No.28 Jason Coates.

Beginner 602 - Coming in first was No.55 Brad Sosebee. Taking home second was No.22 Tucker Anderson. Coming in third was No.44 Jay Lynch. Coming in fourth was No.171 Ethan Fleming.

Blue Ridge Outlaw - Coming in first was No.8 David Payne. Coming in second was No.7 Jason Deal. Coming in third was No.66 Mark Dysart. Coming in fourth was No.51 Drew Deaver. Rounding out the top five was No.72 Robbie Bailey.

Street Stock - Coming in first was No.14 Charles Devine. Coming in second was No.95 Alex Vance. Coming in third was No.169 Jim Weller. Coming in fourth was No.01 Jacob Lynch

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.