

Sports

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Panthers blank Greene County; knocking on playoff's door

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With Halloween just around the corner, the month of October and the Region playoff race has been a horror show for the Union County Panther football team in recent years.

Not even Spirit Week was safe for the Panthers. Up until last year, Union had dropped 10 straight Homecoming contests.

Yet, this time around was different. You could sense it as soon as you entered Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium. To say the Panthers and the home crowd were fired up for last Friday's Homecoming showdown would be the understatement of the year.

The Panthers harnessed, and fed off, the positive vibes generated by the home crowd, and the intensity was turned into results. Now the Panthers are sporting a three-game win streak, despite missing two injured starters on the defensive side of the ball.

Union County (5-2, 3-1) exercised its 'must-win-game' demons and flat out clobbered the Greene County Tigers, 42-0, owning the visitors in every phase of the game.

"We just want to get into the playoffs so badly," sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso said. "Especially for our seniors."

For four grueling quarters, the Tigers had to line up against a Panther squad who was on a mission. A team determined to make a statement and shove a sock in all the doubters who say that Panther football only folds under the bright lights. This time, Union County owned the stage. The spot light lit a fire under the Panthers that hasn't been seen around these parts in over a decade. As for making a statement? No doubt. The remainder of the Panthers' schedule has officially been put on notice.

"I had no idea (the outcome) would be like that," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "There was no doubt in my mind that we could win, but I had no thought of it being 42-0."

Mancuso had another solid performance with his arm, going 13-of-24 for 227 yards and two scores, while extending his streak to 157 straight passes without an interception. He also used his legs, rushing nine times for 108 yards. Once again, his favorite target was junior wide out Jacob Rogers, who hauled in seven grabs for 165 yards and a score.

"I have a great connection with all my receivers," Mancuso said "Everyone connects and the team chemistry is getting better and better."

Rogers has gone over 100 yards receiving in three straight games and also credits the team chemistry that is beginning to blossom on an offense without a senior starter.

"The support of my team and the coaches have really helped,



Sam Brown returns a first quarter interception. Photo/Todd Forrest



Chase Barnett with his first three scores. Photo/Todd Forrest

but we couldn't do this without our (offensive) line," Rogers said. "The line has played spectacular and our quarterback has been on fire. Whatever it was we were missing early on, we've found it. Now we just have to keep it going against Rabun next week."

As the Panthers opened up a 21-0 lead after a quarter and a 28-0 advantage at the break, Union was able to turn to its running game that had been quiet the past few weeks. Sophomore Nick Whittle got back on track with a season high 98 yards on 18 carries.

"This feels great," Whittle said. "It's the best feeling to be able to rush the ball good and get back in the end zone."

Junior Chase Barnett scored a career high three touchdowns off of direct snaps in goal line situations. The direct snap was a new wrinkle that Coach Allison and staff added before the game. Early in the season, Allison began putting Luther Jones and Barnett in the backfield along with Mancuso for some added muscle. After a few weeks of teams spotting this formation on film, Allison decided to put Mancuso into motion, moving him into the slot, while Barnett stepped over to take the departed Mancuso's quarterback position. Barnett would take the direct snap and follow Jones to pay dirt. The plan worked to perfection three times. Just more proof that the it was simply the Panthers' night.

"We actually just put that play in this week," Coach Allison said with a laugh. "But we had been struggling on the goal line and trying to figure out something we could do differently. It worked pretty good. I think one time it went for a loss, but overall I thought it was a good decision."

Union absolutely owned a Tiger team that finished 3rd in 8-AA last year and had high hopes again entering this season. In last year's showdown, Greene scored 23 straight points in the second half as Union unraveled with turnover-after-turnover. The Panthers' 19-14 halftime lead quickly vanished as a young, athletic Tiger squad went for the kill and left the Panthers in a daze. Fast forward to 2013. It is the Panthers who feature youth across the board with only five seniors on the roster and not one starts on offense. However, what the Panthers have lacked in experience in the early going, they have made up for it by closing the gap athletically between themselves and some of the more gifted teams in 8-AA. And it showed on Friday night. Union seemed to be one step faster and one move ahead of the more experienced Tiger squad.

"We've grown up over the course of the season," Coach Allison said. "We started the season with seven sophomores on offense and they've started to grow up and started to mature, and the same thing can be said about our defense.



Junior wide receiver Jacob Rogers gets loose into the open field. For the third straight game Rogers went over 100 receiving yards. Photo/Todd Forrest

We lost 18 starters off our team from last year and it's just taken us some time to get going. We were able to force some turnovers and put it in the endzone early tonight and that's when things started to click."

The Panthers did quite a number on the Greene County rushing attack, proving that this young team is starting to gel on both sides of the ball. Union limited the Tigers to an anemic 24 yards on the ground and 179 yards of total offense. Greene's 155 yards through the air required 34 pass attempts - they completed only 12.

"We stopped their run game tonight," Coach Allison said. "I was worried about their run game coming into this week but we stopped it and it was just an exciting game."

The Panthers also silenced Greene on third down, with the Tigers converting just four of their 12 third downs. Meanwhile Union was 7-for-12 on third down with 22 total first downs for the game, compared to only eight for Greene.

The final tally of 42-0 was not at all misleading. Union dominated on offense, defense, and even special teams where the Tigers turned it over twice. Also, Greene's five punts barely averaged 27 yards per kick, while Union punted just twice, for an average of 38 yards. However, this year's matchup was supposed to be a slug fest between two teams fighting for their playoff lives. With Washington-Wilkes and Jefferson seeming to have the top two spots on lock down, and a rejuvenated Rabun County squad nipping at their heels, that left Union and Greene to fight it out for the final spot.

The first sign of Union's soaring confidence level came during the coin toss when the Panthers elected to defer, putting complete trust in their defense to get the Tigers off the field.

After a 32-yard pass, the Panthers dug in and stopped Greene for a no gain on consecutive runs. A third down run was good for 4 yards but the defense did its job, bringing up a punt.

Junior Robert Prunier's fair catch had Union setting up shop at its own 13 but Mancuso quickly moved the chains with a 15-yard keeper. On the second play, Mancuso hit Rogers on the near sideline, the receiver spun free of a defender and raced 62 yards for the score. Knox Kiernan's kick made it 7-0 in the early going.

On the ensuing drive, the Tigers first play from scrimmage was a pass over the middle that was snagged by Union junior Sam Brown, who returned the interception to the Tiger 14-yard line. Whittle carried for 12 before Barnett scored his first of three touchdowns from 2-yards out, off a direct snap. With 6:45 to play in the opening quarter, Union already had a 14-0 lead.

The Tigers went three-and-out and were forced to punt after sophomore safety Andrew Brown broke up a would-be first down completion. Andrew Brown said after the game that much of his team's success against the Tigers' offense came from studying film and noticing little things they were doing that could tip off a defense.

"Their lineman would show us what they were going to do," said Andrew Brown, who finished with 4 tackles, a pick, and 2 pass deflections. "If they were passing, at least one of the lineman would be in a pass set, and if they were running, all of them would be down in a three-point (stance)."

With excellent field position Mancuso didn't waste any time going for more points. On the first play, the Panther quarterback went to the deep ball and Prunier reeled in a graceful over-the-shoulder, fingertip grab, good for 39 yards

and a score. At the 4:25 mark of the first, Union found themselves ahead 21-0, and on the verge of blowing out the Tigers.

Greene County would continue to implode by fumbling on their ensuing possession. A lengthy Tiger run was for naught as junior Brett Dietz stripped the ball from behind and junior Ralston Drake dove on the loose pigskin. The Panthers would turn it over on downs at the Greene 27-yard line but Union got the ball right back when the Tigers were unable to sustain a drive.

With the offense back on the field, Whittle churned his way through traffic for a 21-yard gain and a Rogers catch was good for 15 more. Whittle tacked on 14 yards and Prunier picked up 18, down to the 1-yard line on a pass from Mancuso. Two plays later, Barnett took another direct snap and powered his way into the endzone for a 28-0 lead with 8:22 to go in the first half.

"We just jumped on them early and kept getting short fields and kept forcing turnovers," Coach Allison said. "And we were forcing those turnovers. They weren't just throwing the ball to us."

Andrew Brown would pick off Greene County on their next possession but Union handed the ball back on a fumble. The Tigers would drive to the Union 25-yard line with 30 seconds left in the half thanks to a 14-yard completion and a Panther penalty on fourth down. Union would force Greene into a 4th-and-2 where the Union defense stood its ground and broke up a Tiger pass.

The third quarter went by quietly with both defenses having the upper hand coming out of the extended break. The Panthers got the ball to start the second half but eventually punted. The teams ex-

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Chambers no-hits Lovett but Union County unable to advance

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The Union County Lady Panthers (20-16) traveled to Lovett and looked invincible in Game One. For the next two games, it was Lovett who looked unbeatable.

In the opener, Freshman Laken Chambers tossed a no-hitter in her first State Tournament appearance, while Union County's bats pounded out 13 hits, run-ruling the Lady Lions, 9-0 in five innings.

In Game Two, a different Lady Panther team showed up. In fact, they didn't show up at all. At least not until they trailed 7-0 in the fifth inning.

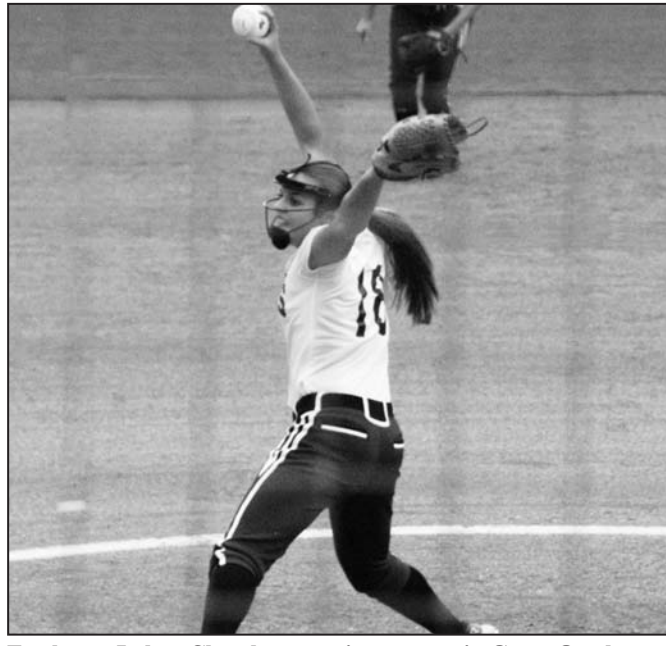
Union added four late runs but it was too little, too late, putting the Lady Panthers in a do-or-die Game Three.

After Thursday's game was rained out, Union fell 2-0 in Game Three on Monday, ending the Lady Panthers' season.

Union County's victory in the first game was their 20th win of the season, giving them three 20 win seasons in the last four years after last year's squad fell just short. It also ended Union's four-game State losing streak.

If the Lady Panthers can brush off their Game Two loss and advance, the 2nd ranked Calhoun Yellow Jackets will host Union later this week.

The other representatives from 8-AA have had also roller coaster ride in the State Tournament. The Region 8-AA Champion, the Social Circle Lady Redskins swept No. 4 seed GAC, but not without a receiving a scare. Social Circle escaped with a narrow 5-3 win in Game One before thumping the Lady Spartans 16-1 in Game Two.



Freshman Laken Chambers was in a groove in Game One but ran into trouble in the second contest. Photo/Todd Forrest

No. 2 seed Jefferson easily took care of Westminster in Game One but were shutout in Game Two, forcing a third and deciding game that Jefferson took 5-3.

Oglethorpe County, the No. 4 seed traveled to 7th ranked Wesleyan and split a doubleheader with the Lady Wolves before dropping the third game.

As for Union, Laken Chambers' no-hitter and 4 RBIs from Crystal Busbee were the story line in Game One as Union cruised to a 9-0 victory in five innings.

The Lady Panthers put Lovett in a 4-0 hole after the first inning. They tacked on two more in the second and three in the third. The fourth and fifth inning went by without Union getting on the board but Chambers kept the Lady Lions off the base paths.

A second inning error gave Lovett their lone base runner of

the evening. Chambers worked five innings, with no hits or walks, and striking out two.

Freshman Kendra Tanner led off the game with a walk, Madison Rich singled, and Chambers singled, loading the bases for Courtney Busbee who put Union on the board with an RBI ground out.

Crystal Busbee followed with an RBI single, then Halle King singled, loading the bases again. Sophomore Maddie Garrett knocked in Union's third run with an RBI single up the middle. Fellow sophomore Karley Nix went to the opposite field for another RBI, staking Union to an early 4-0 lead.

With one out in the second, Tanner reached on an error and Rich walked. Courtney Busbee would later single with two outs, setting the table for her sister.

Crystal Busbee smacked a two RBI single to left-center and



Junior catcher Courtney Busbee laces a single up the middle during the second inning of Game One at Lovett. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union was sitting on a six-run lead in the second inning.

The Lady Panthers exploded for three more in the third with Kelsey Nix stroking a one-out double into the gap. Rich brought her in with a base hit, Chambers reached on an error, and Courtney and Crystal Busbee capped off the inning with consecutive RBI singles.

Every Lady Panther that came to the plate, recorded at least one hit. Crystal Busbee led the charge with a 3-for-3 day that produced 4 RBIs. Courtney Busbee did plenty of damage at the plate, as well. The junior catcher was 2-for-3 with 2 RBIs and a run, while reaching base in each of her three at bats. Rich went 2-for-3, scoring three times, driving in one, and walking once.

Chambers had an RBI to go along with her no hitter, Garrett and Karley Nix each drove in a run, King finished 1-for-3, Kelsey Nix was 1-for-3 and scored following her double, and freshman Lydia Arrowood scored three times as a courtesy runner

lead and Chambers had been replaced by Crystal Busbee.

"I went with Chambers because I think we are a better defensive team with her on the mound and Crystal at shortstop," Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart said. "She pitched well, it's just so hard to shut down a good team for 10 or more innings."

At the plate, Union wasted a lead off double in the first, a one-out double in the second, and a lead off single in the fourth.

Courtney Busbee and Rich each drove in a run for Union. Arrowood, Garrett, and Courtney and Crystal Busbee scored Union's four runs in the sixth inning. Tanner and King each doubled and Courtney Busbee tripled.

Crystal Busbee came in and worked 2.2 innings in relief and allowed just one hit.

More details on Game Three will be available in next week's edition of the *North Georgia News*.



Madison Rich (left) and Crystal Busbee exit the field after Rich snagged a line drive into left field. Photo/Todd Forrest