

Sports

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Union on the goal line of State Tournament despite loss to Rabun

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The Union County Panthers (5-3, 3-2) allowed Rabun County (6-2, 3-2) to pull away on Friday in a 42-18 loss.

However Union has three scenarios this week that will guarantee their first State Tournament appearance in 12 years.

The first one is cut and dry. Travel to Social Circle and defeat a winless Redskins team. Social Circle (0-8, 0-5) is averaging just three points a game on offense while the defense is surrendering 48 per game.

If the Redskins pull off the upset, the second and third options are a safe bet that things will go the Panthers' way. All Union would need is a win by Jefferson at Riverside Military Academy and for Rabun County to knock off visiting Greene County.

However, the Panthers are prepared to take care of business at Social Circle and not worry about who does what elsewhere across the Region.

Last Friday, Union missed their opportunity to wrap up a State berth and set themselves up for a No. 3 seed, or even a No. 2 seed.

Unfortunately, Rabun's defense sparked a 28-point, second half scoring surge, and despite its best efforts the Panthers were unable to keep pace.

In a contest that would serve as a barometer as to where this Panther team stood in the pecking order of 8-AA, things didn't go as planned.

The "Black Out" game that was expected to pack Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium was disrupted by what was undoubtedly the coldest Friday night of the football season, keeping many fans at home.

Still, the Panthers played their hearts out for four quarters, but the Rabun onslaught, on both sides of the ball, eventually took its toll in the second half.

The Wildcats rolled out 533 yards of total offense and completely shutdown the Panthers' rushing attack, limiting Union to 17 yards on the ground.

Forcing Union to a one-dimensional offense. The Panthers were forced to the air 42 times, allowing Rabun's defensive line to pin its ears back and attack Union quarterback Joseph Mancuso. The Panther sophomore was sacked eight times - five in the second half.

"That hurt us," Union Head Coach Brian Allison said. "Rabun came out in a different defense than what we had been working against but that is still no excuse. They're (Rabun) pretty good on defense. Not as good as (Washington) Wilkes but still a good defensive team."

Mancuso finished with 260 yards passing with two



Joseph Mancuso was on the run all night long. Photo/Todd Forrest

touchdowns. Junior Jacob Rogers went over 100 yards receiving for the fourth straight game, catching six passes for 126 yards and two scores.

Despite a handicapped offense, Union still had it chances. Late in the second quarter, the Panthers had the ball in Rabun territory looking to build on its 11-6 lead. But the drive stalled and a Rabun touchdown right before the half put the Wildcats on top for good.

A possible 18-6 halftime advantage was turned into a 14-11 deficit. A huge swing in momentum that would have given the Panthers, not the Wildcats, a much needed boost going into the locker rooms.

"There were a lot of big 'ifs' in that game," Coach Allison said. "We had our chances but they (Rabun) are a good football team. Their quarterback (Hunter Sims) is a freshman transfer from Gainesville. His brother Blake is the backup quarterback for (the University of) Alabama."

Rabun stretched its lead to 28-11 late in the third when Union responded with a much-needed touchdown, making it a 10-point game. And that's as close as the Panthers would get. The Wildcats added a pair of touchdowns in a span of 91 seconds. The first coming in the final seconds of the third quarter and the final dagger in the early stages of the fourth.

"We made some mistakes in the second half that we didn't make in the first half and it hurt us," Coach Allison said. Like last Friday, Union put its faith in the defense as they deferred the opening kick. And once again it paid off.

The Panthers forced a punt when a big hit by junior Brett Dietz jarred the ball loose on a 3rd-and-4 pass attempt resulting in a punt.

The Panthers went three-and-out following a third down sack. After the Union punt, Rabun went 44 yards on six plays, capped off by a 4-yard scoring run. The extra point sailed wide right and Union trailed 6-0 with

5:23 left in the first.

On the ensuing kickoff, junior Robert Prunier took the kick, turned and fired a lateral across the field to Rogers who took the kick down to the Rabun 32-yard line.

Mancuso carried for a 3-yard gain before hitting Prunier for 13 yards. The drive quickly took a turn for the worse as a Union handoff was smothered for a loss. A 4-yard gain by Prunier and an incompletion brought senior T.J. Smith on to try a 38-yard field goal. Two offsides penalties against Rabun turned it into a 28-yard attempt that Smith connected on, making it a 6-3 game at the 2:36 mark of the first.

The teams would exchange turnovers after senior Chase Stancil forced a fumble that was recovered by Dietz. Then with the first quarter coming to a close, Mancuso threw his first pick since the second game of the season.

Union's defense would get redemption for Mancuso and the offense by forcing a safety.

On 3rd-and-6, a sack by senior Luther Jones dropped the Wildcats for a 10-yard loss, bringing up a punt. The snap would sail past the Rabun kicker into the endzone where he booted the ball out of the field of play for two Panther points.

Trailing 6-5, Union took over at the Rabun 45-yard line after the free kick went out-of-bounds.

On the third play, Mancuso connected with Rogers over the middle for a 37-yard catch-and-run. The 2-point conversion run was stopped short, giving the Panthers an 11-6 lead with 8:51 remaining before halftime.

The Union defense forced another punt and the Panthers set up shop from their own 33-yard line.

A pair of passes to Prunier and Rogers got Union into Rabun territory but another sack derailed the Panther drive.

A punt gave the ball back to the Wildcats with 3:59 left in the half where they went on a 10-play scoring drive.



The Panther defense swarms a Rabun County ball carrier. The Panthers held the Wildcats in check for a half. Photo/Todd Forrest



Assistant Coach Neil Setzer instructs the lineman during the second half. Photo/Todd Forrest

An 18-yard run with 1:22 left in the second gave Rabun the lead. A miscue by the Panthers allowed the Wildcats an easy 2-point conversion after Union only had 10 players on the field for the point after attempt.

Union was on the move before the half when Clay Wallis reeled in a pass from Mancuso for 31 yards but another sack halted the scoring opportunity.

The Panthers took the ball to open the second half and picked up a pair of first downs but the Rabun defense got to Mancuso on first down for a 7-yard loss, and again on third down for a 3-yard loss. Union punted on the next play.

Rabun needed only four plays to find the endzone on their first possession of the second half, taking a 21-11 lead at 7:22 in the third.

"Our offense did a good job of getting a couple of first downs on the opening drive of the second half to flip the field position," Coach Allison said. "Then defensively, we let them go down and score, and that's when the momentum shifted. The score at the end of the second quarter and the score to start the third quarter was a big swing."

Prunier took the ensuing kickoff to midfield but Union was forced into a three-and-out after a third down sack.



T.J. Smith connects on a 28-yard field goal. Photo/Todd Forrest

away moments later with a 61-yard touchdown run. With 10:38 to play, Rabun had things under control at 42-18.

The Panthers suffered two sacks after a pair of first downs on the following drive, and were unable to threaten again as Rabun ran out much of what was left on the clock.

Defensively, the Panthers got another big game from junior Chase Barnett who finished with 20 tackles and a forced fumble. Nic Sparks had 9.5 tackles and Andrew Brown had 8.5 tackles. Luther Jones had 7 tackles, including a sack and a tackle-for-a-loss.

Despite the Rabun loss, Union is still in the driver's seat for the fourth and final playoff spot in 8-AA. It's simple, beat Social Circle and make State. And if reaching State for the first time in 12 years isn't enough motivation, a victory on Friday gives Union its sixth win of the season and back-to-back winning seasons - something else that hasn't been done in 12 years.

As for the other scenarios, a loss by Greene County (3-5, 2-3) and Riverside Military Academy (4-4, 2-3) propels the Panthers into State, regardless of the outcome in Social Circle.

Greene County visits Rabun County and Riverside hosts Jefferson (6-2, 4-1). Both Greene and Riverside will be gigantic underdogs in both games and not a soul outside of Greensboro or Gainesville believes that an upset is in the cards.

On paper, the Panthers should rout Social Circle, but Coach Allison knows that games aren't played on paper, especially those played more than 7.5 million pieces of paper away from home.

"Going down to Social Circle will be a tough test for our kids after playing their butts off for four quarters last Friday," Allison said. "We just have to rebound off of the loss. That's part of growing up and maturing as a team. Put the loss behind us and move on to the next game."

20 wins: not too shabby for rebuilding year

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Atlanta - Union County took Game One of the first round contest at Lovett, but the Lady Lion bats came to life in Game Two, while the Lady Panthers bats were silenced in Game Three.

In the deciding contest, Laken Chambers, who no-hit Lovett in the first game, worked all seven innings, allowing 7 hits, one walk, and striking out two.

Junior Courtney Busbee recorded two hits to lead the Panther bats, while sister Crystal Busbee reached twice on walks.

"I don't think we were overly confident, we had a problem adjusting to the slower pitcher in the second game along with four fielding errors," said Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart regarding Union losing two straight after taking Game One 9-0. "The third game we played some great defense that kept us in the game but couldn't produce any runs with our bats."

A disappointing way to end the season? No doubt. But when you look at the big picture, it's not all gloom and doom. The Lady Panthers won 20 games despite relying on five freshmen three sophomores, and four juniors.

"I was proud of the way this year's team played," Coach Stewart said. "We only had four girls that were returning starters. So with five new positions I was pleased how they all reacted and worked together as a team."

Next year, Union County High School adds another loaded Middle School squad into the equation. And Coach Stewart believes that 20-win seasons are



Coach Cagle (L) and Coach Stewart (R) will say goodbye to two seniors, Allie Stroman (L) and Madison Rich (R)

a thing of the past. From here on out, 25 to 30-plus win seasons should soon be the norm.

"Each year we set certain team goals and 20 wins is one of those so we were happy to reach that specific one," Coach Stewart said. "The future of this program looks great and we will continue to work hard in the off season to get back to the State Championship."

Union's lack of pitching depth was one of 2013's shortcomings. Freshman ace Laken Chambers showed early that she welcomed the role as the Lady Panthers' ace and leading run producer in the lineup.

"Most teams only have one good pitcher in high school

so us having two did play to our advantage in certain games," Coach Stewart said. "Laken (Chambers) earned the No. 1 spot (on the pitching staff) by her performance early in the season. She did well on the mound. She pitched more innings than I have ever had a freshman pitch since I've been here. She is very competitive and I needed her bat in the lineup as well. Defensively we were better having Crystal Busbee at shortstop as well so it all worked out."

However, Union only had two pitchers on the varsity staff with one pitching on the JV staff. That should change next year when the Lady Panthers welcome a handful of solid pitchers

moving up from Union County Middle School.

"I can't wait to get more pitching and the talent from the middle school," Coach Stewart said. "The majority of the girls have been playing travel ball and know what it takes to be successful. Our JV program the past two years has not been what I need to help my varsity program. We need to play a full JV season and be able to get girls in at least 12-15 games of experience their first two years, if they're not ready to play varsity immediately."

"Next year we should have no problem doing that with the number of girls that I expect to come out and the pitching that is coming up."

Joe Collins



Tips from the Range

One of the places I see many players falter when score is concerned is on the putting surface itself. They stroke the putt poorly, which can be corrected through practicing the proper technique, make poor reads or develop inconsistent feel or they do the one thing that probably causes more added strokes to the scorecard than any one factor and that is: Lag Putting.

More often than not, a once a week golfer or a twice a month golfer will go out and play a decent round of golf, and when the final score is totaled, it's higher than said golfer thinks it ought to be. You hit the ball well, even hit several greens in regulation, but what happened to your score? The ride home provides the answer to this high score phantom as the round is replayed inside the golfer's head. All of a sudden, when everything is counted and all shots are analyzed, it is obvious that good ball striking alone is not going to produce low scores. Said golfer just counted 45 total putting strokes which included six three-putts and one four-putt. Unacceptable!

The average golfer thinks that the difficulty in golf is hitting the ball from point A to point B. Oh, if only this were true. The difficulty in golf is shooting your lowest score ever or being a consistent low scorer. Ball striking is important to having good scores but putting is the one thing that can affect your score the most and in relative terms, the easiest to control. Proper technique is required to a point but some simple logic will help you roll those long putts closer to the hole and in return have less putting strokes on the scorecard. Sound good?

Many of you have seen the old timers and the way they used their hands to putt by breaking their wrist in the follow through. Obviously this is a form of putting that requires a tremendous amount of feel but can be the most consistent way to putt for someone who has developed that feel. Charlie Jenkins was my mentor at Butternut Creek Golf Course when I was growing up and he taught me to roll the ball on the putting surface and to feel each putt before you ever struck the ball.

He stood on the south side of the ball and he actually cut across the ball with his stroke, but made more putts than anyone. His stroke was through the shoulders but also with a whole lot of feel through the hands. He never three-putted.

How do you develop great feel on long putts? I am glad you asked and I will explain. You don't. If you don't have it, you ain't gonna find it on the course unless you play a lot of golf. You gotta use technique. It is impossible to develop consistent feel when greens change daily and you only play a couple times a month. Your technique must provide the base of your putting stroke. Feel is created inside good form through a lot of practice on technique. The first thing you must consider is the fact that it is very important to repeat your form every stroke so that your distances will be consistent. It is vital that you keep your head still and watch the putter head strike the ball to make a clean impact. Always keep the intended target line in your minds eye by using your peripheral vision. Don't move your head to do this. Keep the use of your hands to a minimum until you have struck the ball. Stay in balance.

Now, this is how you find your correct distances from course to course or from week to week on your home course. Find a flat place on the practice putting green and step off five paces (15') from the nearest flat hole. Drop three balls and make a good solid stance to prepare to roll the first practice putt. Draw the putter back to the outside of the back foot and make your normal, or as close to normal, putting stroke that you would use on the course during a round. DO NOT change your stance, merely place another ball exactly where the previous ball was rolled from and stroke the next two. Assuming you had all the elements in place to make a good stroke, determine how far past or how short the average of the three balls is and that is the distance you will roll the ball on the course when drawing the putter back to the outside of the back foot. Pretty simple huh?

This is a simple but very effective way to combat lag putting problems. Nothing is more irritating than putting for birdie and come away with bogey or double. Work on this the next time you go play and you will find the first putts getting a lot closer to the hole which should eliminate most of the three and four-putts. Good luck and I will see you on the course!