

Sports

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Panthers hold off Riverside 29-14 on Senior Night

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The Panthers picked up their eighth win of the season on Senior Night following a 29-14 victory over a scrappy Riverside Military Academy squad that refused to go away despite falling behind 29-7.

The win guarantees the Panthers can finish no lower than third in 8-AA and are a win over Washington Wilkes away from placing second and hosting the first round of State. It was also the 29th win for the 2015-16 senior class, equaling the 1977-78 class for the winningest class in team history.

Senior quarterback Joseph Mancuso got the start after suffering a knee injury at Rabun County two weeks ago. Wearing a brace on his left knee, the Richmond commit wasn't 100 percent but still threw for three scores in the win.

He would finish the game 16-for-30 with 266 yards passing. The injury limited his rushing numbers but he still averaged 11 yards-per-carry with 44 yards on four carries.

The Eagle defense tested Mancuso's mobility by blitzing early and often but he was able to escape the pressure. Union's first touchdown came with Mancuso throwing on the run and hitting senior Andrew Brown in the back of the endzone.

Mancuso then hit senior Sam Gilbert for a two-point conversion to make it an 8-0 game.

But for the most part, the Riverside defense kept the Panthers offense in check — limiting them to two scores, but the difference was a pick-6 by Brown and a fake field goal by Knox Kiernan that led to another touchdown.

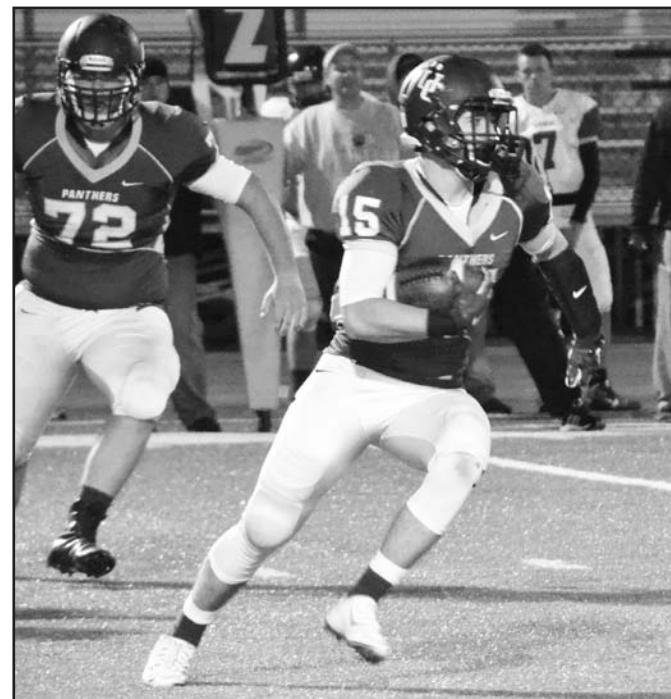
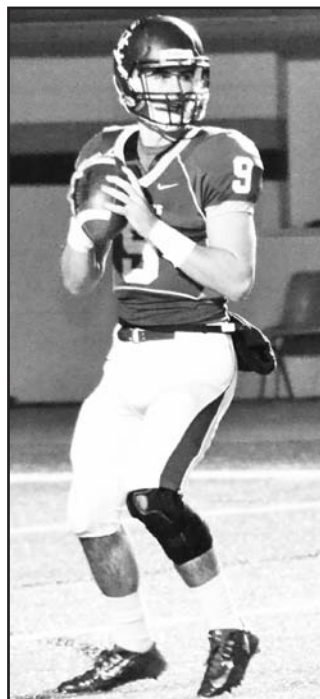
"I don't think the offense was clicking on all cylinders," Union Head Coach Brian Allison said. "We were just a little out of rhythm. We missed a couple of throws and catches. There were three situations where we had a touchdown but didn't finish."

Leading 8-0, following the interception of a Mancuso pass, Brown returned the favor by picking off a Riverside pass, breaking several tackles, and weaving his way 25 yards to pay dirt with just over 2 minutes to play in the first quarter.

In the second frame, a Union fumble awarded the ball to the Eagles at the Panthers 28-yard line. Facing a 3rd-and-8, Riverside completed a pass that was good for 17-yards and a first down. On second down, an 11-yard completion put the Eagles on the board — making it a 15-7 game.

A holding penalty derailed Union's ensuing drive and they were forced to punt it back to Riverside with 1:46 left before the half.

Sophomore R.J. Banton and junior Chandler Day ganged



Left to right: Panther fans were relieved to see Joseph Mancuso (9) get the start at QB despite wearing a brace on his left knee. RJ Banton (11) was unblockable and wreaked havoc in the RMA backfield all night. Cole Dockrey (15) ran for a career-high 115 yards in his first game back from a broken arm that was suffered in game two vs Lumpkin County. Photo/Todd Forrest



RJ Banton (11), Chris Drost (54), and Chandler Day (67) swarm the Eagles quarterback. The Panthers' defensive front abused the Riverside offensive line for 48 minutes. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Union defense just misses out on a safety as they stuff the Eagles rushing attack inside its own 1-yard line. Photo/Todd Forrest

up on the Riverside quarterback, dropping him for loss of five, then a false start and a pair of incompletions brought up a 4th-and-20 and a punting situation.

Defensively, the night belonged to Banton, who finished his breakout performance with 7 tackles for a loss and 3 sacks.

"We dominated their offensive line," Coach Allison said.

"We're starting two sophomores and a junior (on the defensive line) and I thought they did very well."

The Panthers set up shop at the Eagles' 45-yard line with 40 seconds left and on the first play, Mancuso hit a streaking Kiernan down the middle of the field for a 45-yard scoring

hookup that extended the lead to 22-7 at the break.

On Riverside's opening possession of the second half, Banton recovered a fumble and Union took over at midfield.

The offense would drive inside the Eagles' 5-yard line but an interception in the endzone on 4th-and-goal kept the Panthers from extending the lead.

Another sack by Banton forced a three-and-out and senior Josh Daniel returned the punt to the Riverside 34-yard line, then a personal foul moved the Panthers inside the 20-yard line. The drive would stall and on 4th-and-2 from the 11, and Kiernan lined up for a 28-yard field goal attempt.

game. The scoring drive was highlighted by a 23-yard completion on 4th-and-5 after Banton dropped the Eagles for a 4-yard loss on the second play of the drive.

The Panthers would answer by driving into Riverside territory thanks in large part to sophomore Cole Dockrey, who ended up with 15 carries for 115 yards — both career highs. Dockrey had been out of action since the Lumpkin County game with a broken arm.

Following a 15-yard completion to Gilbert, Dockrey carried for 8 yards. Two plays later he went for 14 yards, then 10 yards on the following play.

Unfortunately the drive would stall on the Eagles' 31-yard line when a 4th-and-8 pass fell incomplete.

With 7:04 on the clock, the Eagles had plenty of time to make it a ball game and it appeared they would trim the Union lead after a deflected pass fell into the arms of a Riverside receiver for a 30-yard gain.

An offsides penalty on the Panthers was followed by a first down run and then a 16-yard completion put the Eagles inside the 20-yard line. An incomplete on first down was followed by an intentional grounding flag that made it 3rd-and-19. Riverside was dropped for a short loss on third down, bringing up a 4th-and-20 at the Union 25-yard line.

A hail mary attempt was broken up in the endzone and the Panthers offense took over and melted the remaining 3:07 off the clock.

Up next is a trip to Washington Wilkes with the No. 2 spot in 8-AA and home field advantage in the first round of State on the line.

Last year the Panthers edged the Tigers 35-34 thanks to a blocked extra point by Brett Dietz and a late fumble recovery by Luke Chatham.

Wilkes is under a new head coach but return a three-year starter at quarterback.

"They are very athletic on both sides of the ball," Coach Allison said. "They are big on the offensive line, but not as big as they've been in the past. Defensively, I think we'll be able to match up with them physically, but the question is, can we tackle them in space."

"I think we'll be able to block their defensive line. They're not as big on that side of the ball but they're very athletic in some spots."

Coach Allison is hoping that Mancuso will be able to mend a little bit before Friday, but he also knows that his QB will face a mental challenge as well.

"I think when he starts running the ball more, he'll become more confident, and that will help his passing too," Coach Allison said. "We just hope he's healthy by Friday and ready to go."



Senior Andrew Brown (25) hauls in a touchdown reception in the first quarter. He also scored Union's second touchdown of the game on a 25-yard interception return. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Pride of the Mountains band is on their feet following Brown's pick-6 in the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

With Mancuso holding, Kiernan broke to his right when the ball was snapped and Mancuso tossed the ball to Kiernan, who went untouched into the endzone to stretch the lead to 29-7 with 1:13 left in the third.

Banton may have been the defensive MVP but the of-

fensive award went to the Union kicker. Kiernan's night included 6 receptions for 124 yards and a pair of scores.

Riverside refused to go away and took the ensuing possession 57 yards on seven plays to trim the Union advantage to 29-14 with 10:07 left in the

Injury bug bites at Elite 8; Lady Panthers drop two in Columbus

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Columbus - During Union's opening game with eventual champion Gordon Lee, the Lady Panthers lost the ace of their pitching staff when junior Laken Chambers aggravated an ankle injury that limited her in her team's Sweet 16 sweep of Lamar County.

However, the 31-1 Gordon Lee Lady Trojans were an entirely different monster than what Union (25-9) had faced during the previous round. Despite sophomore Jillian Lawn's best efforts, Gordon Lee proved too much and breezed past the Lady Panthers by a score of 12-2.

"Gordon Lee was a very good team and went on to win the state championship so that was a tough draw right off the bat," Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart said. "They had a very good pitcher and we managed to only get one hit off her and one hit off their No. 2 (pitcher). Laken being injured hurt us, we were off mentally because of that."

Falling into the loser's bracket meant Union would be in action at 9 a.m. the following morning vs Seminole County.

In the early going the Lady Panthers got the jump on Seminole County and took a 2-0 lead after an inning. Unfortunately, the second inning would be all



After ending a 5-year absence from the Elite 8 with only two seniors on the team, the Lady Panthers look to make a habit out of playing in Columbus every October.

Seminole as they surged to an 8-2 advantage.

Coach Stewart made a pitching change and went with freshman Madeline Tanner, who held Seminole in check. Senior Maddie Garrett also did all she could to keep her team in the game, going 3-for-4 with 5 RBIs and a 3-run homer. But it would be too little, too late as Union fell 9-6.

"I was extremely proud of the way Jillian and Tanner stepped up and almost pulled out the win in the second game," Coach Stewart said.

**Lady Panthers 2
Gordon Lee 12**

The Lady Trojans used four singles and a pair of stolen bases in the top of the first to take a quick 3-0 lead.

Union County would get one run back when Chambers sent an 0-2 pitch over the center-field fence for a homerun.

A hobbled Chambers, came back out to start the second inning from the circle but walked a pair before Coach Stewart replaced her with Lawn.

When the dust finally settled on the top of the second, Gordon Lee held a commanding 8-1 advantage.

Lawn held the Lady Trojans scoreless in the third and fifth innings but allowed 4 runs in the fourth.

A single by Garrett in the fifth was Union's only other hit of the game.

Junior Lydia Arrowood and freshman Aladriel Arnold both reached base via walks.

**Lady Panthers 6
Seminole County 9**

Garrett drove in five runs and smacked a 3-run homerun for the Lady Panthers in her final game.

Fellow senior Karley Nix finished 1-for-3 with a run scoring triple and was hit by pitch.

"Our Seniors have been great this season," Coach Stewart said. "Maddie G did a good job stepping up and catching for us

this season.

"Karley has had one of the best seasons at the plate of her high school career. She ended with the second highest batting average on the team and made some amazing catches at second base. I hope to see both of our seniors go play at the next level."

Arrowood was 2-for-4 with 2 runs and a double, while Lawn went 2-for-4 at the plate with a run and an RBI.

Sophomore Braden Pootee reached on an error and stole a base.

Tanner would take over for Lawn in the circle during the second inning and pitched 5 innings, allowing only one hit and

one run, while striking out four.

Trailing 9-3, Union scored three in the fifth to make it a 9-6 game but they were unable to do any damage in the sixth or seventh innings.

"After the season ending loss, I told the girls not to be disappointed," Coach Stewart said. "We had a great year and I'm very proud of them. We got started back in June and we didn't end early this year. These girls earned a trip to play with the best 48 teams in the entire state in all six classifications and I was thrilled for them to get that experience. We are hunting for a state championship every year and this was a good step for our program."