

Sports

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Panthers fend off Wilkes; host State on Friday

Dietz's fourth quarter heroics secure the No. 2 seed and a 35-34 victory

By Todd Forrest
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The Panthers are 9-1 and hosting the first round of the State playoffs for the first time since 2001 after surviving a relentless comeback attempt from Washington Wilkes on Senior Night.

With emotions running high, especially late in the game, juniors Joseph Mancuso and Sam Gilbert played an integral role in the win. However, when it came down to crunch time, it was the seniors that saved the day.

Senior Brett Dietz led the team with 12 solo tackles and 6 assists but did most of his damage by blocking a would-be extra point - keeping Union on top at 35-34.

"He got around the end and it was just a great effort on his part," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "It seems like the bigger the moment or the bigger the challenge, the harder our kids play."

Later in the fourth quarter, he recovered a fumble forced by fellow senior Luke Chatham at the Panthers' 11-yard line with 1:03 to play.

Dietz would also finish with two catches for 50 yards.

Washington Wilkes fumbled twice in the contest with senior Nic Sparks pouncing on the loose football after senior Reid Watson stripped the ball loose.

Senior Chase Barnett also finished with a team-high 12 tackles and 6 assists while emerging as one of Union's go-to guys on offense.

The power back carried 15 times for 74 yards and a score, while reeling in a 6-yard touchdown reception in the final minutes of the first quarter.

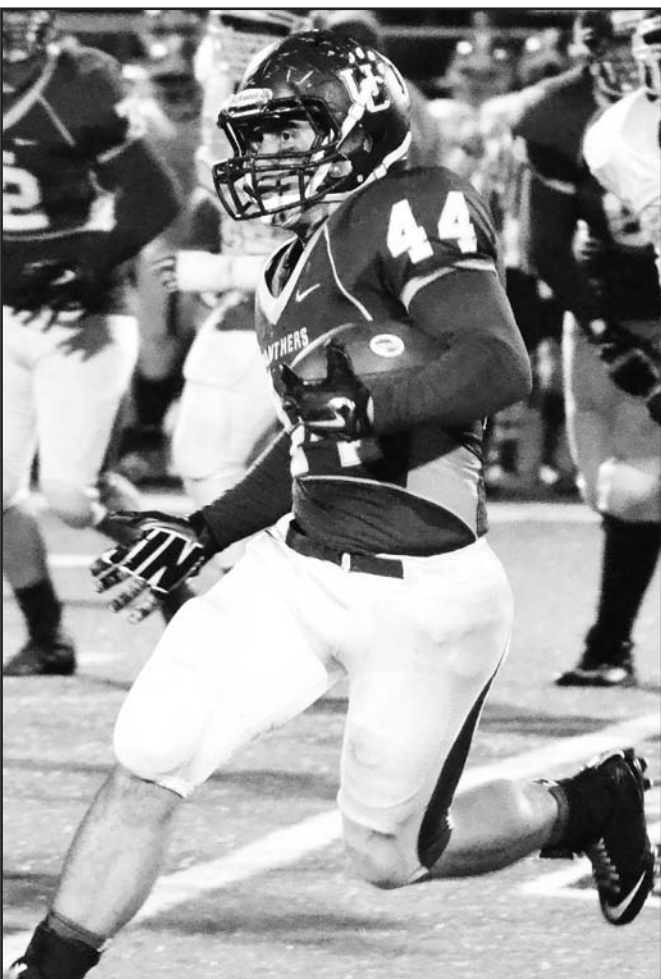
The dynamic duo of senior wide outs Jacob Rogers and Robert Prunier combined for some impressive numbers.

Rogers caught three passes for 106 yards and 2 scores. Prunier finished with 5 grabs for 62 yards.

Gilbert recorded a game-high 6 catches for 101 yards.

Mancuso, also a junior, threw for 327 yards and 4 touchdowns during a 17-for-28 performance.

With Union leading 35-21 entering the fourth, Wilkes



Chase Barnett had another big game toting the rock as Union survived Washington Wilkes on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

made it a one score game with a quarterback keeper from the 3-yard line with just over 9 minutes to play.

"Their quarterback is a pretty good player and he just took over," Coach Allison said.

Later in the fourth, the Tigers got another six points off a 13-yard touchdown pass. On the point after attempt, Dietz came around the left end with arms extended and got a fingertip on the kick, causing it to come up short.

With a 35-34 lead and 2:45 left on the clock, the Panthers ran for two yards but fired incomplete passes on second and third down. On fourth down, Union was forced to punt after burning just 35 seconds on the clock.

"They were blitzing us up front and we only got two yards on first down," Coach Allison said. "On second down we had a good call but they made a great play to deflect the pass. On third down they made another good play to force a punt."

Prunier got off a booming punt to the 10-yard line but

Wilkes' returner was able to get free down the far sideline. All that stood between the Tigers and a go-ahead touchdown was Prunier, and Union's senior punter stopped the return, just inside Panther territory.

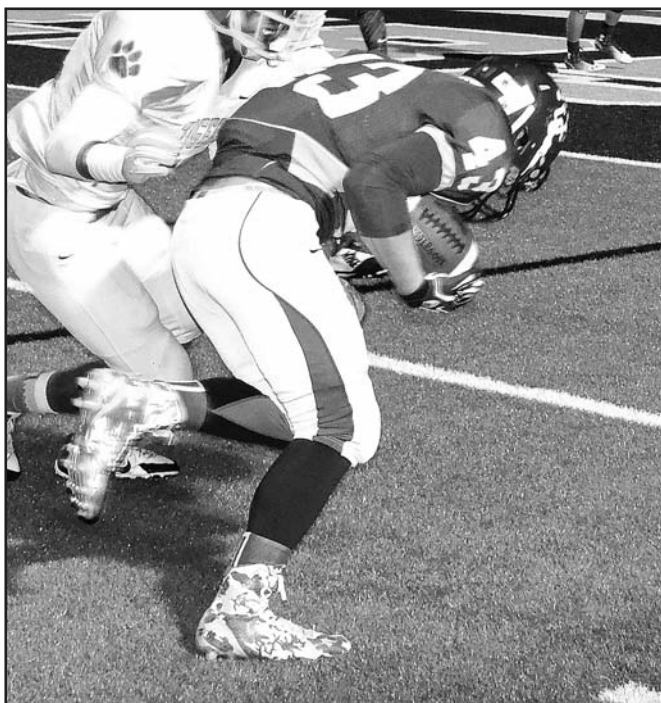
"We had the punt covered but they blocked us in the back and it didn't get called," Coach Allison said. "We had the chance to make the play but they hit one of our kids in the back, and he hit another kid and that knocked both of them down."

On 2nd-and-10 from Union's 47-yard line, Wilkes completed an 8-yard pass that was followed by a 16-yard scamper to the 23-yard line.

On first down, the pass fell incomplete but on second down, a short completion went for a good chunk of yardage until Chatham forced the fumble at the 11.

Dietz quickly scooped up the loose football to secure the ninth win of the season.

"Their player rolled over our guy but his knee never touched, so it was definitely a fumble," said Dietz, who had the best view of anyone on



Robert Prunier with a reception to set up a score. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior safety Andrew Brown with a tackle. Photo/Todd Forrest

the play.

As a result of the fumble call, tempers flared on the Washington-Wilkes sideline.

As Union was trying to take a knee in the victory formation, Wilkes was flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct. And when the final buzzer sounded, the Tigers' coach made a beeline in the direction of Union's fieldhouse to confront the officials. As a result both sidelines cleared, bringing the two teams face to face. Luckily the coaches, administrators, and law enforcement separated both squads without further incident.

The extra-curricular activities that followed took the focus off what was a spectacular game between two teams fighting for home field advantage in the first round of State. During the first half, the

teams traded blows with a Wilkes fumble allowing Union to maintain its 21-14 lead at the break.

Both squads traded punts to open the game but it was Union's passing attack that drew first blood on its second series of the night.

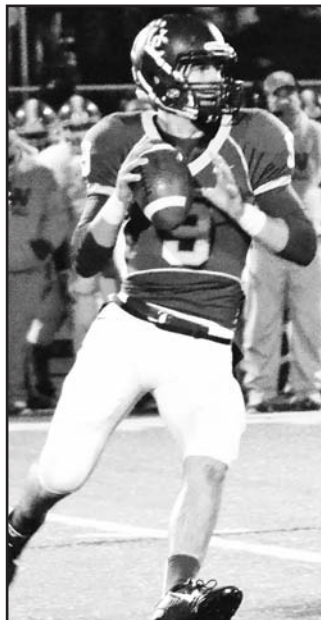
On 2nd-and-2, Mancuso hit Rogers over the middle and the senior receiver outran the Wilkes secondary for a 62-yard catch and run that gave Union an early 7-0 lead.

Following another Wilkes punt, the Tigers proved why they've had the No. 1 defense in 8-AA for three-straight seasons.

With Union's offense starting from its own 15, sophomore running back Bo Lynch put the ball on the turf and a Wilkes defender snatched it up and went untouched into the



Brett Dietz



Joseph Mancuso

endzone. Tied at 7-7, the Panthers went on a 9-play drive that ended Mancuso dumping it off to Reid Watson who went 6 yards to paydirt in the final seconds of the first quarter.

The Tigers' ensuing drive opened at their own 40 and ended with a 1-yard score to knot things up at 14-14.

Union took over at its 35 and faced with a 2nd-and-12, Mancuso hit Prunier for 8 yards, and on the next play, 23 yards. A pair of runs by Lynch went for 9 yards each and on first down, Mancuso hooked up with Gilbert on an 18-yard touchdown pass.

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Cross Country: Union County men place sixth at State; ladies 10th

Defending champ Garrison gives it a go despite injury, finishes 16th

By Todd Forrest
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Carrollton - The Union County Cross Country squads returned to the State Championship Meet over the weekend, and despite not picking up another State Championship, both teams still had plenty of reasons to hold its heads high.

The Region 8-AA Champion Union County men hit the course at high noon and finished in 6th place, the best team finish since 2000 when they placed fifth.

"The guys continued to surprise me all season-long at the way they just kept getting better and better," Union County Head Cross Country Coach Jackie Hughes said.

Freshman Lance Underwood led the Panthers with a 20th place finish in 18:29. He was also the second highest freshman finisher at the meet with Jack Douglas of Pace Academy coming in fifth.

Junior Cristian Garcia placed 48th in 19:26, junior Jacob Kelley was 53rd at 19:35, Timothy Murphy came in 55th at 19:39, sophomore Adam Bachman finished 65th in 19:55, senior Aaron Stafford was 81st at 20:24, sophomore Jakob Brown checked in 119th with a time of 21:18.

The Panthers finished the race with 235 points. Placing ahead of 6th place Union was State Champ Wesleyan at 44 points, runner up Pace Academy with 56 points, third place Bleckley County with 90 points, fourth place Lovett with 99 points, and fifth place Holy Innocents at 145 points.

Behind Union was seventh place Darlington with 238, eighth place Vidalia with



Lance Underwood (left) and Cristian Garcia (front right) early in the State meet. Photo/Todd Forrest

273, ninth place Lamar County with 306, and 10th place Berrien at 326 points.

"Our initial goal was top 10," Coach Hughes said. "But as the season progressed we changed our goal to earning one of the podium spots, which is first through fourth. So we came pretty darn close."

As for the Region Champion Lady Panthers, junior Emma Garrison was unable to win her third State Championship and placed 16th.

The two-time State Champion has battled shin splints for most of the season and recently missed two weeks

of action.

"Missing those two weeks really hurt her endurance," Coach Hughes said. "She had to take two full weeks off where she wasn't allowed to run at all. She is a tough competitor and it's difficult for her to not win, but I'm proud of her effort. She got out there and gave it her best."

Despite not winning a State title, the Lady Panthers improved over last year with a 10th place finish.

In 2013, the Lady Panthers were 11th.

Garrison checked in with a time of 21:53 and defending



The Lady Panthers at the starting line. Photo/Todd Forrest

8-AA Region Champ Julia Lindsey placed 44th at 23:02.

Junior Anna Danek was 65th at 24:27, junior Stephanie Busse came in 72nd at 24:44, senior Marissa Spaulding was 85th at 25:43, sophomore Cora Bauman placed 105th at 26:37, and junior Raphaela Aleman was 119th at 27:21.

Ahead of 10th place Union, who finished with 272 points was State Champ Lovett with 33 points, runner up Wesleyan had 75 points, third place went to Darlington with 76 points, Holy Innocents was fourth with 117. Pace Academy took home fifth with 160 points, Lamar County was sixth with 187 points, seventh place went to St. Vincents Academy with 220 points, eighth place was Model at 254 points, and ninth place Bleckley County at 269.

Coach Hughes will lose two ladies and one guy to graduation so she expects to be back in the mix next year.

"It's difficult to say be-



Stephanie Busse



Aaron Stafford



Emma Garrison

cause in a sport like running, it's tough to predict what's going to happen," Coach Hughes said. "But if we stay together, and everyone stays healthy, we have a good chance at competing at Region and State with both teams."

Finally, Coach Hughes would like to thank all of the

support from the parents and the community that her team received during the season. She also wanted to thank all the sponsors.

She wants to send out a special thank you to United Community Bank for their donations during the season.