

Sports

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Panthers win ninth-straight, 49-17 over Banks County

Union visits Oglethorpe County Friday looking for program-record 10th straight victory

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Union County avoided the proverbial letdown game and picked up its ninth consecutive victory in convincing fashion, 49-17 over Banks County (3-4, 2-2) while clinching a state playoff berth in the process.

The win ties the program record of nine-straight wins, set during the first nine games of the 2001 season -- Head Coach Brian Allison's sixth season at UCHS. In fact, their last loss came over a year ago at North Hall on Oct. 13, 2017.

"It's something I never thought I would accomplish and it's never even crossed my mind that I'd be coaching this long," Coach Allison said after the game. "To win that many games you need some good players and a good coaching staff and we're blessed to have both. It's been an honor."

Coming into Friday night's showdown with Banks, Union County was fresh off a bye week that came on the heels of one of the biggest wins in recent history at Elbert County. The extra week off allowed the Panthers to bask in the spotlight of their 29-28 victory for a few extra days before getting back to work with the third place Leopards on deck.

Sporting a 2-1 record in Region 8-AA, second place was up for grabs when Banks County traveled to the mountains on Friday night. Upon arrival, they immediately found themselves in the crosshairs of a Union County team on a mission, with the Panthers successfully going for the jugular early and often in the 32-point victory.

In the midst of a winning streak that spans nearly an entire calendar year, senior center Coleson Daniel was asked what keeps the Panthers motivated and prevents them from becoming complacent during this current stretch of not-so-glamorous midseason matchups with teams like Banks, Oglethorpe and Social Circle.

"It's all about the mindset of this team," he said. "The nine-straight wins is great but like Coach Allison said today, we've got to keep pushing ourselves. We know what it takes to win games, we just have to put in the work."

And the Panthers showed up early to work last Friday night. Leading 21-0 after a quarter, Union was never threatened as the offense turned its first seven possessions into touchdowns.

As a matter of fact, the Panthers were rolling sevens all night as Pierson Allison completed his first seven passes to lead Union County to a 7-0 record.

The junior quarterback would finish with a career high six touchdowns, connecting on 17-of-25 passes for 260 yards, along with four touchdowns and no picks through the air. He added another 101 yards and two scores on the ground. His favorite target, junior receiver Sawyer Drake would catch six passes for 103 yards and a TD.

The Allison-Drake hookup led to the first Panther score of the evening, just 95 seconds into the game. With a first down at the Banks County 35, Drake got a step on the cornerback and ran under a well-placed deep ball down the far sideline for



(L-R) The Panthers take the field Friday night prior to the program's ninth straight victory, a 49-17 rout of Banks County. Senior Chayton Schafer drags a defender across the goal line during his 25-yard touchdown reception late in the first quarter. Photos/Todd Forrest



six points.

The defense forced a quick three-and-out, handing the ball back to Union at its own 43 following a Leopard punt. Facing a 4th-and-2 from midfield with a likely punt on the way, Banks breathed new life into the Panther offense with a costly offsides penalty.

Six plays later, Allison rolled right on 3rd-and-6 and found junior Kyle Morlock in the back corner of the end zone for a 14-yard scoring strike at the 6:31 mark of the first. The Brian Smith point-after gave Union a 14-0 lead before even reaching the halfway point of the opening frame.

Another Leopard three-and-out allowed the Panthers to set up shop from their own 39. From there, the offense would need seven plays and 61 yards to open up a 21-point advantage. Along the way, the offense converted a pair of lengthy third downs to keep the drive alive.

"Our inside blocking needs to improve from how we've been doing," Coach Allison said when asked about the run game struggles on first and second down, setting up too many third-and-long situations. "We've got some inexperienced guys up front that will get better."

On the third play of the series, a 7-yard play-action pass to Morlock moved the chains on 3rd-and-7. Later, while dealing with a 3rd-and-10, Banks County brought pressure from the outside but Pierson Allison scrambled away from the Will linebacker blitz for a 27-yard scamper.

On the very next play, Chayton Schafer took a tunnel screen to the house from 25 yards out -- opening up a 21-0 Union County lead with 1:25 left in the first.

"I feel like coming off the season we had last year (missed the playoffs for first time since 2012) we have something to prove and we're playing with a chip on our shoulder," Schafer said after the game. "We also have some records that we're aiming for and the team chemistry is at an all-time high. I've never played on a team with this much chemistry."

The Leopards would suffer its fourth straight three-and-out and the Panthers took over near midfield early in the second quarter.

Facing a 3rd-and-8 from the 50, Pierson Allison dumped it off Chad Buzzard and the senior running back drug a defender past the first down marker for a 14-yard pickup.

Two plays later, a screen to Drake resulted in 24 yards before he was pushed out of bounds inside the 20. On the ensuing play, Kyle Morlock found a soft spot in the middle of Banks County's soft Cover-3 zone, hauling in the short completion before shaking the initial tackler and going untouched into the end zone for his second touchdown of the half.

"We went up 28-0 in a hurry," Coach Allison said. "Coming in, our (offensive) plan was to play as fast as we could play and that's what we did."

The Leopards finally got on the board with a 14-play, 79-yard scoring drive. The drive was kept alive, however, by a fake punt on 4th-and-3 from their own 44-yard line. The special teams okie doke netted a gain of 33 yards via an 18-yard run and a 15-yard penalty tacked on the end.

On the verge of cracking the red zone for the first time, a Banks County penalty brought up a 3rd-and-16 but a 15-yard sweep put the Leopards in very manageable 4th-and-1, where they picked up 11 with an off-tackle handoff. Looking at first-and-goal from the three, Banks needed just two plays to punch it in the end zone and trim the deficit to 28-7 at the 3:44 mark of the second.

"Maybe there's a few (concerns) with our run defense but when you look at the stats, (Banks) had 166 rushing yards on 50 carries, which is barely 3 yards a carry and that's pretty good against an offense that's a complete 180 from what we do."

With the Leopards set to receive the second half kickoff, where they could potentially cut the Union County lead in half, the Panthers' final drive of the half took on some added importance.

Starting from the 30, a completion to Cayden Rich was good for 14 yards but a short run by Buzzard and an incompletion brought up another 3rd-and-long with just under three minutes left in the half -- plenty of time for Banks to do some damage before the intermission.

Playing it safe, Union County called a quarterback draw and Pierson Allison took it up the gut for a 54-yard touchdown run. Springing the run was a key block by right tackle Karson Garrett, picking up the blitzing Mike linebacker, who would have otherwise blown up the play in the backfield.

Storming through the

A-gap, the Leopard linebacker had a clear path to the Panther quarterback but Garrett was able to get a hand on him, knocking the defender off-balance just enough to allow Pierson Allison to side-step the pressure and break loose up the middle for his fifth touchdown of the half.

"Offensively, the biggest thing for me was the way we responded to (Banks County's) drive in the second quarter by scoring in four plays," Coach Allison said.

With 2:47 before half-time, Union County was in complete control at 35-7. On the final play before the break, the pass rush of senior Kyle Williams forced an errant throw that was intercepted by Schafer and returned inside the Banks County 15 before getting tripped-up at the 11.

The second half opened with a Banks County scoring drive that took 20 plays while burning 9 minutes and 55 seconds off the clock. Despite trailing by 28, the Leopard offense lacked any sense of urgency, and by the time they cut the Union County lead to 35-14, there was only 3:05 left in the third quarter.

With a four-touchdown lead and knowing Banks County's offense isn't setup to score quickly, Coach Allison wasn't overly concerned about allowing the touchdown.

"I don't think you're ever content with giving up a score," he said. "But when you're up 28 and you have an offense that's moving the ball as well as we were, I wasn't panicking over (a late Banks County rally)."

Once again, the Panthers answered a methodical Banks County drive with a quick-strike, three-play scoring drive of their own, set up by a 56-yard run by Buzzard.

Starting at the 27, an end-around shovel pass to Drake went for 13 before Buzzard took a handoff 56 yards, getting pushed out at the four. On the next play, the Leopard defensive end bit hard on the read-option fake to Buzzard and Pierson Allison kept it himself, waltzing into the end zone for his sixth touchdown of the game.

On the ensuing Banks County possession, a 4-yard loss on first down forced them to the air where Schafer picked off his second pass of the night. Faced with 3rd-and-11, senior cornerback Alec Scott battled the receiver for a jump-ball, deflecting the throw into the hands of a diving Schafer on the

final play of the third period.

"Several coaches have talked about how productive (Schafer) is and we know how productive he is," Coach Allison said. "He's a good player. He's smart, he's aggressive and he understands the game. Our most inconsistent game was probably at Monticello when he was out."

The fourth quarter opened at the Banks County 39, where Union County needed five plays to break open the floodgates at 49-14. This time, it was sophomore Jonah Daniel who got in on the action, taking the handoff up-the-middle for a 16-yard, icing-on-the-cake touchdown run.

The Panthers followed up a Banks County punt with their first punt of the contest -- breaking a string of seven-straight possessions with a touchdown.

"I thought our guys came off the bye week with some energy. I thought Brian Smith kicked the ball well and our special teams played well too," Coach Allison said. "We did have that goof on the fake punt and we could probably be a little more physical but overall I was happy (with the performance)."

The Leopards concluded the scoring with a 38-yard field goal with 34 seconds to play, turning a would-be 35-point loss into a 32-point loss.

After the win, Coach Allison talked about how the sport has evolved since 2001 and how that also forced him to change with the times to remain successful in today's game.

"The game has changed so much since (2001) but over

the last 10-12 years its changed something unbelievable. Banks County, they ran the Wing-T (offense) and that's what we used to run. (Back then) most teams ran an I-formation or Wing-T and they were running the football the majority of the time.

"Now teams have gone to a pass-happy, spread offense and as a result, defenses have had to change as well. Defenses have become faster and more multiple with different looks. It's just crazy how much the game has changed."

Up next is a trip to win-less Oglethorpe County, where Coach Allison is confident his Panthers are beyond the point of taking anyone lightly.

"I hope that going for the school record of 10-straight wins is enough to keep them fired up," he said. "We're also trying to get better each week because our goal is a region championship. But we know that we still have to keep ourselves in position for a region championship before we get to that final game."

According to Daniel, who has snapped the ball to Joe Mancuso, Cole Wright and now Pierson Allison, the Panthers prepare for everyone the same, whether its a top-five Rabun County team or a win-less Oglethorpe County.

"It doesn't matter who we're playing, it's the same thing at practice every week, we just have to keep working," Daniel added.

For stats from Union County's 49-17 win over Banks, see page 3B.

| Scoring Summary | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|---|--------------------|------|
| Quarter | Team | Description | UCHS | BCHS |
| First Quarter | UCHS | TD Sawyer Drake 35 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick) | 7 | 0 |
| | UCHS | TD Kyle Morlock 14 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick) | 14 | 0 |
| | UCHS | TD Chayton Schafer 25 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick) | 21 | 0 |
| Second Quarter | UCHS | TD Kyle Morlock 19 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick) | 28 | 0 |
| | UCHS | TD 2 Yd Run (Kick) | 28 | 7 |
| | UCHS | TD Pierson Allison 54 Yd Run (Brian Smith Kick) | 35 | 7 |
| | Third Quarter | UCHS | TD 2 Yd Run (Kick) | 35 |
| UCHS | | TD Pierson Allison 4 Yd Run (Brian Smith Kick) | 42 | 14 |
| Fourth Quarter | UCHS | TD Jonah Daniel 16 Yd Run (Brian Smith Kick) | 49 | 14 |
| | UCHS | FG 39 Yd | 49 | 17 |