

Sports

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Defense grounds ELCA, lifts Panthers into Sweet 16

Union County visits No. 6 Rockmart on Friday night in second round

By Todd Forrest
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Saturday's 24-17 victory over Eagles Landing Christian Academy (ELCA) delivered Union County a playoff victory in consecutive seasons for the first time in program history.

On a misty afternoon in Blairsville, the Panthers (8-3) and Chargers swapped early leads following 9 Union County points in the first 110 seconds. ELCA answered with 10-straight to seize a 10-9 edge in the second quarter, but Union County pushed ahead 17-10 at the break and 24-10 in the third before the Chargers' late touchdown tightened things up.

"Our offense did enough, but our defense won us that game," said Union County head coach Michael Perry, who becomes the only Panthers football coach with multiple playoff victories. "With the way things are in modern football, defenses don't get enough credit, but defense is what wins games. And our defense was flying around [on Saturday] and they are all a great group of guys."

ELCA had one final shot, taking over at its own 21 with 2:08 remaining in a 24-17 contest, but Union's defense sealed the win four plays later when Luke Stansell's fourth-and-1 pass short-hopped a diving TJ Lewis.

After the game, senior outside linebacker Kooper Ashcraft discussed the defense's mindset during ELCA's final series and locking down the victory for the offense.

"That's the way we want it," he said. "We're happy to get the win today, but it feels extra special to be on the field with a chance to win the game for your team."

Ashcraft awarded the Panthers their first defensive score of the season by way of a safety on ELCA's third play from scrimmage, blowing up a third-down screen pass in the endzone.

"We were in man coverage, and I saw the back swing out [for a screen], so I just ran to the play and made a tackle," Ashcraft said.

"I can't say enough about Kooper Ashcraft," Perry added. "That kid just brings it every single day and his safety was huge."



Kooper Ashcraft (4) and Tyler Parker (11) celebrate Union County's safety in the opening moments of Saturday's playoff win. Photo/Todd Forrest

Following the free kick, Union faced third-and-3 from the ELCA 21, where coach Michael Perry unveiled a new offensive wrinkle, shifting senior running back Braylen Rader to quarterback with 250-lb guard Kaden Combs flanking him as a blocking back. Rader took the shotgun snap and followed Combs for 13 yards, and on the next play, with Caiden Tanner back behind center, the senior QB slipped through a crease for an 8-yard score and a 9-0 advantage.

"That [package] was something new we had for [ELCA]," Perry said. "We knew they had a very good defensive line, and their box was really good."

Rader's day ended with 22 carries for 122 yards, putting the senior over 2,000 yards on the ground for his career. Tanner went 22 for 30 and 229 yards through the air. He rushed 19 times for 84 yards.

Later in the first, the Panthers' offense returned to the red zone following another ELCA three-and-out, but a fourth-and-5 sack halted the 11-play drive. ELCA answered with

a 64-yard touchdown run on the heels of Fenix Fenton's acrobatic sideline catch, turning a third-and-8 into fourth and inches. Moments later, the Chargers rolled the dice from their own 36, and senior back Brandon Hood broke through the line and found clear sailing to the endzone.

The teams swapped turnovers when Tanner fumbled at his own 38, and junior safety Braden Plott came down with Stansell's deep ball at the 5-yard line. But three plays later, ELCA returned the favor via an interception at the 19, placing the defense in a challenging predicament.

Nonetheless, the Panthers didn't flinch, and on third and four at the 13, junior linebacker Connor Schuknecht wrapped up Gavin Walker after a short gain, resulting in a Chargers' field goal and a 10-9 Union County deficit.

Later in the second quarter, Schuknecht and the defense came through again. With ELCA 30 yards from building a 17-9 margin, Schuknecht stood up Hood in the backfield on fourth and 4. However, the offense's

ensuing 18-play drive stalled inside the 10 when consecutive sacks handed possession back to the Chargers at the 21.

But following an ELCA punt with 1:27 in the half, the Panthers needed only two plays to regain a lead they wouldn't surrender.

Tanner scrambled for 11, drawing a facemask penalty on first down, then hit senior Jensen Goble down the seam for 20 yards and the score. Tanner and sophomore Cade Dockrey hooked up on the 2-point conversion, sending Union into the locker room up 17-10.

"[Tanner] kept saying 'the ball was soaked,' so i'm sure the wet weather was a factor in us putting it on the ground early on," Perry said. "But the one

thing I'll say about Caiden Tanner, he never hung his head and he's a very mature young man with a lot of composure."

As for Goble, the senior had 11 catches for 111 yards, putting him over 1,000 yards on the year.

ELCA advanced to mid-field early in the third, converting a fourth-and-1 from its 40, but three plays later, Schuknecht and senior Seth Rutan swallowed up Fenton on third and 12 on a short throw over the middle.

Later in the frame, Stansell's second interception proved extra costly, eventually leading to a Union County touchdown and a 24-10 score.

And the interception couldn't have come at a better time for the defense.

Sweet 16: Union County at No. 6 Rockmart



The Purple Swarm will face its toughest test of the year at Rockmart. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Panthers are seeking the program's first Elite Eight appearance when they visit Rockmart (9-2) on Friday night.

If Union County is going to punch its ticket to the Class AA quarterfinals, the defense must continue to bring its A-game.

"We have to stop the run," Perry said. "They run a lot of wheel routes and that's something we got hurt on [vs. ELCA]."

"Offensively, we have to be able to sustain drives," he continued. "Nobody has been able to put up a lot of points

on them. Fannin County scored 14 and that was the most they allowed in their region."

Speaking of Fannin, the Rebels provide one common opponent between Union and Rockmart. Both teams won handsily over the Rebels, with Union taking a 50-12 win in Blue Ridge, and the Yellow Jackets winning 48-14 in Rockmart.

However, Fannin managed to keep it close into the second half, trailing 20-14 in the third.

"Fannin did some good things against [Rockmart], they just weren't able to capitalize

With ELCA driving deep in plus-territory, Dockrey streaked in front of a Chargers' receiver at the 23, giving possession back to the offense near the 30.

From there, Union overcame an early holding penalty when Tanner found Tyler Grasty over the middle on third down for 19 yards. Dockrey added a catch and run for 37 more and Rader capped the 11-play drive with a 2-yard run.

Another holding penalty, this one in the fourth quarter, prevented Union from opening up a 31-10 advantage, bringing back Rader's would-be 20-yard touchdown run. The series stalled at the 12 when Tanner overshot Goble on fourth down.

ELCA responded by going 88 yards on 12 plays, headlined by a 36-yard completion to a wide-open Hood on third and 11.

Union County recovered the ensuing onside kick with 3:37 to play, but a three-and-out resulted in Zurriel Mancillas' punt and an ELCA fair catch at the 21 with 2:08 left.

Since giving up 55 at Providence, the Union County defense has turned things around behind Rutan's return from injury, allowing other members of the linebacking corp to return to their natural position.

"I think [the Providence loss] made us stronger as a unit," Ashcraft said. "Plus, getting guys like Seth back from injury makes things much easier. I'm back at my regular spot [at outside linebacker], where I'm reacting to the pass more and Seth is back in the middle."

Perry added, "[Defensive Coordinator Mark Wade] and the defensive staff have done a great job for us this year and did a great job containing some very good players on Saturday."

Stats: Dockrey 4 receptions, 56 yards; Rader 4 rec, 24 yds; Grasty 2 rec, 23 yds; Ethan McBride 1 rec, 15 yds, 2-2 PATs.



Junior Braden Plott's first-half interception at the 5-yard line kept ELCA off the board following a Union County fumble. Photo/Todd Forrest

Basketball: Panthers scrimmage at Gilmer, open at Rabun Tuesday

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Ellijay - Union County basketball's scrimmage contest ended with a split at Gilmer, with the Lady Panthers taking a double-digit victory in a game that saw the score reset after each quarter.

Union County took the first 15-11, won the second 20-14 and held a 12-10 edge during the third. The fourth ended in a 9-9 tie for a final tally of 56-44. Fourteen Lady Panthers scored in the scrimmage under first-year head coach Thomas Nelson, with no player reaching double figures.

Junior Ariel McCarter led the way with 9 points, sophomore Paula Robertson had 8 points and senior Lara Turner scored 7 points.

Eleven different players saw action in the first with senior Kamryn Mull knocking down a pair of 3s to finish the first quarter with 6 points. McCarter added a traditional 3-point play, junior Sloane Dyer hit a pair of free throws and junior Hope Taylor, who ended with 6 points, added a bucket.

Robertson and junior Aubrie Akins chipped in a first-quarter free throw.

McCarter did most of her damage during the second,



Senior Kamryn Mull drives to the basket during last Tuesday's scrimmage at Gilmer. Photo/Todd Forrest

drilling two 3s during Union's 20-point quarter. Junior Hensley Adams scored all of her 5 points in the frame, Robertson added 5 points before the break, Turner and Taylor had two each.

Turner scored 5 in the third; Robertson, Taylor and junior Katelyn Brown chipped in 2 points each; freshman Nomi Nelson split two free throws.

Brown added three in the fourth; freshman Ragan

McCarter recorded a bucket; freshman McKenna Hood and sophomore Mady Adams scored 2 points apiece.

Up next: Union County will visit Rabun County at 6 p.m. Tuesday. Friday's White County game is rescheduled for Dec. 1 due to football playoffs. The Lady Panthers will face Athens Christian at 10 a.m. Saturday in the Sandy's Spiel Tip-Off tournament at Chestatee.



Junior Jude Ellis scores on Gilmer's Jackson McVey during last week's scrimmage. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers 88, Gilmer 98 - Down three key players still participating in football, Union County had no answer on the defensive end for Gilmer and 7-foot junior Jackson McVey.

The Panthers, paced by juniors Jude Ellis, Houston Henry and Hayden Hughes, held a 19-18 edge after one, but Gilmer's 27-point second-quarter outburst plunged Union into a 45-34 halftime deficit.

A 3-point play and two

treys by Hughes early in the third moved Union within two at 47-45, but Gilmer closed out the period with a 26-16 stretch to take a 73-61 lead into the fourth.

The Bobcats built their largest lead at 98-81 in the final minutes before Union County closed with 7-straight courtesy of Ethan Hogsted and Hayden Price.

Ellis led the way for Union County with 22 points.



Coach Thomas Nelson

Hughes had 21, Henry scored 14 points and sophomore Vince Marvka added 10.

Freshman Ethan Hogsted had 10, sophomore Holden Payne scored 5 points. Brayden Hogsted and Price chipped in 3 points apiece.

McVey led all scorers with 32 points. JD Taylor poured in 29 for Gilmer.

Up next: The Panthers travel to Rabun County on Tuesday for a 7:30 p.m. tip-off. With the White County game postponed, the lone weekend action will be Saturday's 11:30 a.m. meeting with Putnam County at Chestatee's Sandy's Spiel tournament.

UCRD Football: Union Co. 1st and 6th grade finish as MAC runner-ups



Union County 1st grade players and cheerleaders at Saturday's Super Bowl at Lumpkin County.



Union County 6th grade players and cheerleaders at Saturday's Super Bowl at Lumpkin County.



Jakin Wright (2) and the Union County 1st grade battled Pickens and the elements to a 38-19 loss on Saturday morning in the MAC Super Bowl at Lumpkin County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Abel Bass (center) and the 6th grade defense gave Dawson County all it could handle in the MAC Super Bowl. However, the Panthers fell short, 14-6 on Saturday night in Dahlonega. Photo/Todd Forrest

Wrestling: No. 2 Union County hosts Fannin, White in Tuesday's home opener

CLASS 2A

PRESEASON RANKINGS

1. ROCKMART
2. UNION CO
3. VIDALIA
4. TOOMBS CO
5. BANKS CO
6. COOK CO
7. MODEL
8. PUTNAM CO
9. JORDAN
10. LANDMARK

ROCKMART

GEORGIA GRAPPLER.COM

Swim: UCHS, UCMS log top top-five team finishes at Tallulah Falls

UCHS

Veteran's Day Luau @ Tallulah Falls

<p>200 Medley Relay</p> <p>Girls A: 5th Boys A: 6th Girls B: 10th</p>	<p>100 Breaststroke</p> <p>Reese Jones: 6th Isabel Hoover: 7th</p>
<p>OVERALL</p> <p>5TH PLACE COMBINED</p> <p>3RD PLACE BOYS</p> <p>5TH PLACE GIRLS</p>	
<p>50 Freestyle</p> <p>Nicholas Nushtayev: 1st Andrew Nushtayev: 3rd Isabel Hoover: 7th Cole Orlando: 8th Sophia Licavoli: 9th</p>	<p>100 Backstroke</p> <p>Andrew Nushtayev: 1st Lily Helton: 3rd Wyatt Chandler: 9th Lilly Collins: 9th</p>
<p>100 Freestyle</p> <p>Nicholas Nushtayev: 2nd Lily Helton: 4th Cole Orlando: 7th</p>	<p>200 Freestyle</p> <p>Reese Jones: 2nd Wyatt Chandler: 4th</p>
<p>200 Free Relay</p> <p>Boys A: 3rd Girls A: 5th Girls B: 9th</p>	

Tallulah Falls - Andrew and Nicholas Nushtayev each picked up a gold medal at Saturday's Veteran's Day Luau.

Nicholas Nushtayev added a silver in the 100 Freestyle; Andrew collected bronze in the 50 Freestyle event.

Reese Jones finished as the 200 Freestyle runner-up; Lilly Helton placed fourth in the

100 Freestyle. Wyatt Chandler came in fourth in the 200 Freestyle.

In middle school action, Wyatt Yancey took home gold in the 50 Backstroke and the 100 Individual Medley.

Ian Lander was second in the 100 Freestyle; Henry Kazmierzak placed third in the 50 Breaststroke and 50 Freestyle.

John Tippens placed fourth in the 50 Freestyle and 100 Freestyle. Lander was fifth in the 50 Breaststroke; Ella Fisk placed fifth in the 100 Freestyle; Chloe Iler was fifth in the 50 Backstroke.

The UCMS boys were third overall, the girls came in sixth for a combined fourth-place finish.

Union County wrestling returns home on Tuesday after opening the season with an undefeated showing at Eastside High School's Trevor Bailey Duals over the weekend. The Panthers defeated Eastside, Locust Grove and Class AAA's 2nd-ranked Franklin County. Union County returns four top-three individual finishers from last year's squad that ended up fifth in Class AA. Photo/Todd Forrest