

Sports

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Time runs out on Panthers' upset bid at Heard County

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Franklin - The Panthers (4-6) outscored Heard County 21-3 over the final 25:01, but it wasn't enough as the Braves converted a pair of late third downs to secure a 31-28 victory.

"It was a great effort by our guys," Union County head coach Brian Allison said. "[Heard] came out and hit us with a couple of big plays to [take a 28-7 lead], but we made some adjustments in coverage and did a nice job against their run game. Our coaches came in with a great offensive and defensive game plan, and overall, I think it was a solid performance in all three phases of the game."

With 4:55 remaining, Carson Walker raced around the right edge for a 5-yard touchdown run. Moments later, Jonah Daniel added 2-points, bringing Union County within a field goal at 31-28. Unfortunately, the Panthers' offense would not receive another opportunity as Heard County drained the final five minutes, picking up a pair of first downs and adding a third via a Union penalty.

However, a dramatic finish seemed out of the question at the midway point of the second quarter after the Braves caught Union off guard by going to the air and connecting over the middle on a 24-yard scoring strike, followed by a screen pass that went 78 yards for another score, extending Heard County's margin to 28-7.

On the ensuing Union County possession, backup quarterback Kaston Hemphill -- starting in place of the injured Logan Helcher -- orchestrated a 79-yard scoring drive to keep hope alive at 28-14. An early pass interference aided the drive, then senior Blake Davis, who caught his first career pass four plays earlier, hauled in an 18-yard reception on third and 11.

Later, Daniel picked up three first downs to set up first and goal from the 7 -- the first coming via a 13-yard run on third and 12. After a 3-yard carry on third and short, Daniel gained 14 on a second-and-10 screen pass.

"Jonah is a difference maker when he's on the field and healthy," Allison said about his senior running back. "He played one half against Fannin, then we thought he was back healthy



Noah Underwood's seven receptions were a career-high and the second most by a Union receiver in the playoffs since 2015. Photo/Todd Forrest

against Rabun Gap but he got banged up again. He's a difference maker for sure."

On second and goal from the five, Hemphill dumped off a short underneath pass to Noah Underwood, who bounced off a would-be tackler on the one and powered his way into the endzone with 61 seconds to play before halftime.

"He was everywhere, making plays all over the place on both sides of the ball," Allison said regarding Underwood's performance. "He worked hard in the off-season and is a great football player, but he's an even better person - we'll certainly miss him."

Heard County refused to settle for a 28-14 halftime advantage and quickly advanced to midfield with a 17-yard run and a 9-yard completion. However, their aggressiveness backfired when Hemphill picked off a second-down pass and returned it to the Braves' 32-yard line.

With 22 seconds on the clock, Hemphill went back to Underwood for a 24-yard catch-and-run, setting up first and goal from the eight. That's when the Panthers reached into their back of tricks and Walker found line-

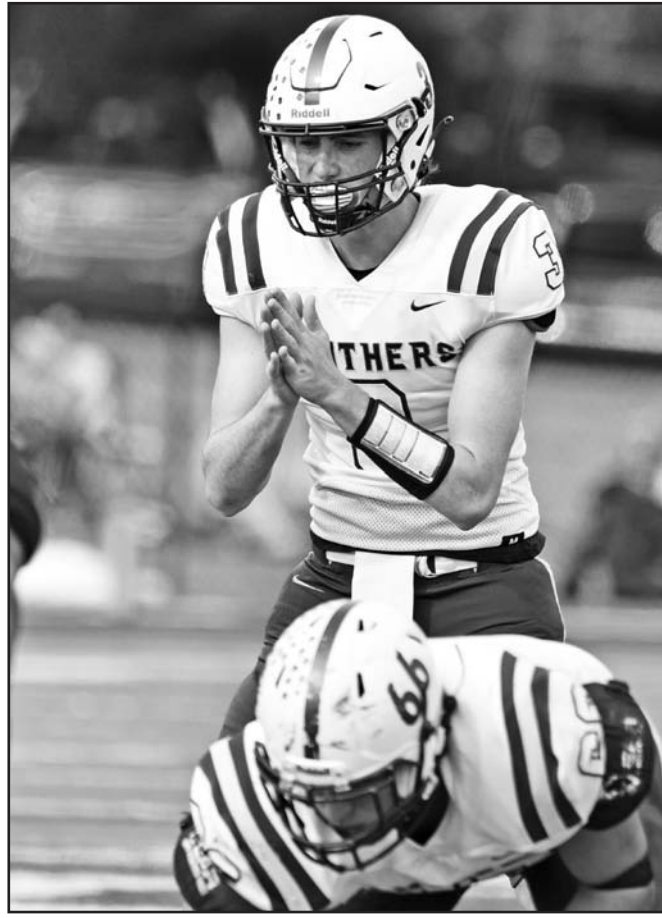
backer Hunter Young for a 7-yard gain to the one on a halfback pass. But the play would not stand as Union was flagged for an ineligible receiver.

Moved back to the 13 with 1 second left, the Panthers settled for a 30-yard field goal from Mason McCombs to trim the deficit to 28-17 at the half.

According to Allison, if not for the penalty on the pass to Young, his mind was already made up to go for 6 points from one yard out with one second left. However, the 5-yard penalty left the field goal as the only option.

"We felt pretty good in that situation and we got the 2-point conversion later in the game, so yeah, we would've went for [the touchdown]."

The two squads would trade punts to begin the second half, and Union took over at midfield with 6:48 left in the third. A 14-yard screen to Daniel on first down immediately had the Panthers on the edge of field goal range, but a second-down loss and a short gain on third down forced Union into a fourth and 4, where Hemphill hit senior JJ Littles for 6 yards and a first down. A 3-yard run by Walker and a 9-yard completion to Underwood gave



Senior quarterback Kaston Hemphill saved his best for last, recording his first 200-yard passing game in the State playoffs. Photo/Todd Forrest

the Panthers a first down at the 12, but consecutive negative plays forced Union into another field-goal situation. McCombs' kick from 40 yards split the uprights to make it a one-possession game at 28-20 with 56 seconds remaining in the third.

Heard answered with completions of 23 and 38 yards to move inside the Union 15 to begin the fourth quarter but two holding penalties and a tenacious defensive stand kept the Braves out of the endzone, limiting them to a field goal with 7:31 to play.

Starting from their own 20 and trailing by 11, the Panthers dodged a bullet when a Heard interception return was fumbled and recovered by Union at the 35. Three plays later, Hemphill converted a third and 2 when he hooked up with Underwood for 18 yards. Hemphill found Keyton Chitwood downfield on the very next play, setting up first and goal at the seven. On second down from the five, a stretch handoff to Walker capped the drive at the 4:55 mark.

Heard jumped offside on the 2-point try, moving Union inside the two, where Daniel blasted his way across the goal line behind the left-side of the

offensive line.

A well-placed pooch kick by McCombs forced the Braves to begin the final drive from their own 14, and following a holding penalty, Heard County was backed up to the six. Two plays later, the Braves fumbled the second-down snap but managed to jump on the loose ball at the 14, setting up third and 10.

Heard went to the air and connected on a comeback route at the marker for a first down. Three plays later, the Panthers corralled the ball carrier for a 3-yard loss, but Union was called for a questionable late hit while pushing the running back out of bounds.

With Union County out of timeouts and 1:22 left, the Braves moved the chains once again on third and short, putting the Panthers away for good.

Hemphill finished with a career-best 210 passing yards and Daniel ended up with 111 total yards (66 yards rushing and 45 yards receiving), making him the first Panthers' running back to record three 100-yard State playoff games.

"Kaston did a great job, he had a great demeanor going in and was ready to roll," Allison said. "He executed the offensive

game plan that our coaches put in place and we were able to keep [Heard] off balance."

Underwood had a career-high seven catches for 74 yards; Chitwood has two grabs for 58 yards. Walker scored two rushing touchdowns.

In other news, Heard County's 4-star senior outside linebacker Chief Borders cemented his commitment to the University of Florida earlier in the week. In a video posted to social media on Thanksgiving, the 6-foot-5, 235-pound defender told Gators head coach Dan Mullen via video chat, his commitment was solid, and he was shutting down his recruitment.

Heard County offensive lineman Drew Cornelius (No. 53) announced earlier in the season that he was Tampa-bound with a commitment to South Florida. The 6-5, 271-pounder chose the Bulls over Air Force, Army and others.

Had Union County pulled off the upset, the Panthers would have traveled to Fannin County for round two thanks to the Rebels' 28-21 upset of Pace Academy.

"I'm proud of what our guys did over the course of the season through all the chaos," Allison said. "We played three region champions, one state runner-up (Rabun Gap in North Carolina private). Heard was a State champ two years ago and we beat two 4A schools and one 3A school. Our schedule was tougher than its been but our guys persevered and responded really well."

In other 8-AA games, Rabun County cruised to a 35-7 victory over Haralson County after jumping out to a 28-0 advantage at the break. Despite ending regulation tied at 7-7, Bremen escaped Elbert County with a 28-21 overtime victory.

Meanwhile, a COVID-19 outbreak forced Banks County to forfeit its trip to top-seeded Callaway.

Locally, White County fell in a 48-35 shootout at Rockmart. North Hall edged North Murray 36-28. Commerce took down Manchester 52-20 and Dawson County outlasted Adairsville 45-31.

Rome overwhelmed Habersham Central 35-14, Jefferson dismantled Mt. Zion 65-0 and Lee Shaw's playoff debut with Lakeview came to an abrupt end as the Lions fell 28-7 at North Cobb Christian.



Senior running back Jonah Daniel (24) visits the endzone one final time, converting a late 2-point try in Union County's near-comeback at Heard County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Mason McCombs kept Union County in the game with a pair of field goals - a 30-yarder to trim the deficit to 11 at halftime and a 40-yarder to pull within eight during the third quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior receiver Blake Davis proved clutch on Union's second scoring drive, coming up with two important grabs, including an 18-yard catch between three defenders on third and 11. Photo/Todd Forrest