

Sports

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No. 5 Washington Wilkes slams the door with 21 unanswered

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Washington - The Union County Panthers (2-2) went on the road to an extremely hostile environment last Friday and held their own for more than three quarters.

But in the fourth quarter, the size and depth of fifth ranked Washington Wilkes proved too much as the Tigers pulled away in a 41-10 Region 8-AA victory.

"We could have played a little bit harder, and a little bit better, but last year against them, I don't think we had two first downs," Union Head Coach Brian Allison said.

The Panthers took an early lead of 3-0, following a 21-yard field goal by senior T.J. Smith.

The score came after both offenses sputtered on their opening drives and the teams exchanged punts.

Union took over at their own 45-yard line with 9:53 left in the first quarter. A penalty put Union in a 2nd-and-15 situation but sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso hit junior Robert Prunier for a 49-yard pickup.

A sack would force Union into a field goal situation but Smith split the uprights and the Panthers led 3-0 with 7:53 to play.

The Panther defense refused to budge and forced another three-and-out and a punt by the Tigers.

Junior quarterback Ralston Drake carried for 7 yards on first down, but was picked off at the Tiger 35-yard line.

"We called a deep ball thinking they would come up on the quick screen but they stayed back," Allison said.

Washington-Wilkes took advantage of the pick and marched 74 yards in just over two minutes to take a 7-3 lead.

The Panthers gift-wrapped the Tigers' second score when a botched handoff put the ball on the ground and Washington-Wilkes pounced on the fumble at the Union 9-yard line.

Two plays later, the Tigers punched it in from six yards out for a 13-3 lead at the 3:20 mark of the first.

Union took over at the 27-yard line where the Panther passing attack continued to move the ball on a highly-touted Washington-Wilkes defense.

Mancuso found sophomore Sam Gilbert for 26 yards, Mancuso then dumped it off to sophomore running back Nick Whittle, who rumbled 19 yards to the Tiger 23-yard line.

Once again the drive stalled after three straight incompletions, bringing Smith on to attempt a 40-yard field goal.

Smith's second attempt was blocked by a Tiger defender scooped up the blocked kick and carried it into his own endzone. When he picked up the ball he was quickly tackled by sophomore Lance Rich for a safety.

Or so the Panthers faithful thought. The officials claimed that



Junior Brett Dietz blows up a screen pass. Photo/Todd Forrest

the blocked field goal was a dead ball and awarded the ball to Washington-Wilkes at the 20.

As the first quarter came to a close, the Tigers were on the move once again. An 11-play, 80-yard drive put Washington-Wilkes in control at 20-3 with 9:52 left in the half.

The Panther offense would benefit from a solid kick return by Whittle, allowing Mancuso to set up shop from his own 39-yard line.

A false start brought up a 3rd-and-15 from the 34 but the Mancuso to Prunier connection was still in service when the sophomore quarterback stepped up in the pocket, and hit the junior receiver for a 66-yard touchdown.

After the completion, the Tigers were flagged for roughing the passer, as well as unsportsmanlike conduct when the defender had a few choice words for Mancuso after his late hit.

"I thought Joe (Mancuso) did a decent job," Allison said. "He held onto the ball a little too long and he was getting pressured quicker than he's ever seen it come, but you can see what Joe and Ralston (Drake) are both capable of."

Jake Walts' extra point was good, cutting Washington-Wilkes' lead in half at 20-10 with 9:08 to play in the half.

The penalty allowed Union to kickoff from midfield and Smith split the uprights for a touchback.

The Panther defense quickly forced the Tigers into a 3rd-and-7 but a quarterback scramble went for 24-yards and a first down. The Tigers went back to the ground game and gashed the Panthers for 26 yards. On the ensuing play, Washington-Wilkes struck for a 27-yard touchdown throw, making it a 27-10 game with 6:30 remaining in the second quarter.

The Panther offense converted on 3rd-and-inches but another sack put Union behind the chains. A false start crippled the offense even more and on 4th-and-28 the Panthers punted from their own endzone.

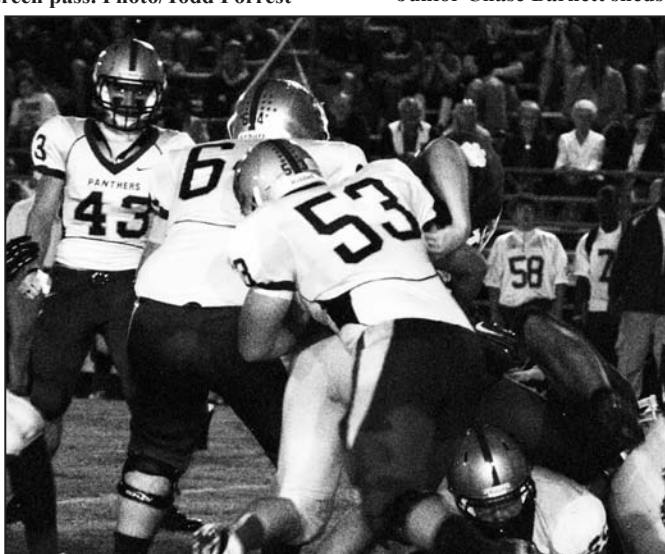
Prunier's punt gave the defense a little breathing room as the Tigers took over at their own 42.



Junior Chase Barnett sheds a blocker. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Joseph Mancuso



Brett Dobbins leads a swarm of Panther defenders. Photo/Todd Forrest

Washington-Wilkes moved the ball to the Union 11-yard line but the bend-but-don't-break defense did its job and forced an incompleteness on fourth down.

With 1:16 to play in the half, Drake carried for 7 yards before Union took a knee and went into the intermission trailing 27-10.

"We were outmanned across the front lines," Allison said. "They probably averaged 270-280 (pounds) and our defensive line, including Luther (Jones), maybe averages 200 pounds. So we got pushed around a little bit and their running back made us look silly at times, but he's quick, he's a good runner, and they've got a good football team."

The third quarter went by quickly and quietly, unlike the fourth quarter.

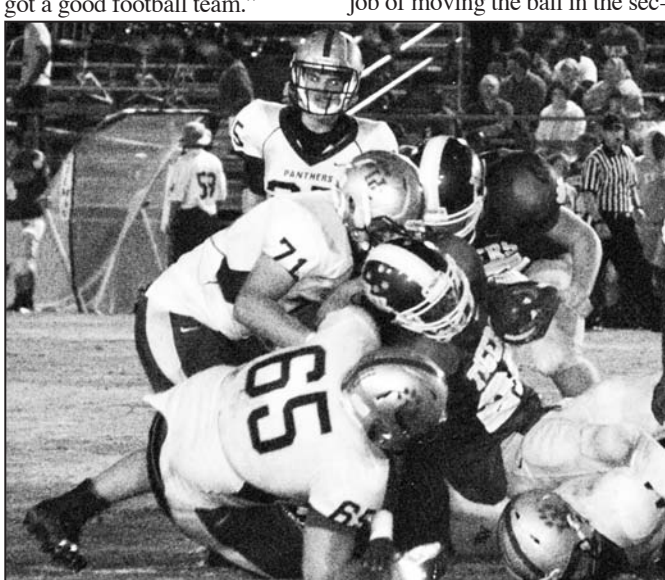
The Panthers opened the second half with junior Brett Dietz blowing up a screen pass for a 7-yard loss, resulting in a Tiger punt.

Union managed a first down thanks to a roughing the kicker but eventually punted again.

Prunier pinned the Tigers at the 2-yard line where Washington-Wilkes managed one first down before punting.

The fourth quarter began with Union in a 3rd-and-23 at their own 16-yard line.

"We didn't do a very good job of moving the ball in the sec-



Luther Jones and Reid Watson with a tackle. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Ralston Drake

ond half," Allison said. "We only had 20 plays in the second half." Drake carried for 15 yards, bringing Prunier on for another punt.

The Tigers took over at their own 44 with 11:07 to play and eventually found the endzone on a 29-yard pass with 9:18 to play.

The Panthers went three-and-out and punted with 8:08 remaining and Washington-Wilkes added their final score on a 10-yard carry with 5:46 to play.

"Defensively, I just don't feel like we are where we need to be," Allison said. "We missed too many tackles. Coming into this season we had eight new players on defense and it's just a baptism by fire. But each week we are learning"

As the Tigers' lead grew the verbal assault upon the Panther players from Washington-Wilkes' fans became downright ruthless, and exceeded the boundaries of heckling. Profanity, degrading remarks, and calls for injuring Panther players rained down upon the Union defense.

With the officials refusing to take a stand, all Union could do was put the offense on the field and give the defense some time to cool off.

"I think overall we battled that environment pretty well," Allison said. "That experience in a pretty hostile environment, was an environment that most of these guys have never been in. It got rowdy and they had some fans who were getting on our kids, but

Junior Jacob Rogers

I thought we handled it okay and didn't back down one bit." A 28-yard pass to junior Jacob Rogers put Union into Tiger territory before Union was eventually stopped on fourth down, burning more than two-and-a-half minutes off the clock.

Chase Barnett finished with 15 tackles and Rich had seven from the linebacker positions. Chase Stancil had 10 stops and Andrew Brown had nine.

Dietz had five tackles with one for a loss, Mekiah Martin had eight, Jonathan Floyd had eight, Luther Jones five, and Reid Watson four.

Union will now return home for the first time since the season opener against Towns County on Aug. 30th, as they face Oglethorpe County, who lost 26-20 to Riverside last week.

"It'll be good to be back home and not be on the road like we have for three of the last four weeks," Allison said. "I think (Oglethorpe) is a team that we match up with a little bit better than we did against Washington-Wilkes."

Last year, Union traveled to Lexington and held off the Patriots 21-14. This Friday, Union goes for its first Region win at 7:30 p.m. It's a near-must-win game for Union's playoff hopes, as a 0-2 Region start would strike a devastating blow to the Panthers, who must still face Jefferson, Greene County, Rabun County, and an improved Riverside team.

For offensive stats, see Page 13A.

Lady Panthers open 8-AA Region Tourney at home on Tuesday

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The 8-AA Region playoffs open on Tuesday in Blairsville as the Lady Panthers host Washington-Wilkes with a State playoff spot on the line.

Union County must take care of the Lady Tigers in a best-of-three series to advance to their fifth straight State Tournament.

Less than two weeks ago, Union took care of Washington-Wilkes, easily sweeping a double header from the visiting Tigers. But with playoff implications riding on this matchup, Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart knows that you can throw records and regular season results out the window.

"Washington-Wilkes is a pretty good hitting team," Coach Stewart said. "They finished in the Sweet 16 last year so they know what it takes to win in the post season, so we need to come ready to play in every single game from here on out."

Last week Union was in action for three games, taking a Region victory on the road at Rabun, while dropping non-Region contests at Lumpkin County and at North Murray.

The Lady Panthers managed just one hit in a 2-1 loss at North Murray. However, Union still led 1-0 entering the sixth but the Lady Mountaineers



Coach Jennifer Cagle and sophomore Karley Nix. Photo/Todd Forrest

Crystal Busbee went the distance for Union, allowing 5 hits and 2 earned runs.

Union got its lone run in the second when Hallye King and Kendra Tanner walked. Kelsey Nix reached on an error and Karley Nix brought in the go-ahead run with a fielder's choice.

"We had a long talk after the North Murray game and we have to remain focused on the post season and Washington Wilkes first and then the rest of the Region Tournament," Coach Stewart said. "We just have to do a better job offensively and executing when we do have runners on base."

The Lady Panthers rounded out their Region schedule on Tuesday when they picked up a 6-1 victory at Rabun County.

Union took a 5-0 lead after two innings and never looked back.

Courtney Busbee led the charge with 4 RBIs and Laken Chambers picked up the win, striking out eight and yielding 7 hits.

Crystal Busbee walked to lead off the game and Courtney Busbee reached on an error. King brought in Crystal Busbee with a sacrifice fly for a quick Union lead.

Chambers followed with a two-out single and Courtney Busbee later scored on a passed ball, making it 2-0 after an inning.

The second opened with



Crystal Busbee

Kelsey Nix reaching on an error, Maddie Garrett and Madison Rich walked before Courtney Busbee cleared the bases with a base hit and a little help from a Rabun throwing error.

Union's sixth and final run came in the sixth when Crystal Busbee walked, Rich reached on an error, and Courtney Busbee singled home her sister Crystal.

"I think the morale of the team is a little down but we will find out how resilient they are Tuesday," Coach Stewart said. "The game is at home and we usually do well on our home field. We had a good meeting after the game and the leadership from the seniors and juniors on the team was great. They realize our season could come to an end quick if we



Laken Chambers leads in RBIs and average. Photo/Todd Forrest

don't get it together."

Even against Rabun we didn't hit very well. We are still playing good defense and our pitching is keeping us in the game. Chambers who is batting .347 and leading the team in RBIs sat out against Lumpkin and North Murray because of the number of games and pitching JV. Her bat in the lineup is important for us to score runs.

On Monday, Union fell 2-0 at Lumpkin despite six strong innings from Crystal Busbee.

The Lady Panthers out-hit the Lady Indians 6-5 but couldn't push across any runs. Courtney Busbee had two hits, including a double.

Rich added a double, Tanner had two hits, and Crys-

tal Busbee had a base hit. Now with the Region Tournament on deck, Union must regroup quickly.

Unlike last year, the Lady Panthers won't have a bye and Coach Stewart believes the Washington-Wilkes games will provide a chance for Union to find its groove for the Semi-Finals.

"We always strive to be undefeated in the Region and two of the three losses were one-run games and could've gone either way," Coach Stewart said. "I think we have a shot at the Region Championship even as the No. 3 seed going in. I'm thinking that playing these games against Washington Wilkes will give us an advantage rather than going an entire week with a bye."