

Sports

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Rabun survives shootout thanks to late defensive stands

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

In a game where both offenses were scoring at will, it was the Rabun County defense that provided the visitors with two critical stops in the second half, allowing the Wildcats to take a two touchdown victory, 45-31.

In the first half it appeared as if the offenses were feeling out the opposing defenses before stomping on the accelerator in the final 24 minutes.

"I thought that entire game may (turn into a shootout) because both offenses are pretty good," Panthers Head Coach Brian Allison said. "Rabun has a potential SEC player on their team and I knew he would be hard to stop, but I never envisioned them going right at the middle of our defense the way they did."

A late field goal gave Rabun a 17-14 lead at the break and after the Panthers were forced to punt on their opening possession of the third, the Wildcats had a chance to put some distance between themselves and the Panthers.

Starting deep in their own territory, Rabun mishandled a snap and senior defensive back Will Stone scooped up the fumble and didn't have far to go for the score.

Union's third defensive touchdown of the year gave the Panthers a 21-17 lead - their final lead of the game.

The Wildcat offense came back on the field and it didn't take them long to regain the lead.

A 40-yard touchdown pass capped off a drive that lasted 127 seconds, and with 7:50 left in the third, Union found themselves trailing 24-21.

On the ensuing kickoff, junior Josh Daniel returned the kickoff to the Rabun 14-yard line.

Unfortunately, the Wildcats' defense stiffened and kept the Panthers out of the endzone for the first of two key stops by the Red and White defense.

On first down, junior Bo Lynch carried for 2 yards but



Sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso looks for running room during the decisive goal line series during the fourth quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

two incompletions followed and on fourth down, junior Knox Kiernan connected on a 29-yard field goal - knotting the score at 24-24.

Settling for the field goal came back to haunt the Panthers, especially up against an offense the caliber of Rabun County's.

"We left a lot of points on the field," Coach Allison said. "We left probably 18 points out there and didn't have a turnover, so it would have taken a near-perfect game for us to win."

Starting from its own 27-yard line, Rabun's offense converted three third down attempts and maneuvered its way to the Panther 15-yard line.

On the verge of another score, the Wildcats coughed up the football but were able to recover.

Three plays later, Rabun was in the endzone again, and following the extra point, were back on top at 31-24.

On the second play of their next series, Mancuso and the offense went for the deep ball and it paid off when junior Nick Whittle hauled in the reception down the far sideline and took into the Wildcats' redzone.

One play later, Barnett took it to the house from 20 yards out as the back-and-forth affair continued.

With 1:25 to play in the third, the score was tied at 31-31. But before the quarter drew to a close, Rabun was inside the Union 10-yard line.

The fourth quarter opened with a Wildcat touchdown on the first play - making it 38-31.

Just as expected, the Union offense went back on the move. Starting from their own 23, the Panthers handed off to Lynch for 4 yards, a pass to Robert Prunier was stopped after only a gain of one. On 3rd-and-5, Mancuso found senior Clay Wallis for 16 yards.

Faced with another third down, Mancuso and Prunier hooked for 6 yards - good enough to move the chains and the offense into Rabun territory.

On first down, Barnett took the handoff and went 14 yards. At the Rabun 31, Barnett got another carry and picked up 4 yards. A second down incompleting brought up a 3rd-and-6 where a Sam Gilbert reception went for 9 yards and a fresh set of downs.

Inside the Wildcats' redzone once again, Mancuso kept it himself and picked up 12 and gave Union 1st-and-goal from the 6-yard line.

That's where the Rabun defense made its second, and most important stand.

After three straight runs, Union was faced with a 4th-and-goal from the 1-yard line.

The Wildcats took a timeout to regroup and it paid off as the Panthers were stuffed on a quarterback sneak and Rabun's offense retook the field with 6:40 to play.

"That quarterback sneak was my call," Coach Allison said. "In hindsight we could have done several different things, but I thought we would make it with the quarterback sneak, but we didn't"

Right away Union's defense put the Wildcats in a third down situation but gave up a big gain on the ground and then tacked on a late hit at the end of the run.

Rabun converted two more backbreaking third downs and eventually punched it into the endzone, extending its lead to 45-31 with 1:28 remaining.

"We didn't play well on either side of the ball but I think Rabun County had a lot



Trailing 38-31 the Panthers came up inches short on 4th-and-goal in the fourth quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest



Friday night vs Rabun County was a 'pink out' game for breast cancer awareness. Photo/Todd Forrest

to do with that," Coach Allison said. "But when it was all said and done, our kids played their hearts out."

The contest opened with the Wildcats connecting on a 57-yard touchdown pass on a third-and-long.

The Panthers' first possession saw the offense go on a 17-play drive that took more than 8 minutes and resulted in a 4-yard touchdown pass from Mancuso to Prunier.

Rabun regained the lead with a 4-yard run with 3 seconds left in the first quarter.

Union tied it up on an incredible grab by Jacob Rogers, who went up and snagged the ball with his fingertips then raced another 25 yards around

the Wildcats' secondary and into the endzone.

Kiernan's kick tied it at 14-14.

With 1:04 before half, Rabun was able to squeak in a 39-yard field goal that barely cleared the crossbar.

The Panthers will have a bye week to lick their wounds and prepare for a trip to Riverside Military Academy on Oct. 31st.

"The main thing I told our guys is the loss to Rabun isn't going to make or break our season," Coach Allison said. "It's a 10-game season and that's just one game. But we have all of our goals still in front of us."

How 'sweep' it is; Lady Panthers returning to Sweet 16

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

After a two-game sweep of Darlington, the Union County Lady Panthers are going back to the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2010.

Despite four straight seasons of October heartbreaks, the Lady Panthers cleared the first round hurdle that had been troublesome in recent years.

The series was set to open on Wednesday but rain moved things back to Thursday. And much to the delight of the hometown crowd, the Lady Panthers got the monkey of their backs and took out three years of frustration on the Darlington Lady Tigers, who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now the Lady Panthers are one step away from returning to Columbus where they would compete for a State Championship.

After disposing of a private school last week, Union will pay a visit to the Region 6-AA Champions, the Wesleyan Lady Wolves (25-4) for a Wednesday double-header. The two teams will square off at 4 and 6 p.m. with Wesleyan riding a 13-game winning streak. If necessary, the third game would be played Thursday at 4 p.m.

"It feels great to get back to the Sweet 16," Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart said. "The seniors have been wanting to get to Columbus since they started as freshman and now we are potentially two games away from making that happen. They are extremely determined and focused to beat Wesleyan and finish in the Elite 8."

UC 10, Darlington 2

In game one, freshman Jillian Lawn had a breakout performance going 4-for-4 with a double, 2 runs and 2 RBIs. Sophomore Lydia Arrowood also got involved going 3-for-5, with 3 RBIs and a run.

Leading 2-1 in the top of the third, Union handed the visitors a freebie when a passed ball allowed the Lady Tigers to score their final run of the game, and the series.

In Union's half of the inning, sophomore Kendra Tanner put the Lady Panthers in business with a one-out triple. Three pitches



The Lady Panthers after punching their ticket to the Class AA field of 16. Photos/Todd Forrest

later she returned the favor by scoring on a passed ball.

With a 3-2 lead, sophomore Laken Chambers silenced the opposition's bats, retiring the Lady Tigers 1-2-3 in the fourth and fifth inning.

In the bottom of the fifth, Tanner provided another spark with a leadoff single as Union picked up two more runs to make it a 5-2 game. With the sophomore outfielder aboard, Lawn doubled, setting the stage for senior Crystal Busbee, who came to the plate with two runners in scoring position. The senior leadoff hitter sent a 3-1 pitch up the middle - scoring Tanner and Lawn.

Chambers worked around a two-out single in the sixth, allowing the offense to play the role

of closer. The Lady Panthers put up 5 runs in the inning - four with coming no outs.

Junior Maddie Garrett and senior Courtney Busbee connected on back-to-back singles to open the sixth. Senior Kelsey Nix came through with an RBI single, Tanner was hit by a 1-0 pitch, and senior Hallye King scored Courtney Busbee with an infield single. Lawn would follow suit with a 2-run double that brought Nix and Tanner.

Following a ground out, Lawn scored by way of an Arrowood single that made it 10-2, ending the contest early by mercy rule.

Darlington got a run in the top half of the first but the

Lady Panthers quickly tied it up. Arrowood singled and scored on a passed ball after a double by Chambers moved her to third base.

Union's second run came in the second inning by way of Crystal Busbee. The senior shortstop reached on a fielders choice and stole second, and one pitch later, she scored when Arrowood singled to left.

Tanner finished 2-for-3, scored three times and tripled. Her third inning triple was her fifth of the year - tying Kayla Gowder's team record from 2007. Chambers tossed a 3-hitter in six innings with 7 strikeouts against one walk.

Crystal Busbee went 1-for-5 with a run and 2 RBIs, Kelsey Nix was 1-for-3 with a run, a walk,



Hallye King

and a RBI, and King went 2-for-4 with a double and an RBI. Garrett had a 2-for-3 day that included a run and a walk, Chambers went 2-for-4, and Courtney Busbee was 1-for-4 with a run.

UC 10 Darlington 0

Union County (28-6), who were the visitors on the scoreboard in game two, blew open a 3-0 contest with two runs in the fifth and five in the seventh.

Chambers tossed her fifth complete game shutout of the season, recording her 22nd win while striking out a season high 11.

"Laken came out and had 18 strikeouts (in two games) and pitched fantastic," Coach Stewart said. "The defense gave up zero errors and played perfectly."

Offensively, the Lady Pan-

thers' lineup was clicking. Already up 1-0 in the second inning, King blasted a two-run homer to left center, giving Union a 3-0 lead.

The Lady Panthers began to distance themselves from the visitors in the fifth inning, and it all started with two outs. With one down, Lawn reached on a fielders choice and advanced to second on a passed ball. At the plate, Crystal Busbee sent a high fly into right field that was dropped by the outfielder - allowing Lawn to score. Crystal Busbee reached second on an Arrowood walk, she stole third and scored when Arrowood forced a rundown between first and second base.

Trailing 5-0 with their season hanging in the balance, desperation was starting to take hold of the Lady Tigers.

They opened their half of the inning with consecutive singles off Chambers but Courtney Busbee cutdown a Darlington baserunner trying to swipe third. Chambers then struck out two to keep the 5-run advantage intact.

In the fifth, Garrett was stranded at second following a one-out double. In the bottom half of the inning, Chambers fanned two as she retired the Lady Tigers in order.

The top half of the sixth saw King and Lawn stranded after back-to-back singles, but Chambers continued to baffle the opposition and struck out the side in the bottom half of the inning.

In Union's final at bat, they pummeled the Lady Tigers to the tune of five runs on three extra base hits. The Lady Panthers were also assisted by two Darlington errors, a walk, and a hit batter.

Garrett doubled, Busbee walked, and Kelsey Nix was hit by a pitch to load the bags for Tanner.

And she delivered. The lefty lined a triple into the right centerfield gap that not only cleared the bases, but set a new team record as well. One pitch later she scored on a passed ball.

With two down, Lawn reached on an error and later scored on a Crystal Busbee double - making it a 10-0 game.

Crystal Busbee also scored Union's first run of the game when she singled to leadoff the top half of the first. After stealing second



Senior Kelsey Nix takes a ball low and inside while freshman Logan Seabolt leads off from third. Nix has been swinging one of the hottest bats in the Union lineup. Photo/Todd Forrest



Kendra Tanner

See Sweet 16, continued on 15A