

Sports

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No. 8 Fellowship survives Union's upset bid in 8-AA title game Panthers host ELCA Saturday in first home playoff game since 2019

By Todd Forrest
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Roswell - Less than 36 hours removed from a gut-wrenching 28-21 region championship loss at 8th-ranked Fellowship Christian on Thursday night, the Panthers acquired a much-needed shot in the arm early Saturday upon learning Blairsville would host a first-round playoff game for the first time in four years.

The loss at Fellowship dropped Union County (7-3, 3-2) into a three-way tie for second place in Region 8-AA alongside Athens Academy and Providence Christian. With all three teams defeating each other by at least 14 points, the head-to-head matchups and victory-margin tiebreakers went out the window. Eventually, Union came out on top by way of its 7-point loss to the highest-seeded team (Fellowship) -- the narrowest margin vs. the region champs among the three.

"I'm super proud of how well our guys played against a really talented team that made the final four last year and has a bunch of guys who will play college football," Perry said. "They've blown out everyone in the region, but they didn't blow us out."

As for last week's region title showdown in Roswell, the Panthers and Paladins delivered a Thursday-night thriller, concluding with Fellowship picking off Caiden Tanner in the endzone as time expired.

Trailing 28-21 late in the fourth, the Panthers denied Fellowship's fake punt attempt, awarding the offense possession near midfield with 2:48 remaining. Union faced a do-or-die fourth-and-1 from the 39 four plays into its final series, but Braylen Rader took a quick screen for 8 yards to keep his team's region title hopes alive.

Later, a third-and-8 penalty resulted in a fourth-and-13 conversion when Tanner stepped up in the pocket to hit Jensen Goble over the middle for 18 with 19 seconds remaining.

A first down throw to the endzone fell incomplete, and then Tanner was forced to scramble for no gain on second, leading to a Union timeout. On the game's final play, Tan-



Caiden Tanner (17) and Kaden Combs (54) briefly silence the Fellowship crowd after Tanner's TD run tied the score at 21-21. Photo/Todd Forrest

ner tried dropping an endzone throw into a tight window, but the pass sailed just beyond the fingertips of the double-covered Tyler Grasty and into the arms of a Fellowship defensive back.

"I'm really proud of our kids, unfortunately, we just didn't make enough plays," Perry said.

Had Union put six on the board in the final seconds, there was no doubt what the Panthers would do next.

"We were going for two and the win," Perry said. "We already had a 2-point play ready to go."

Despite the loss, Tanner finished 31 for 37 with 346 yards, a touchdown and 2 interceptions. Goble ended with 152 yards receiving while logging his second 13-catch game of the year. Ethan McBride added 7 receptions for 112 yards.

However, it was all Rader in the early going as Union County built a 14-0 advantage. The senior broke a 47-yard carry on the Panthers' second offensive series to move the visitors out front 7-0.

The defense kept momentum in Union's corner via a quick three-and-out and Tanner took over at his own 38,

leading a 10-play drive to the Fellowship 7-yard line before penalties derailed the scoring opportunity and wiped out a 12-yard touchdown strike to Goble.

Pushed back to the 23, the Paladins picked off Tanner's desperation heave on fourth and goal. But the defense did its job and forced a Fellowship punt from the shadow of its goalpost, handing possession back to the offense 40 yards out.

As was the trend most of the night, penalties hindered another Union drive, negating a timely completion inside the five to McBride. On the ensuing Panthers punt, Zuriel Mancillas' pooch kick clanked off a Paladin helmet and Rader pounced on the live ball inside the 15.

Five snaps later, Rader finished the drive by taking a quick throw from Tanner and powering his way across the goal line.

Fellowship finally got on the board late in the second with a 10-play, 70-yard scoring drive, trimming the Union lead to 14-7 on a drive assisted by an extremely suspect targeting penalty.

A Panthers' three-and-

out with under a minute left in the half granted Fellowship one final chance to even the score, and they capitalized on the very next play, coming down with a juggling 41-yard touchdown catch to knot the score at 14-14 entering the break.

"That play killed us," Perry said. "We should have had the lead going into halftime with them getting the ball right back in the third quarter."

The Paladins grabbed a 21-14 advantage to start the second half, opening the third with a 12-play, 66-yard scoring drive that included a pivotal third-and-8 conversion from the Union 25.

Trailing for the first time all night, Tanner and the Panthers tied things up at 21-21 on the back of a 10-play, 80-yard drive. During the series, Tanner converted a pair of early third downs with throws to Goble and Rader before the senior QB finished things off by scrambling for the 13-yard equalizer.

Perry discussed his decision to air it out in the second half after leaning on Rader early.

"[Fellowship] was doing a good job controlling the clock with their offense and we weren't getting many posses-

sions," he said. "And of course, once we fell behind towards the end, we had to [throw it]."

Fellowship capped a 10-play drive of its own with a third-and-goal touchdown strike on the first play of the fourth frame, jumping back on top 28-21.

"For me, that [drive] was the turning point in the game,"



Jensen Goble hauls in a twisting, sliding catch during the second half at Fellowship. The senior finished with 13 grabs. Photo/Todd Forrest



Dusty Aaron (52) leads the way for the Union County defense with Seth Rutan (18) and Ethan Lester (25) in pursuit. Photo/Todd Forrest

Playoff Time: ELCA at Union County

Union County is back in the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season and the 10th time in 11 years when they host McDonough's Eagles Landing Christian Academy (ELCA) at 1 p.m. Saturday.

"I'm very excited to get a home playoff game," Perry said. "We'd like to have a packed house on Saturday."

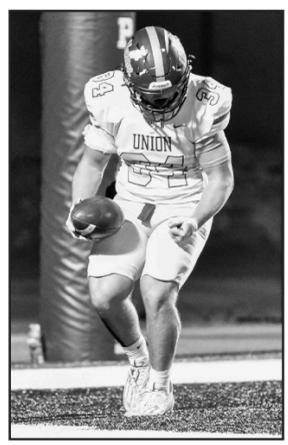
The Chargers will bring their 4-6 record into Blairsville for the first-ever meeting between the two programs.

However, those six losses are a bit misleading. Four of ELCA's defeats came to teams ranked No. 1, 2, 4 and 6 by the AJC.

"Their record doesn't look very good but they played a very difficult non-region schedule," Perry said.

"They are very athletic and a traditional football powerhouse and we definitely can't take them lightly. If we don't play well, they will definitely beat us."

The Chargers' offense is led by freshman quarterback



Braylen Rader

Luke Stansell, who averages 137 yards per game through the air with 9 TDs and 15 interceptions.

Running back Brandon Hood puts up 109 ypg on the ground. Felix Fenton averages 45 ypg receiving.

"They don't have a featured guy," Perry said. "None of their stats are overwhelming and are really spread out."

Perry said. "Our kickoff team really hurt us after we tied it up 21-21. It was supposed to be a squib kick, but it wasn't really a squib, and we didn't cover it very well and [Fellowship] got the ball at midfield."

However, the Union offense went back to work when Tanner and McBride hooked up for completions of 35 and 12 yards, then an 11-yard pass to Grasty on third down had the Panthers in the red zone. A pair of Goble receptions set up Union with first and goal at the four, but three penalty flags derailed the drive before Fellowship took over at its 1-yard line with just under 8 minutes left.

With the region title on the line, along with 8-AA's margin of victory tiebreaker, the Panthers' defense prevented a game-sealing score, halting Fellowship after Seth Rutan blew up a first down run in the backfield near the 40. Union County limited a QB bootleg to 8 yards on third and 11, resulting in the Paladins' fourth-down trickery. But Ethan Lester immediately snuffed out the fake punt, taking down the ball carrier on the direct snap to the upback.

Stats: Rader 14 carries, 83 yards, TD, 7 receptions, 41 yds, TD; Tanner 11 car, 55 yds, TD; Grasty 3 rec, 27 yds; Zach Taylor 1 rec, 10 yds.

No defensive stats were available at Monday's deadline.

Joshua Banks' 10 tackles a night is tops on the defense. Wilson Reagan and Dylan Neal have 3 sacks apiece. Banks and Fenton have each picked off two passes.

"They are a 3-4 defense and play a lot of cover-3, so it's not nearly as exotic as what we saw [at Fellowship] where they did everything under the sun," Perry said.

ELCA has won seven state championships, with five straight coming between 2015-2019. Last season, ELCA was eliminated by Fellowship Christian in the Sweet 16 by a 26-15 score. The Chargers reached the final four in 2021 and the Elite Eight in 2020.

The winner of ELCA-Union County will face the winner of top-seeded Rockmart and fourth-seeded Washington.

"If we get by ELCA, it looks like we'll be going to Rockmart," Perry said. "But if we can play with Fellowship, we can probably play with just about anybody."

XC: Union girls a program-best fourth at State; Hunter places fifth

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Carrollton - Carrollton - The Union County ladies turned in a program-best fourth-place team performance at Saturday's Class AA State Championships, paced by sophomore Lola Hunter's top-five finish at 20 minutes, 26 seconds.

"I definitely thought [the team] had a chance to finish in the top five," Union head coach Paige Dyer said. "There was some tough competition at State and we usually have a bit of a lag going into region coming off fall break but bounce back at State."

Union County collected 135 points, coming in behind three private schools, with two trailing from Region 8-AA. Athens Academy took home both team (58 points) and individual titles behind Maya Davis' time of 19:15. Fellowship Christian placed second at 95 points, Savannah Arts was third at 102 points and Fannin County rounded out the top five with 188.

Providence Christian placed 10th with 309 points, giving 8-AA four teams in the top 10.

Individually, Union County senior Ellie Adams came in 19th at 22:08; junior Hannah Kazmierzak placed 30th, matching a personal record at 22:32; senior Natalie Payne crossed the line



The Union County ladies on the podium following their fourth-place finish at State. Photo/Todd Forrest

Junior Noel Hyatt rounded out Union's top-five with a 44th-place finish and a personal record time of 23:29.

Freshman Clara Kazmierzak was 51st at a personal-record pace of 23:54, and junior Lydia Wagner placed 64th out of 178 runners with a time of 24:36.

"The girls did a super good job and I'm really proud of them," Dyer said. "This is a great group of girls; one of the best I've had. But they had a lot of support behind them

from the community and their parents."

Coming in behind Davis' state championship finish was Fannin County junior Lindsey Holloway at 20:01 and Vidalia's Georgia Meredith at 20:12. Savannah Arts' Leah Nyce was fourth at 20:20.

Next season, Class AA and 8-AA will look much different with the likely departures of Athens Academy, Fellowship Christian, Providence Christian and Banks County to Class A.

Fannin County appears

headed to Class A as well.

Region 8-AA could see the arrival of Elbert County, Franklin County, Hart County and Stephens County and others in 2024-25.

"I'm not 100% sure who will be in our region, but right now, it looks like we could have no private schools in the region," Dyer said. "That could mean good things for our teams next year. I think our girls will have a good shot to win region and state, but we are losing some very important seniors that we'll need to replace."



Sophomore Lola Hunter crosses the finish line in fifth place on Saturday morning in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest

Basketball: Panthers tip-off Tuesday, Nov. 7 at Gilmer scrimmage

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Union County basketball opens its 2023-24 seasons on Tuesday, Nov. 7, with both programs eyeing a Region 8-AA title in February.

In 2022-23, the Union men became one of the fastest-rising programs in north Georgia, appearing in consecutive region championship games and reaching the Class AA Sweet 16 on the heels of a winless 2020-21 campaign.

Last January, a young Union County squad featuring four sophomore starters handed the eventual State runner-up and third-ranked Providence Christian a stunning upset that propelled the Panthers to the 8-AA title game and its first playoff victory in seven years.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers return four starters from last season's 14-14 squad and are under the direction of first-year head coach Thomas Nelson.

"It's been a big adjustment but the girls are doing well," Nelson said. "Things are a lot more serious now than they were in the summer. The main thing is creating stability after five coaches in five years, but I'm really proud of how hard the girls are working in practice."

Headlining Nelson's inaugural season is a four-year starter in senior forward Lara Turner and a three-year starter in junior guard Ariel McCarter. Junior forward Katelyn Brown is back, along with seniors Kamryn Mull (guard) and Morgan Warren (post), who return after becoming key contributors a year ago.



Junior Ariel McCarter took down Houston Henry during the Skills Challenge at Friday night's Hoopfest. Freshman Hayden Price defeated senior Kamryn Mull to win the 3-point competition. Photo/Todd Forrest

Sophomore Paula Robertson should see a more significant role after earning playing time as a 9th grader last year.

Other returners that saw minutes in 2022-23 are juniors Hensley Adams, Aubrie Akins, Sloane Dyer and sophomore Mady Adams.

Junior Hope Taylor, who played primarily JV a year ago, could also find her way into Nelson's rotation.

The Lady Panthers remain in a top-heavy Region 8-AA featuring Class AA State

runner-up Banks County, who returns four starters. The Leopards, however, will suffer from the graduation of 6-foot All-State post Kamryn Grier.

Region runner-up Athens Academy graduated seven seniors but will likely reload. Third-place East Jackson loses six seniors, including do-everything guard Antonia Pittman. Providence Christian and Fellowship Christian struggled mightily a year ago but featured young rosters that will see improvement in 2023-24.

The Union County men should enter 2023-24 as the favorites in 8-AA but Banks County, Providence and Athens Academy could all have something to say about that by season's end.

Without a senior, the Panthers will feature another underclassmen-heavy roster this winter led by a junior class that includes a pair of three-year starters in junior guards Jude Ellis and Houston Henry, along with a two-year starter in junior sharpshooter Hayden Hughes.

The Panthers will need to find a replacement for starters Eli Underwood (graduated) and Maddox Young (transferred) but fifth-year head coach Corey Garrett has plenty of options.

Sophomore Cade Dockrey, who played the role of sixth-man last year, will likely move into Young's spot. Meanwhile, junior Kaden Combs and freshman Jaxon Totherow are the frontrunners to replace Underwood.

Additionally, freshman Ethan Hogged, sophomore Vince Marevka and junior Brayden Hogged should furnish a boost to a Panthers' rotation that struggled with depth last winter.

"The main thing is getting the football guys (Combs, Dockrey, Totherow) back," Garrett said. "Coming into the season, the biggest question was who would replace [Underwood] or would we do something different with his spot? But I think [Combs and Totherow] will be able to step in. They probably won't give us what Eli gave us last year, but they should fill in nicely."

Region 8-AA could be a four-team race this season between Union, Banks, Providence and Athens Academy.

Providence and Athens Academy will be carried by their respective co-region players of the year, Samuel Thacker and Kymel Williams. However, Providence suffered heavy graduation losses across the board from last year's Class AA runner-up finish and could take a step back. Athens Academy finished fourth in 8-AA but ended the season with an upset of Banks County and expect to return four starters.

Although, Union's most prominent threat could reside in Homer, where Banks County brings back four starters off a team that entered the final week of 2022-23 with a shot to finish atop the 8-AA standings until the loss at Athens Academy knocked them from the mix. Banks County responded by bumping Union into the top spot via the Leopards' upset of Providence on the final night of the regular season.

Should Union want to enter the region tournament as the No. 1 seed once again and take home its first region title since 1981, the road will likely go through Banks County -- a place where the Panthers haven't won in over a decade.

Tuesday's scrimmage at Gilmer gets underway when the Lady Panthers take the floor at 6 p.m. with the guys to follow.

"We have to take some major steps between our scrimmage Tuesday and our first game a week later," Nelson said. "We hope to have a good showing at Gilmer then move on to the season and get a good push going into the Christmas Break and then region play."

The shorthanded Union men will face an uphill climb at Gilmer, who features 7-foot-tall Jackson McVey - one of the top post players in the state.

"It's kind of hard to say [what to expect at the scrimmage]," Garrett said. "I just want us to go out and compete and see how hard we can play. Do I think we can win? Absolutely? Are we going down there to win? Absolutely. But I just want us to go out there and compete and do the things it takes to win."

UCRD: 1st and 6th grade Panthers advance to Saturday's MAC Super Bowl



Wide receiver Brett McWatters comes down with a Zayne Helton pass in the endzone for Union County 6th grade's lone touchdown on Saturday afternoon during their 8-0 victory over White County in the MAC semifinals in Blairsville. Photo/Todd Forrest

Two Union County youth football teams are Super Bowl bound.

On Saturday, the Union County 1st and 6th grade teams punched their respective tickets to the Mountain Athletic Conference (MAC) Super Bowl

with victories at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The 1st grade defeated Dawson County 7-0 behind JP Waggener's touchdown run.

Later, the 6th graders used Brett McWatter's scoring reception and Joe Moses' 2-point kick

to sink White County.

Zayne Helton sealed the win with a late interception.

Both teams travel to Lumpkin County on Saturday. The 1st grade faces Pickens at 9 a.m. The 6th grade meets Dawson County at 4:30 p.m.

UCHS Swimmers 7th at Canton's Chiefs & Eagles Invitational Meet

UCHS SWIM TEAM STATS
chiefs & eagles invitational meet 7 nov 4 / cherokee

TOP 10 FINISHES

22
best times
out of
34 total swims

<p>200 Medley Relay Girls A. 6th: Lilly Collins, Lily Helton, Reese Jones, Isabel Hoover</p> <p>50 Free Nicholas Nushtayev: 5th Lily Helton: 7th</p> <p>100 Free Nicholas Nushtayev: 2nd Andrew Nushtayev: 8th</p>	<p>200 IM Reese Jones: 6th</p> <p>200 Free Relay Boys. 4th: Nicholas Nushtayev, Cole Orlando, Wyatt Chandler, Andrew Nushtayev Girls A. 7th: Reese Jones, Sophia Licavoli, Isabel Hoover, Lily Helton</p> <p>100 Breast Lily Helton: 7th</p>
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Overall: 7th place
Girls: 7th place
Boys: 7th place

The Union County High School swim team traveled to Cherokee County on Tuesday for the Chiefs & Eagles Invitational. Union County logged 22 personal-best times with both teams finishing in seventh place. Nicholas Nushtayev placed second in the 100 freestyle event to headline the team's eight top-10 finishes. This weekend, the middle school and high school teams will visit Tallulah Falls.