

Football: Panthers look sharp at recent 7-on-7 camps

By Todd Forrest
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Union County finished with an impressive 11-3-1 record during two 7-on-7 camps last week at Kennesaw State University and Habersham Central High School.

Facing live competition for the first time since November, the Panthers turned in a pair of solid showings despite competing against significantly larger schools at both events.

"I thought we made tremendous progress from our first two games on Tuesday at Kennesaw to Friday afternoon at Habersham," Panther head coach Brian Allison said. "Over that time there was probably 15 games that we got to play and that allowed us to get guys some experience in competitive situations. That will help us to evaluate our personnel as we continue moving forward."

At Kennesaw, Union County faced one school from Class 7A (Georgia's largest classification), three from Class 5A and one from Class 4A. No scores were kept at Tuesday's Kennesaw Camp but (based on the unofficial tally of yours truly) the Panthers would finish the day with a 5-1 record.

Meanwhile, at Habersham Central on Friday, June 14, Union County was the second smallest school behind Athens Academy -- the defending State Runner Up from Class



Rising-senior Pierson Allison returns behind center. Photo/Todd Forrest
A Private. Scores were kept at the Habersham tournament with five pool games in the morning followed by a single elimination tournament in the afternoon.

In the opener, Union tied with St. Pius X, 20-20 before losing to Flowery Branch, 27-16 despite touchdowns by Sawyer Drake and Kyle Morlock.

The Panthers edged Hart County, 31-27 behind two touchdown grabs from Drake. Back on track after struggling early, Union demolished Cedar Shoals by a score of 50-0. Drake hauled in a pair of scores

while Morlock, Cayden Rich and Zion Ross each tacked on a touchdown.

Union finished off pool play with a 34-7 win over Chestatee. Mason McCombs led the offense with three touchdown catches.

In tournament action, Union eliminated Jefferson, 30-10 in the first round. Drake had two scores, Morlock added one and Pierson Allison picked off a pass.

The Panthers followed that up with a 30-11 win over Athens Academy, behind two Morlock touchdowns and one



Zion Ross blows past a defender at Kennesaw State. Photo/Todd Forrest

from Jonah Daniel. During the 27-16 semifinal victory over West Hall, McCombs, Morlock and Ross would each score. Union's luck would finally run out in a 24-14 loss to Habersham Central in the finals. Daniel and Noah Underwood each caught touchdowns in the loss.

The Panthers finished the Habersham tournament with a 6-2-1 record against a slate that featured a 10-win, Sweet 16 squad from Class 4A (St. Pius), an 8-3 playoff team from Class 4A (Flowery Branch), two Class 3A playoff teams (Hart

County and Jefferson), a Class 6A Sweet 16 squad (Habersham) and the aforementioned Class A Private Runner-Up (Athens Academy).

On Tuesday, June 11, Union County traveled to Kennesaw State for six 7-on-7 matchups that included a tour of Fifth Third Bank Stadium and the KSU Owls' football facilities.

In the first contest, the Panthers thumped the West Forsyth B-team, 32-6 (unofficially, of course). Josh Orr picked off a pass and scored; Drake and Morlock also caught a

touchdown. Rising-sophomore quarterback Logan Helcher saw action and threw a touchdown pass to Ross.

Union fell to Carver-Columbus, 24-12 in the only loss of the day despite two scores by Morlock. They rebounded with wins over a trio of Class 5A teams, Eagles Landing (37-20), Kell (37-16), and Fayette County (15-12). In the finale, they knocked off West Forsyth's A-team.

Against Kell, Morlock, Ross, Walker and Drake caught TD passes - the final coming from Helcher.

Daniel, Drake, Morlock and Ross scored vs Eagles Landing High School; Morlock scored the only touchdown during a defensive battle with Fayette County.

In the 20-10 win over West Forsyth's A-team in the finale, Drake scored both touchdowns - one set up by a big gain on a catch-and-run by John Mancuso.

West Forsyth reached the Sweet 16 in Class 7A, Carver was a 9-win playoff team from Class 4A and Kell went 9-3 en route to the Class 4A Sweet 16.

Fresh off two full days of 7-on-7 action last week, Union County will be back in action at 9 a.m. on the morning of Thursday, June 20 when Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium plays host to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' 7-on-7 Camp.

Football: Six things we learned at last week's 7-on-7 tournaments

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Recently, Union County football took part in a pair of 7-on-7 tournaments as preparation for the upcoming season gets underway.

As the summer workouts intensify, the *North Georgia News* spoke with Panther head coach Brian Allison last weekend regarding the early returns on the 2019 football team. And here's what we've learned about Union County football, so far, during the first half of June.

1) This might be the deepest wide receiver corp that Union County has ever fielded: Entering 2019, it's no secret that Sawyer Drake and Kyle Morlock (combined for 91 catches, 1,657 yards and 16 touchdowns in 2018) will be responsible for keeping defensive coordinators up at night. What they might not expect is the number of weapons that will surround them on the outside.

Union County lost Kanon Hemphill to graduation but there's plenty of options to replace the departed three-year starter. With seniors Cayden Rich (25 catches in 2018), Zion Ross (finally healthy) and John Mancuso combined with up-and-comers like Mason McCombs, Carson Walker, Kaston Hemphill, Noah Underwood and Josh Orr, among others, it's safe to assume that the most dangerous air attack in 8-AA will reside in Blairsville this fall.

"The strength of this year's football is the depth of our wide receivers," Coach Allison said. "I feel pretty good about our two-deep at wide receiver and I feel really good about our first group."

This year's group could easily match some of the great receiving units in recent history. In 2014, three different receivers caught 40-plus passes. In 2016, seven different players finished with at least 10 receptions -- this group could equal or surpass them both.

2) Union County's pass defense will rely upon several new faces; not to mention, some old faces in new places:

Coach Allison will no longer be able to rely on his human swiss army knife, Chayton Schaffer. Graduating an All-Region safety leaves a huge hole in the secondary, and as of now, that spot appears to belong to rising-junior Kaston Hemphill. A starter at cornerback in 2018, Kaston Hemphill will join Mancuso on the back end of the Panthers' defense.

"I think moving (Hemphill) to safety is more of a natural fit for him," Coach Allison said. "Right now he's a little uncomfortable because it's new but by August 30, he'll be really good there."

Experienced corners Alec Scott and Ean Harkins also received their diplomas in May. And with Hemphill moving to safety, that creates two openings at the corner, and right now, Ross and his sophomore counterpart, Walker, are taking



RB Jonah Daniel scores vs Athens Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sawyer Drake hauls in a completion vs Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest

on the responsibility of shutting down the opposition's leading pass catchers.

The first-time starters are very rough around the edges but there is no doubt that this duo provides Coach Allison and his defensive staff with all the physical tools needed to develop into a nightmare for opposing wide receivers.

"The two guys that we've moved to corner are very athletic and can run very well," Coach Allison said. "They're biggest problem is lack of experience. You saw that early on (at the 7-on-7 camps) but as they day went on they got better and better."

The Panthers will also have the option of placing Pierson Allison and Drake in the defensive backfield in nickel and dime packages or in late game situations.

"Typically we don't have a lot of depth in the secondary but this year, that's a potential strength, along with the depth at receiver," Coach Allison said.

3) When healthy, Ross is an elite weapon in all three phases of the game: Entering his junior season in 2018, Ross was expected to crack the two-deep at wide receiver. That was until ACL surgery derailed his spring practice, summer camps and most of the fall.

"He worked very hard to get back after knee surgery (in March 2018)," Coach Allison said. "He was able to get back by mid-season but he was a little bit behind."

Playing junior varsity late in the year, Ross began to showcase the explosiveness that had coaches excited about his future. Just six months removed from surgery, Ross took a kickoff return to the house in the JV regular season finale at Fannin County, despite not being fully recovered.

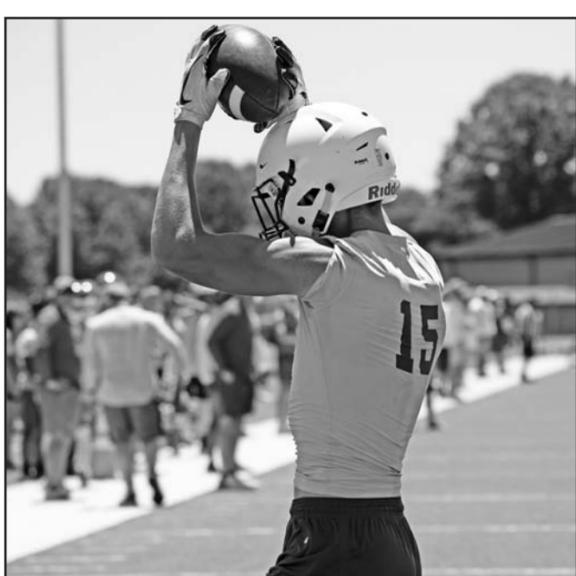
Now with an entire off-season under his belt, Ross is at 100% and showing what he's capable of. And with a need in the secondary, Coach Allison turned to Ross and the senior gladly accepted the role.

"So far, I've been very pleased with his progress and he continues to get better," Coach Allison said. "In fact, his best 7-on-7 game was the championship vs Habersham."

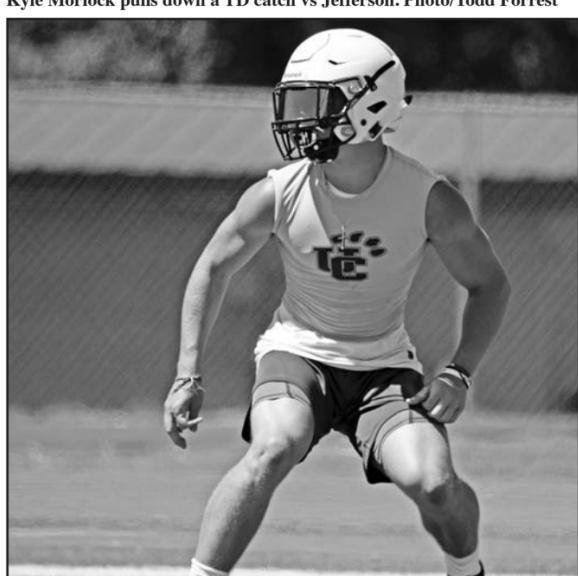
Ross will add another weapon to Pierson Allison's offensive arsenal in 2019, will provide much-needed athleticism in the secondary and lastly, a viable option in the kick return game when Coach Allison divvies the special teams duties later in the summer.

"(Ross) brings a lot of speed to the cornerback and wide receiver position and he's also a possibility to return kicks," Coach Allison said. "Ross has always played receiver but when I talked to him about playing corner, he was more than happy to do it. He's going to be very good for us this year."

4) Jonah Daniel will replace Chad Buzzard at RB-1 and Coach Allison believes



Kyle Morlock pulls down a TD catch vs Jefferson. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sloan Sutton reads the offense vs Flowery Branch. Photo/Todd Forrest

he's ready to carry the load: The Union County backfield has remained in good hands in recent years thanks to guys like Bo Lynch and Chad Buzzard. And with the plethora of wide receiver talent that has passed through UCHS in recent years, a viable rushing attack is a must to keep opposing defenses honest.

With Buzzard (11 rushing TDs in 2018) graduating, Coach Allison and offensive coordinator Howard McCombs look to rising-junior Jonah Daniel as a potential workhorse in the ground game.

Last year, the duo of Buzzard and Daniel provided a deadly 1-2 punch of "thunder and lightning." A homerun threat anytime he touches the ball, Daniel averaged 10.2 yards per carry with eight touchdowns in relief of Buzzard in 2018.

"(Daniel) has the potential to be one of the better backs we've ever had if we keep him healthy," Coach Allison said. "We're also going to call on Sloan Sutton and Walker at running back to take some reps from Daniel."

Without Buzzard's "thunder" this fall, the smaller but quicker Daniel could be called upon for 20-25 carries-a-game.

When asked, Coach Allison made it clear that Daniel was more than capable of taking on that role.

"I'm happy where Jonah is at size-wise, he's re-

stepped up as the defensive leader, Sutton took over as the leading tackler with 116.

This year, Coach Allison expects Sutton to take on a leadership role with the graduation of Colwell, Hunter Kelley, Kanon Hemphill and Kyle Williams.

Despite losing a lot of experience, Coach Allison is confident that guys like Underwood and JJ Engle will lead a revamped linebacker corp.

The coaching staff could also turn to a couple of cross-over players to add some much-needed depth at the position.

"We want (Sutton) to take on a bigger role this year with the losses at linebacker but I think we have some guys like Noah Underwood and JJ Engle that we're expecting to step up. We can also use Rich and Daniel at linebacker at times, so we have the bodies, it's just getting them the reps and experience."

6) Despite all the accomplishments in 7-on-7, success still hinges on run defense and play in the trenches: The offensive line graduated several key players from last season, including three-year starter Coleson Daniel. Now the Panthers will enter 2019 with a remodeled O-line as they attempt to put a less-than-favorable ending to 2018 in the rear-view mirror.

Last year's postseason saw a physical Bremen squad dominate Union County in the trenches. And if Union has had one Achilles' heel in recent years, it's the inability to slow power running teams.

The potency of Union County's offense has been reiterated over and over throughout this piece, but how far the Panthers advance in the postseason will ride on the defenses' ability to not get bullied by ground-and-pound offenses and get the ball back in the hands of Pierson Allison and company.

"Our biggest concern is facing teams that can just line up and overpower you," Coach Allison said. "Size-wise we're not going to be very big so we'll have to be tough and do a better job of putting people in the box. But it all comes down to stopping the run. We still have to do a better job there."

Summer Schedule	
June 17 th , 18 th , & 20 th	summer workout 8:30-11:30am
June 20 th	FCA passing camp at UCHS
June 21 st and 22 nd	Western Carolina Offensive Lineman Camp (do not know cost as of now)
June 24 th and 25 th	summer workout 8:30-10:00am. Meet at weight room.
June 26th - July 7th Dead Period	
July 8 th , 10 th & 11 th	summer workout 8:30-11:30am
July 9 th	Start at weight room. Throw against Robbinsville at 10:00am
July 10 th & 11 th	UCHS Lineman & 7 On 7 Camp 9:30am-12:30pm
July 15 th & 16 th	summer workout 8:30-11:30am
July 17 th & 18 th	padded camp at Habersham Central leave at 7:00am
July 22 nd & 23 rd	weight room at 8:30
July 22 nd & 23 rd	padded camp at UCHS 9:30-12:30pm
July 24 th	weight room at 8:30
PRACTICE OFFICIALLY BEGINS	
July 25 th , 26 th	conditioning practice 8:30-10:30. Weight room 10:30-11:30
July 29 th , 30 th and 31 st	conditioning practice 3:00-5:00
August 1 st & 2 nd	full pads practice 3:00-6:00.
August 5 th	practice 8:30-11:00, meet your teacher(TBA)
August 6 th	pictures 9:30am. Practice at 3:30
August 7 th	first day of school, practice at 3:30
August 9 th	Scrimmage vs Chestatee
August 16 th	Scrimmage at Habersham Central.
August 30 th	first game at East Hall 7:30.