

Sports

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Football: Habersham Central provides final tune-up before Aug. 30

Panther reserves score 14 unanswered in fourth to edge Raiders 31-21

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Mt. Airy - Union County is now in regular-season mode after wrapping up the preseason at Habersham Central with its second and final scrimmage contest. The East Hall Vikings are now in the crosshairs of head coach Brian Allison's squad as they begin preparation for the 2019 season opener, set for Aug. 30 in Rabbittown.

"I feel comfortable with the progress we've made and believe we're pretty close to where we should be," Coach Allison said. "There are a couple of areas that need a good bit of work but we're going to use this week to take a step back and work on some fundamentals and some smaller details."

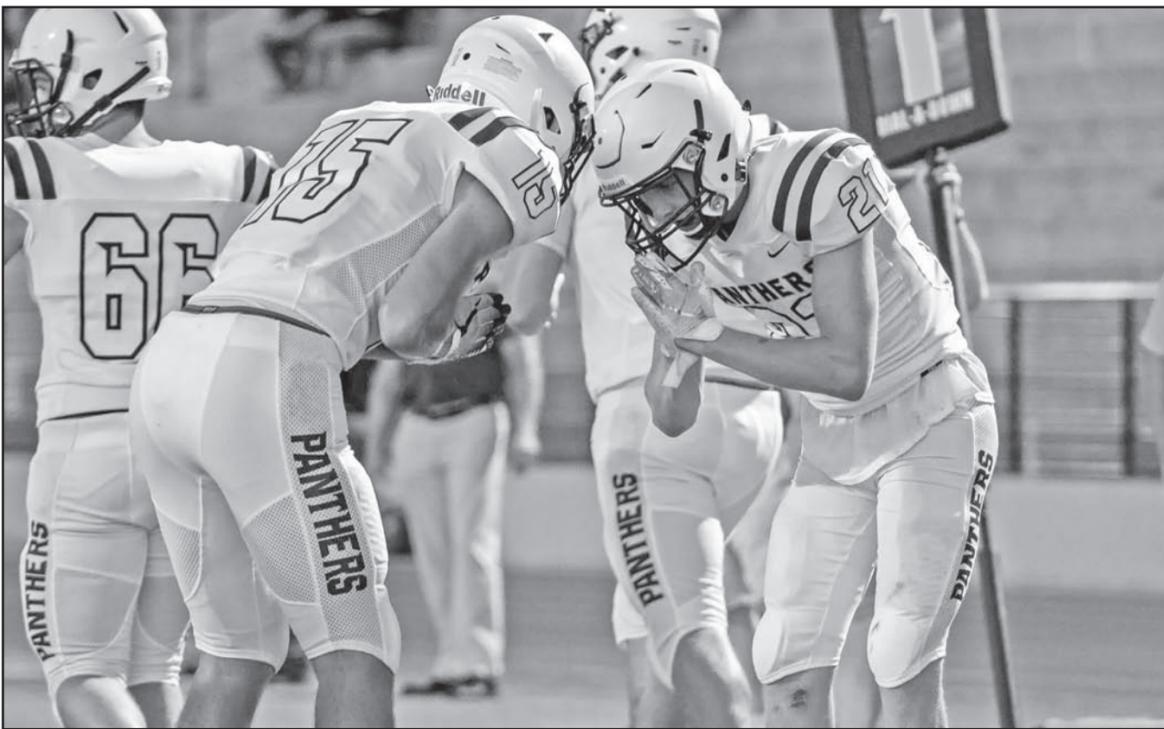
In last Friday's scrimmage with the Class 6A Raiders, the Panthers faced what might be the toughest opponent they'll see until Rabun County comes to town in November. And early on, Allison's defense had trouble adapting to the physicality of Habersham's offensive line and its shifty tailback Jackson Cloutre.

On the Raiders' first two offensive series, Cloutre carried the rock 11 times for 110 yards and a score as Union found itself in an early 14-3 hole. Arian Curry provided Cloutre with a breather on the second series and the bruising 5-11, 210-pound senior picked up 16 yards on two attempts.

"They (Habersham) were a physical football team up front and that's why we scheduled them as a scrimmage, because I knew it would be a good challenge for us," Coach Allison said. "I think we adjusted to it and that's something we're going to get better at as the weeks go on."

The Panthers' defense would tighten up in the second quarter, forcing a punt and a turnover to take a 14-10 deficit into the half. With 8:03 to play in the third, Habersham went to the air and connected on a 59-yard catch-and-run to open up a 21-10 advantage. Union County would respond on the ensuing possession as Pierson Allison hit Kyle Morlock in the endzone for a 27-yard scoring strike on 4th-and-1.

That would be the final play of the game for Pierson Allison and the first-team offense as the Panther reserves were



Wide receivers Kyle Morlock (15) and Sawyer Drake (21) celebrate Drake's 9-yard touchdown reception in the second quarter to pull Union County to within 14-10 at Habersham Central. Photo/Todd Forrest

in action for the final 17-plus minutes of the contest.

An unsportsmanlike conduct penalty derailed Habersham's final varsity drive as sophomore quarterback Logan Helcher took the reigns at his own 20-yard line following a Raider punt.

Helcher led the Panthers into the redzone before an interception gave the ball back to Habersham at its own 5-yard line. The big play on Helcher's opening series came on 3rd-and-4 from the 24 when Zion Ross took a screen pass 43-yards to the Raider 33. A completion to Josh Orr and an offside penalty had Union County at the Habersham 16 when the drive was halted by the turnover.

After giving up a 25-yard run on first down, the defense immediately buckled down and forced a punt and the offense took over at its own 36. On 3rd-and-7, sophomore Dalton Allen got behind the secondary on a deep corner route and picked up 49 yards. Three plays later, Helcher hit sophomore Eli Peugh in the endzone on a quick 4-yard strike to give Union the lead 24-21 following Allen's point after.

Allen would deliver another big play when he hauled in an over-the-shoulder grab from Helcher and raced 68-yards down the middle of the field for a Panther touchdown. Allen's

extra point would extend the Union advantage to 31-21 with 3:28 to play.

Allen would finish with a team-high 117 yards on two catches while Helcher finished 7-of-10 for 190 yards with two scores and an interception.

Pierson Allison was 17-for-27 with 240 yards, two touchdowns and a pick. Kyle Morlock led the starters with 69 yards and a score on four grabs. He also picked off a Raiders' pass right before half-time. Meanwhile, fellow senior Sawyer Drake hauled in a team-leading five catches to go with 56 yards and Union's first touchdown of the day.

Drake almost had a second score but his grab in the back-corner of the endzone was waved off via a holding penalty. As a result, the Panthers were unable to match Habersham's opening drive touchdown and settled for a 36-yard Mason McCombs field goal, trimming the margin to 7-3.

"Having [McCombs] out there definitely helps us, his leg has gotten stronger and I believe it will continue to get stronger as the year goes on," Coach Allison said. "Right now [his max distance] is around 46 or 47 yards but he was injured for four or five weeks (over the summer) and didn't kick at all so he's still trying to rebound from that."

Trailing 14-3, Union

County's second offensive series stalled at the Raiders' 17-yard line when a tipped pass fell into the arms of a defender at the goal line.

"The interception was an in-between ball," Coach Allison said. "It went off the receiver's fingers but at the same time it wasn't a great throw so I'm not going to put that on our receiver."

"Those kind of things happen [at all levels of] football and I think those are things that we will fix. Eliminating turnovers is one of the things that we've taken pride in over the last few years and it's something we're going to try and continue to do."

After forcing a punt and getting the ball back at its own 36, the Panthers finally found the endzone when Drake hauled in a 9-yard catch at the pylon. McCombs' point-after would bring Union County to within 14-10 but the drive proved costly as running back Jonah Daniel was lost for the evening after landing awkwardly on the turf. According to Coach Allison, the junior back cleared concussion protocol and is expected to be 100-percent in the opener.

In less than one half of play at Habersham, Daniel was piling up Habersham, Daniel was on the ground and as a target out of the backfield. When he left in the final minutes of the second quar-

ter, Daniel already had 42 yards on five carries and 35 yards on two receptions.

Senior linebacker Sloan Sutton topped Daniel and rushed eight times for 27 yards before giving way to the reserves in the latter stages of the third. John Mancuso had 48 yards on two catches, Cayden Rich finished with two grabs for 24 yards and McCombs caught two passes for 18 yards.

Ross had one catch for 43 yards, Orr had one for 11 yards and Noah Underwood caught one pass for 10 yards.

Sophomore Kyle Smith caught a pass for no gain and rushed once for two yards. Peugh had one touchdown grab of four yards and freshman Stein Harkins rushed six times for 24 yards.

Up next: In two weeks, the Panthers will visit East Hall, where they haven't won since the Bill McGraw era in 1959. Over the last 60 years, Union County has dropped all four of its meetings in Rabbittown, including a 62-42 loss in 2017. Including that loss two years ago, the Panthers are 0-3 at East Hall under Coach Allison.

In 2010, East Hall edged the Panthers 35-28. In 2000, a 35-21 loss to the Vikings knocked Union County from a potential 2-seed into a four-way tie for third, where the tiebreaker system ultimately eliminated the

Panthers from the postseason.

However, Union County should be the favorite entering this season's matchup as the Vikings are currently rebuilding under first-year head coach Michael Perry.

Perry returns to Hall County after spending the last two seasons at Roswell's Centennial High School, where he compiled a 15-8 record, including a Sweet 16 appearance in 2017.

Prior to Centennial, Perry was the offensive coordinator at Coffee County and Gainesville High. While at Gainesville, he was a part of the Red Elephants' 2012 State title team with current Houston Texans' quarterback Deshaun Watson behind center.

Perry is bringing his "Air Raid" offense to East Hall but despite the different name, it's a very similar style to the Panthers' spread attack.

In an interview with *Bo Wilson* of *AccessWDUN*, Perry summed up his offense as a system that sprays the ball all over the field to an assortment of different pass catchers.

"If you look at our stats (at Centennial), every skill player is getting the ball," Perry said. "It's even too. It's all spread out, because our big deal is we're not going to have the opposing defensive coordinator circle one guy and say, 'hey, if we stop that one guy, we're going to win the game.' We want them saying, 'what are we going to do with all these guys?'"

That will be much easier said than done since East Hall is coming off a 3-7 season that saw them allow 52 points a game. And in last week's scrimmage with Region 8-AA's Elbert County, the Vikings once again surrendered 50-plus in a 50-7 loss.

The Vikings are replacing its leading passer, its top four rushers, the top-two receivers and four offensive linemen from last season.

On defense, East Hall's top-five tacklers are gone, along with the top three in sacks and tackles for loss. One area the Vikings won't be lacking experience is in the secondary where three starters return to new defensive coordinator Shane Giardina's 4-2-5 scheme.

As of this writing, East Hall's quarterback battle is still unsettled with sophomore Clete Cooper and junior Luke England

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Sophomore Dalton Allen hauls in a Logan Helcher pass and takes it 68 yards to the house for Union County's final score of the scrimmage. Photo/Todd Forrest



After surrendering 130-plus rushing yards in the opening frame, the Union County defense settled down as the Panthers would go on to outscore the Raiders 28-7 over the final three quarters. Photo/Todd Forrest