

Sports

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Panthers hand Fannin worst home-opening loss in 39 years Rader's four TDs highlight Union's 300-yard rushing performance in 50-12 win

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
tforrest@ngame.com

Blue Ridge - Union County blew things open with 35 unanswered points, then added a late score to deliver Fannin County its worst home-opening loss since 1984 in a 50-12 rout on Thursday night.

The 38-point margin marked the most lopsided road victory in the rivalry's 32-game history, topping Union County's 36-0 victory in 2000.

On a 303-yard rushing night from the Panthers' offense, Braylen Rader provided most of the heavy lifting, recording a career-best four touchdowns during a bruising 135-yard performance.

"Our offensive line just took control of the game, and that let Rader do his thing," Union County head coach Michael Perry said.

Three of Rader's scores came during an opening half where Union County seized control in the second quarter for a commanding 28-6 advantage at the break.

With Union's aerial attack struggling to find a rhythm against a Rebels' defense keyed on the passing game, Rader established himself early and often.

"I couldn't have done any of it without my offensive line," Rader said after the game. "They played their butts off. It's not just me, it's the entire team. But it feels good to get this rivalry win. I think I speak for everyone when I say we all wanted to play our hearts out tonight."

Meanwhile, the Panthers' defense limited Fannin County to 268 yards of offense and forced three turnovers, beginning with senior Kooper Ashcraft's fumble recovery on the game's second play from scrimmage.

Starting at the Rebels' 27, Union County needed four plays to grab a 7-0 lead when Rader found a crease on second and goal from the seven.

Fannin responded with a six-play, 72-yard scoring drive capped off by a 31-yard read-option keeper by junior quarterback Lawson Sullivan. Union remained out front when a mishandled snap resulted in a botched point-after.

The Panthers fired back



Senior Braylen Rader became the first Union County running back in seven years to rush for four touchdowns in a single game during his 135-yard performance at Fannin County last Thursday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

by going 73 yards on 10 plays, converting three third downs before Rader rumbled 19 yards down the home sideline for a 14-6 lead. En route to Rader's second touchdown, senior quarterback Caiden Tanner used his legs to move the chains on a pair of third downs; however, the drive's pivotal conversion came on third and 7 at the Union 41, when senior tight end Tyler Grasty slipped behind the coverage and drew a desperation pass interference penalty near the Rebels' 30.

On the ensuing Fannin drive, senior defensive back Nolan Thompson scooped up a fumble near midfield, setting off a foot race down the Union sideline. The Rebels eventually forced Thompson out of bounds at the 2-yard line, but Fannin denied the Panthers' four attempts and regained possession inside the five.

A quick three-and-out by the Union defense set up Tanner with excellent field position, but after converting a fourth down that moved the offense inside the red zone, the Rebels

picked off Tanner's second-down throw from the 16.

"Fannin came out in a five-man box because they were definitely concerned about (wide receiver) Jensen Goble," Perry said. "Their game plan was to stop Goble and he was getting hit a bunch."

The Panthers' passing attack finally got on track before halftime after the teams traded punts on the heels of Tanner's interception. Starting at the Fannin 38, Tanner hit Grasty underneath on second and 8, and the senior cut upfield for 20. Two plays later, Tanner and Goble hooked up on a quick 5-yard scoring strike over the middle to build a 21-6 margin.

Another Fannin punt awarded the offense one last crack with 1:28 before the half, and senior Zach Taylor delivered the catch of the night, pulling down a Tanner jump ball at the three. One play later, Rader notched his third score of the half when he slipped into the endzone with 36 seconds on the clock.

Union began the third by

going 63 yards on five plays, highlighted by junior Connor Schuknecht's 26-yard carry and a 25-yard scoring run by Tanner.

"[Fannin] jumped Goble on that touchdown run so they had nobody on the quarterback and that's how [Tanner] had that long run," Perry said. "We knew if they were doing that we'd have success running the ball, and as they say, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' We also had some really good downfield blocking by our receivers. Ethan McBride threw a big block that sprung Tanner's touchdown."

Schuknecht showed out on the defensive end moments later, stepping up from his outside linebacker spot to drop a scrambling Sullivan for an 8-yard loss. With the Panthers taking over near midfield, Schuknecht's backfield mate, Rader, landed the knockout blow.

On the possession's first play, the senior back bowling-balled way into the endzone -- breaking six tackles while picking up a downfield block by Grasty on a 53-yard touchdown run.

Fannin's last gasp was denied by senior Taylor Whitehead's interception when he ripped a completed pass away from the Rebels' receiver inside the 5-yard line.

"Our defense line stepped up (with Lane Lance injured), and David Heredia played outstanding as usual," Perry said. "[Rutan] played very well and played through cramps; Whitehead and Schuknecht came up with some big plays for us on defense."

Fannin added an 11-play scoring drive to bring the margin to 42-12 during a running-clock fourth quarter.

Not to be outdone, the Union County reserves closed out the game in style via a 65-yard drive punctuated by freshman Bentley Rich's 13-yard run during the waning moments.

Schuknecht opened the series with carries of 30, 5 and 2 yards, respectively. Freshman quarterback Chetley Cox added 2 yards on third and 3, then Schuknecht got six on fourth and 1. Cox's keeper went for seven on first down, and Rich closed out the drive on the next

play. The Panthers finished with a 50-piece when Tanner scooped up a bad snap on the PAT and found a wide-open Grasty for 2 points -- Union's first 50-point road performance since putting up 74 at Putnam County in 2019.

Stats: *Passing* - Tanner 10-18, 167 yds, 1 TD, 1 INT. *Rushing* - Rader 15 car, 135 yds, 4 TD; Schuknecht 9 car, 92 yds; Tanner 10 car, 77 yds, 1 TD; Rich 1 car, 13 yds, 1 TD; Cox 2 car, 9 yds. *Receiving* - Goble 5 rec, 81 yds, 1 TD; Taylor 2 rec, 50 yds; Grasty 2 rec, 34 yds; Cade Dockrey 1 rec, 2 yds; Rader 1 rec, 1 yd.

Defense - Ethan Lester 13 tack; David Heredia 12 tack, 1 TFL, 1 sack, 1 FF, 2 QBH; Seth Rutan 12 tack, 1 TFL; Ashcraft 9 tack, 1 TFL, 1 FR, 1 PBU, 1 QBH; Whitehead 5 tack, 1 INT, 1 FF, 1 PBU; Dusty Aaron 4 tack; Braden Plott 3 tack; Daniel McPhee 3 tack; Dockrey 3 tack; Jonah Kluth 3 tack; Thompson 2 tack, 1 FR; Gunnar Franklin 1 tack.

Kicking - McBride 6-6 PATs; Zuriel Mancillas 1 TB.

Extra points: The 38-point margin at Fannin not only marked Union's most one-sided road win in the series but will go down as the rivalry's second most lopsided victory behind the Panthers' 49-7 rout in 2018. Union County now owns four of the five largest blowouts in the series.

*Rader becomes the first Panther to rush for four touchdowns since quarterback Logan Helcher's four TDs vs. Gilmer in 2021. No Union County running back has gone for four touchdowns in a game since Bo Lynch vs. East Hall on Sept. 30, 2016. Later in the 2016 season, quarterback Cole Wright rushed for four touchdowns in the regular season finale vs. Lumpkin County. Another QB, Joe Mancuso, scored four times on the ground vs. Greene County on Oct. 9, 2015.

*Union County's last 300-yard road rushing game came vs. Coach Perry's East Hall squad during the 2019 season opener. The Panthers went for 332 vs. Providence at home last October.

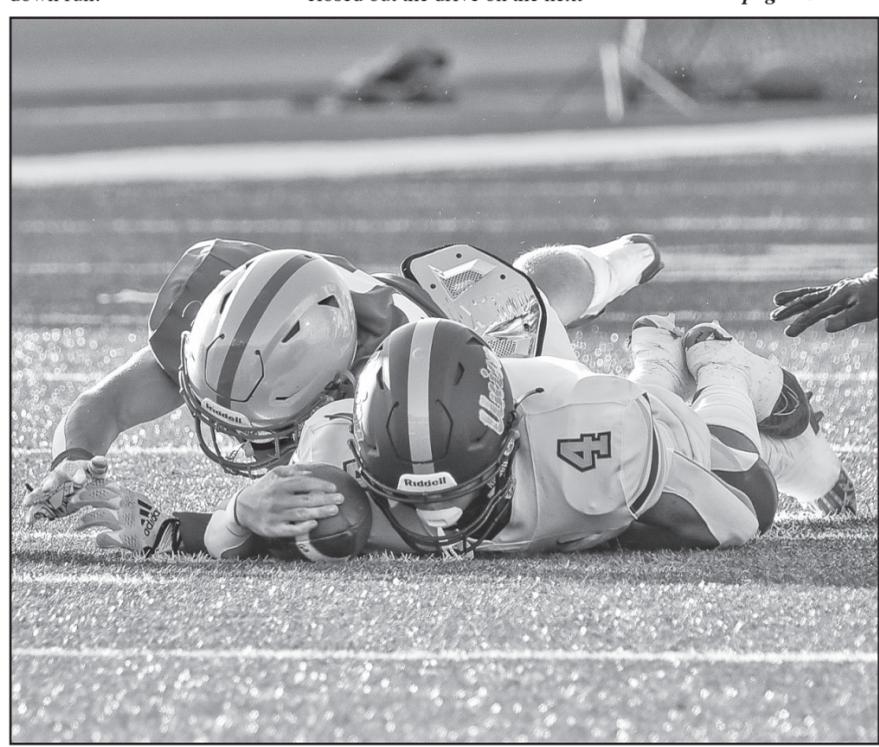
*Union leads the all-time series 17-15 vs. Fannin County.

*Fannin's home-opening loss in 1984 was a 41-0 defeat vs. Southeast Whitfield.

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Senior receiver Zach Taylor (14) snatches a Caiden Tanner pass off the helmet of a Fannin County defender to set up Union County's fourth touchdown of the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior linebacker Kooper Ashcraft (4) pounces on a Fannin County fumble during the opening minutes of Thursday's game. Photo/Todd Forrest

Softball: Lady Panthers blast Gilmer, blanked by Cohulla Creek

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Ellijay - Union County split two games on Saturday, blasting Gilmer 14-5 after getting blanked 8-0 by unbeaten Cohulla Creek (Dalton).

Lady Panthers 14, Gilmer 5 (six innings) - Union County broke things open with a seven-run third to mount a 10-0 lead before tacking on two apiece in the fifth and sixth frames.

Junior Sloane Dyer turned in a 4-for-4 performance at the plate, driving in two and scoring twice. Freshman Izzy Anthros knocked in three and scored a run during a 2-for-4 day.

Anthros, sophomore Ayla Jamison and freshman Zadie Diaz combined to scatter six hits over six innings in the circle but weren't done any favors with four Union County errors behind them.

Dyer's two-run single sparked a three-run first before Anthros' two-out single brought her home. The Lady Panthers pushed the lead to 10-0 in third courtesy of five straight one-out singles during the frame. Hits by Dyer, senior Brooklyn Brown, Anthros, sophomore Peyton Grisham and Diaz mounted a 6-0 lead. A Georgia Patton walk, a Katie Byers two-run single, an error and Gracie Gladding's RBI single opened things up at 10-0.

Three consecutive two-out hits by Gilmer put the Bob-



Junior Sloane Dyer went 4 for 4 vs. Gilmer with 2 RBIs during Union County's 14-5 win. Photo/Todd Forrest

cats on the board at 10-2 before Jamison closed the door via an inning-ending strikeout. Union County worked three straight walks in the fifth to set the stage for sophomore Delaney Moses' two-run double.

A Lady Panthers error followed by an RBI double put Gilmer in business during the home half of the fifth, but

Jamison escaped with her team holding a 12-5 lead. A costly two-run error by Gilmer allowed Union to pick up two add-on runs in the sixth.

Anthros worked a perfect bottom half to end the game at 14-5.

Gladding finished 2 for 3 with a run, a walk and an RBI; Patton scored twice and added



Senior Katie Byers slides safely into second during a game earlier this month. Last week, Byers scored a pair of runs vs. Gilmer and singled vs. Cohulla Creek. Photo/Todd Forrest

a pair of walks during a 1-for-2 day. Byers went 1 for 3, drove in one and scored twice; Brown scored once and went 1 for 4; Grisham ended her day 1 for 2 with a steal, a run, a hit-by-pitch and an RBI.

Moses knocked in two, swiped a bag and doubled during a 1-for-1 day. Diaz walked twice and went 1 for 2.

Diaz tossed 3 2/3 innings, allowed four hits and two earned. Jamison gave up two earned and two hits while fanning two over 1 1/3 innings. Anthros struck out a batter during one hitless inning.

Lady Panthers 0, Cohulla Creek 8 (four innings) - Cohulla Creek scored one in the first, four in the third and

three in the fourth during a five-inning victory over Union.

Byers, Gladding, Anthros and Diaz each singled in the loss. Anthros allowed four hits, five runs (one earned) and struck out four over 3 innings.

Diaz gave up two hits and three runs (two earned) in an inning of work.

Volleyball: Union picks up first win of '23 vs. Class AAAA East Forsyth

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

A 2-1 victory over East Forsyth on Tuesday, Aug. 15 headlined Union County volleyball's opening week.

Last week the Panthers traveled to Dawson County to open the 2023 season vs. the host Tigers and East Forsyth. Facing Dawson in the first match, Union County lost consecutive sets by scores of 25-18 and 25-14.

Against East Forsyth, the Panthers won back-to-back sets after dropping the first.

"It was great to start off the year with that win because [East Forsyth] was a very tough team," Union head coach Megan Brown said. "We dug down deep and did what we needed to do."

However, the roles were reversed in Thursday's trip to Pickens County when Union County took the first set of the best-of-five, 25-21. But the Dragons responded by taking the next three sets 25-12, 25-19 and 25-23.

Union County hosted Andrews, NC in Monday's home opener. The Panthers head back on the road Thursday to face Murray County and Gilmer in Ellijay.

"We're going to get in a lot of matches before region [play] starts," Brown said. "Right now they are learning how to play together, and the more time they can get on the court, the better. But they're adjusting well and the older girls are taking the younger ones under their wing and looking out for them."



Union County's second-year coach, Megan Brown, is impressed with the growth her young squad has shown through the first week of the 2023 season. Photo/Todd Forrest

Football: Panthers, Lumpkin County set for heavyweight showdown in Dahlonega on Friday

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County travels to Lumpkin County for an early-season measuring stick in Dahlonega on Friday, Aug. 25.

The Indians' season-opener vs. Riverside was canceled, but Lumpkin impressed in its preseason scrimmage vs. Banks County. Lumpkin went 8-3 last year in Class AAA but bowed out in a 49-21 loss at Oconee County during the first round of the playoffs.

The Indians return 16 starters from a 2022 squad that ended an eight-year postseason drought. One critical loss is at quarterback, where the Indians must replace 7-AAA Player of the Year Cooper Scott. Despite the graduation of its star QB, head coach Heath Webb still has a good one in-house with junior Cal Faulkner, who will be protected by five returning starters on the O-line.

"[Lumpkin] moved their receiver (Faulkner) to quarterback and he's their best athlete," Perry said. "They're going to run a lot of RPOs, so we need to come up with a plan for that. They are the best team we will see until the private schools (Athens Academy and Fellowship Christian) at



The Union sideline erupts at Fannin as Nolan Thompson (10) scoops up a Rebels' fumble. Photo/Todd Forrest

the end of the year. [Lumpkin is] really good on the line of scrimmage. When it comes to mountain schools, outside of Rabun County, they might be the best team."

When asked about the team's mindset heading into Dahlonega, Rader added, "We need to stay focused, stay together as a team and do the right thing this week."

The Panthers will likely be without senior defensive end Lane Lenozer (knee). Senior end David Heredia (ankle) missed the scrimmage but returned with 12 tackles and a sack at Fannin County.

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. at Lumpkin County High School. The Indians won last year's meeting 28-7 in Blairsville — Lumpkin's first

victory over Union since 2011. The Panthers lead the all-time series 24-16.

Union's last visit to Lumpkin came during a Region 7-AAA clash to close out the 2017 regular season. The Panthers held on for a 31-24 victory.

Lumpkin County's last home win in the series was the 28-13 victory in 2011.

Cross County opens '23 Thursday at Meeks Park



Union County cross country has been busy all summer in preparation for Thursday's season opener at Meeks Park. Both teams return the top-five runners from a girls' squad that placed fifth at state and a guys team that ended up 12th. Thursday's high school race begins at 5 p.m.