

Sports

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Purple Swarm delivers in 14-7 win over Fannin

Defense comes through as water-logged offenses sputter in rainy conditions

By Todd Forrest
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Union County's defense stuffed Fannin County (0-1) three times inside the 4-yard line to survive a rivalry-game thriller that saw a one-hour lightning delay followed by heavy rain for most of the contest.

With the win, Union County (1-0) halts a two-game slide to Fannin and regains a 16-15 series edge in a rivalry that turned 40 years old this year.

Clinging to a 14-7 advantage with 2 seconds left, senior defensive back Sam Page snuffed out Corbin Davenport's designed quarterback run as time expired, sending his teammates rushing onto the field in celebration.

"We're 1-0 with a win over our biggest rival, who is a two-time defending region champion, you can't beat that," said Coach Micheal Perry after the game.

Union County's sideline rushed the field moments earlier when junior Kooper Ashcraft chased down Davenport from behind on second and goal from the two. As the horn sounded, excitement erupted on the home side of the field, but a Fannin timeout put the celebration on hold and two seconds back on the clock.

With the game on the line, the Rebels went back to the man responsible for the bulk of the team's 199 yards rushing, but Davenport was unable to escape Page's grasp.

With Ashcraft attacking off the edge on the play, Davenport immediately side-stepped the blitz and raced left, looking for room on the outside and leaving Page on an island. But the senior safety tracked the Fannin star, corralling him at the five and dragging his left shoulder to the turf.

"Throughout the whole game, they had been going to that same play," said an exhausted Page on Friday night. "They would fake right and go left, so I had a feeling they would do that again at the goal line and I just went after it. It's a wonderful feeling. We've had to deal with losing to them for two years, so it feels great to get this win."

For much of the night, it looked like Fannin would extend its winning streak to three, but a pair of Union touchdowns in the final 12-plus minutes pushed the Panthers ahead of the stunned



Rain severely hampered both offenses through the first three quarters following a 61-minute lightning delay to start the game. Both teams finally took the field at 8:31 p.m. but the two offenses combined for just 19 passing yards on four completions during the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest

visitors.

Playing in monsoon conditions in the early going, a 56-yard run by Davenport set up the only score of the first half, when he lunged into the endzone six plays later on third and goal at the nine.

The Union offense continued spinning its wheels in the third after the defense forced a three-and-out to open the half. The momentum eventually shifted late in the quarter when the Panthers' defense swung the field position by inducing a punt from the Fannin 16-yard line.

Starting inside Rebels territory, quarterback Cayden Tanner finally found a rhythm, beginning with a 4-yard swing pass to senior Griff Young on first down. On second down, he fired a strike to junior Ethan McBride for 13 yards, then hit junior Zack Taylor on the outside for 10 more.

"It took me until about the third quarter to settle in, but when I finally did, I started throwing the ball a whole lot better," Tanner said after the game.

A handoff up the gut to sophomore Connor Schuknecht picked up 4 yards, but a pair of incompletions brought up a critical fourth-down play. On fourth and 6 from the 16, Goble lined up in the slot and found a seam in Fannin's zone, pulling

down Tanner's high throw at the goal line with a safety draped on his left shoulder.

"I told the guys at half-time that we were intentionally conservative on offense in the first half because we couldn't throw the ball in that weather," Perry said. "But then I told them, 'in the second half, be prepared to take some shots because we're going to have to if we want to win this game.' Luckily the rain eased up later in the game and we were able to start throwing it."

Tied at 7-7 following McBride's point-after, the Rebels advanced into the Union red zone, bringing up fourth and 1 from the 19. But the Union defense rose to the occasion again behind Ashcraft and senior Gage Barnes, who smothered a quarterback roll-out and dropped the Rebels for a 6-yard loss.

Both offenses would swap punts, giving the ball back to Union County at its own 31 with 4:49 on the clock. Tanner hit Goble on consecutive short passes to open the game-winning drive, then he kept it himself on third and 1 to move the chains after a measurement. Three plays later, Tanner hit Grasty down the middle for 29 yards on third and 7, setting up a second-down deep ball to Young, whose over-the-shoulder grab at the two set up

a first and goal.

The go-ahead score came on the very next snap when Schuknecht powered his way into the endzone behind the right side of the offensive line with 1:22 remaining.

"Cody Meeks had a great block on their big [defensive lineman] and that's what really opened things up," Perry said.

As Union County sensed victory up 14-7, Davenport nearly bailed out the Rebels one final time, taking the ensuing kickoff 79 yards down the far sideline, but senior Liam Cone chased him down at the 15 to prevent a game-tying score.

"If he doesn't hustle back and make that tackle, the game is tied, simple as that," Perry said.

Three consecutive handoffs moved Fannin inside the 5-yard line, bringing up first and goal with 28 seconds left. Ahead of Union's second and third-down stops, Page made the first of his two tackles on the final series, meeting Davenport in the hole on first down, stopping him cold in a violent collision.

"Our defense locked them down the whole night," said Tanner, offering a compliment to his teammates after the game. "What a great tackle by Sam at the end to secure the game. But our entire defense played great all night."

"He was leaving the pocket way too soon," Perry said. "As soon he took the snap, he started rolling, and that messes everything up. We had them blocked, so there was no reason to scramble. He was just seeing ghosts in the first half, which is normal for a quarterback in his first start. But that's something we talked about at halftime and he made some clutch throws in the second half."

Goble's six catches marked a career-high, ending the game with 45 yards and a score. Young had five grabs for 40 yards while Grasty, McBride, Taylor and Braylen Rader caught one pass each.

The running backs, Rader and Schuknecht finished with 15 yards apiece on the ground, while Tanner added 9 yards rushing.

Up next: Following the 31st meeting with Fannin County, the Panthers host Lumpkin County on Friday in the 41st contest between the Indians and Union County.

The Panthers own a 24-15-1 record against Lumpkin in a series dating back to 1961. Union's last loss came in 2011 as the Panthers won the next four meetings, coming in four straight seasons between 2014-2017.

The Indians are on the upswing following an 0-10 season in 2020 and a 2-8 campaign last year. Lumpkin is currently 1-0 on the heels of last week's 61-7 thrashing of Riverside Military Academy.

Despite piling up 61 points, the Indians only attempted five passes as three different runners combined for seven touchdowns.

Junior Mason Sullens scored four times and tallied 121 yards on 13 carries. Basketball star and sophomore quarterback Cal Faulkner rushed five times for 63 yards and two touchdowns. In all, Lumpkin amassed 303 yards on the ground, averaging 10.6 yards per carry.

"Lumpkin is a much better team this year," Perry said. "They are a spread-option offense, and the biggest thing for our guys is not shooting ourselves in the foot. We just have to continue getting better in all phases, especially on offense. Lumpkin is going to be a challenge, and they're going to defend us a lot differently than Fannin County did."

Friday's kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.



Senior linebacker Gage Barnes (35) prepares to lead Union County onto the field in the 2022 season opener vs. Fannin County. Barnes also led the Panthers with 13 tackles in the victory. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior defensive back Sam Page (14) drags Fannin County's workhorse senior quarterback Corbin Davenport to the turf as time expires following a third and goal play from the 4-yard line. Photo/Todd Forrest

Softball: Lady Panthers put up 34 runs in wins over Dawson, Fannin

Burnette blanks Lumpkin County, Union suffers first loss Saturday vs. Bremen

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The Lady Panthers (4-1) won three of four last week, culminating with an 8-0 loss to Class AAA Bremen in the final game of Saturday's doubleheader at the University of North Georgia.

Lady Panthers 6, Lumpkin County 0 - Junior Sierra Burnette fired a two-hit shutout, matching a career-high with eight strikeouts in her second win of the year on Monday, Aug. 15.

Junior catcher Gracie Gladding continued to swing a hot bat, going 3 for 3 with a double and 2 RBIs. Burnette, Katie Byers and Georgia Patton each went 2 for 4.

Burnette's leadoff triple opened the scoring in the top of the first, coming around on senior Jaycee Seabolt's RBI groundout. Burnette's second hit helped extend the margin to 2-0 when courtesy runner Peyton Grisham stole second and scored via a Lumpkin County error during the third.

Patton began the fourth with a base hit and a stolen base, eventually crossing home on another Indians' fielding miscue.

A Massey walk and a Gladding single made it 4-0 in the fifth, then Gladding opened the flood gates with a two-run double in the sixth, scoring Byers and sophomore Sloane Dyer.

Union County left the bases loaded in the seventh and Burnette escaped after a hit batter in the bottom half.

Seniors Caroline Karnes, Chloe Potts and Seabolt each went 1 for 4; Dyer finished 1 for 3 with a run and Grisham scored twice.

Lady Panthers 20, Fannin County 5 (4 innings) - One day later, Union County exploded for eight in the fourth, eventually ending the contest via the mercy rule when Seabolt belted a



Senior Jaycee Seabolt lines a three-run homer off the left field scoreboard to end the Fannin game with a 20-5 rout. Photo/Todd Forrest

three-run shot off the left-field scoreboard and Burnette brought her home with an infield single.

The Lady Panthers added five more runs in the second with RBIs off the bats of Gladding and Dyer.

An RBI double by Fannin trimmed the margin to 9-4 but junior Jewell Massey scored on an error, then RBI singles from Gladding and Seabolt pushed the Union County margin to 12-4 after three.

The Rebels used a fourth-inning sacrifice fly to score their fifth run but the Lady Panthers put up an 8-spot in the bottom half to bring the contest to an early end.

Dyer followed Patton's leadoff double with an RBI single, then Karnes drew a walk and Massey reached on an error that brought home Dyer. Karnes came around on Burnette's single and a two-run double from Byers made it a 17-5 game, setting the table



Sophomore Sloane Dyer deals during the Fannin win. Later in the week, Dyer plated the game-winning run vs. Dawson. Photo/Todd Forrest

for Seabolt after Gladding going to be successful."

Lady Panthers 13, Dawson County 13 - Dyer's sacrifice fly scored Grisham in the bottom of the seventh as the Lady Panthers escaped a slugfest in Saturday's opener at the University of North Georgia.

Union County mounted an early 9-2 lead but the Tigers got two in the bottom of the second and three in the third. Union County built a 12-7 advantage after five until Dawson County trimmed the deficit to 12-10 in the sixth and grabbed the lead with three in the seventh.

Down 13-12 in its final at-bat, Gladding opened the frame with her third double of the game and Seabolt moved courtesy-runner Jaslyn Roberts to third on a single to left field.

Grisham entered for Seabolt and immediately swiped second, prompting

Dawson to issue a bases-loaded intentional walk to Potts. The Tigers couldn't handle a grounder to third off the bat of Patton, bringing home the tying run.

With the winning run at third, Dyer's fly ball to center was deep enough to score Grisham for the walk-off victory.

Byers finished 4 for 5 with three steals. Gladding doubled three times and knocked in two during a 3-for-4 game.

Seabolt went 2 for 5 with 2 RBIs and Karnes scored twice, stole three bags and knocked in a run during a 2-for-3 game. Potts drove in a pair during a 1-for-4 day and Burnette went 1 for 4 with a run.

Massey stole two bases during a 1-for-3, one-RBI game. Dyer drove in two, finishing 1 for 3 with a run. Patton scored and knocked in a run; Roberts scored twice, while Brown and Grisham added one run apiece.

Dyer tossed two innings in the start, allowing three hits and seven earned. Sophomore Ila Bragg went 4 1/3, surrendering seven hits and six earned runs. Burnette picked up her third win of 2022 in relief, giving up three hits and no runs over the final 2/3 of an inning.

Lady Panthers 0, Bremen 8 - Union County lost its first game of the year on Saturday, Aug. 20 in Dahlonega.

No details were available at press time. The Lady Panthers continue their non-region slate, visiting Pickens on Tuesday for a 6 p.m. first pitch.

Union County will participate in a weekend tournament at Oconee County beginning with Friday games vs. Barrow Arts and Science Academy (4 p.m.) and Pace Academy (6 p.m.). The Lady Panthers will face Savannah Christian at 9 a.m. Saturday morning.

XC: Freshman Lola Hunter begins high school career by defeating 8-AA champ

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Tiger - Over the summer, Union County cross country coach Paige Dyer predicted a bright future for the incoming freshmen, particularly on the girls side.

And after just one race, the future has arrived.

Union County freshman Lola Hunter's high school career got underway on Thursday, Aug. 18 at Rabun County with a decisive victory. But what made the win so remarkable is who she beat, and how and where she did it.

Rabun County senior Molly Jo Wright entered the race as the clear favorite on her home course. At last year's region meet, Wright took home the 8-AA title by 23 seconds over Union senior Hana Gregory at Unicoi State Park. Wright went on to place 15th at state, defeating Union's Ashley Shipes (25th) by 35 seconds and Gregory (34th) by over a minute.

Fast-forward to last Thursday and it was Hunter leaving the competition in the dust, earning a gold medal with a time of 23:35.

Wright came in a distant second at 24:24. Union County's Ellie Adams finished fourth, clocking in at 25:11 to help Union County take home first in the team standings with 46 points.



Union County freshman Lola Hunter approaches the finish line in her season-opening win at Rabun County. Photo/submitted

Rabun finished second with 54 points and Franklin, North Carolina placed third with 58.

The Union guys came in second overall with 41 points, falling short of Franklin's 27.

Juniors Benton Gregory and Sam Seiler set the pace for the Panthers, finishing third and sixth, respectively.

Gregory crossed the line

with a time of 20:17 and Seiler clocked in at 21:10.

Rabun County placed third in the team standings with 65 points. Towns County came in fourth at 148 and Rabun Gap rounded out the top-five at 153.

Union County is at home on Thursday, Aug. 25 when they host the annual Meeks Park race at 4:30 p.m.



Union County cross country placers at last Thursday's Rabun County race (L-R): Sixth-place junior Sam Seiler, third-place junior Benton Gregory, fourth-place junior Ellie Adams and first-place freshman Lola Hunter. Photo/submitted

Volleyball: Megan Brown era begins with victories over Elbert and Stephens

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Members of the Panthers volleyball team during their pancake breakfast fundraiser from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. on Saturday morning at Blairsville's Longhorn Steakhouse. Plates were \$5 each and included two pancakes, sausage and a drink. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Union County High School 2022 volleyball team finally took the floor on Tuesday, Aug. 16 with a tri-match sweep of Elbert County and host Stephens County.

The Panthers opened with a 2-1 win over Stephens before taking down Elbert County in straight sets.

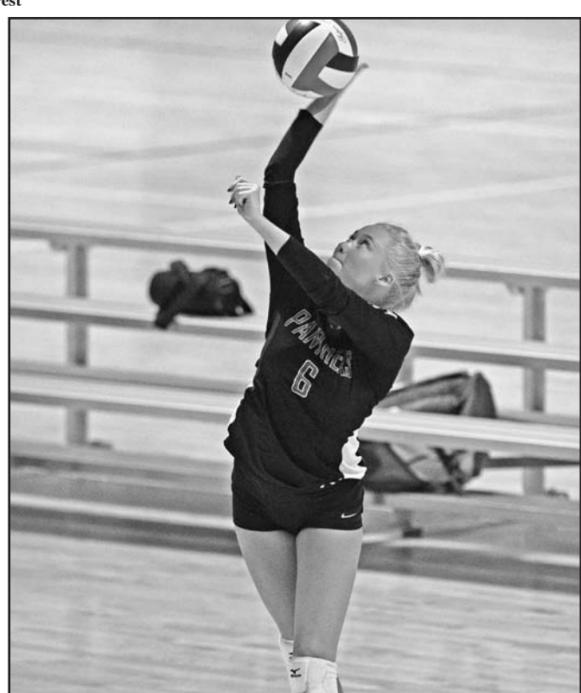
The competition took a significant leap forward on Thursday when Union County visited Dawson County for a tri-match with the Tigers and Chestatee.

The War Eagles made quick work of Union County in two sets (25-16, 25-14), and during the night cap, Dawson knocked off the Panthers in another straight-set defeat.

With a 2-2 record following the opening week, Union County hosted Rabun Gap and Rabun County on Monday, Aug. 22 in the season's home opener. No results are available after the Monday morning deadline.

On Tuesday, the Panthers will visit Fannin County where they will face Rabun County at 6 p.m. and the host Rebels at 7 p.m.

Over the weekend, Union County will participate in North Forsyth's Coal Mountain Classic. On Saturday, Aug. 27 at 10 a.m., the Panthers will face South



Union County senior Haleigh Helcher. Photo/Todd Forrest

Effingham.

Union County and Johns Creek will square off at noon, followed by a meeting with Lumpkin County at 2 p.m.

The Panthers will play at 3 p.m. against an opponent to be determined.

Last weekend, Union County volleyball players and coaches took over Longhorn Steakhouse from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., hosting a pancake breakfast to raise money for the program.

Learn to Play Pickleball

Free Beginners Classes every Tuesday at 6 p.m. (weather permitting).

All equipment is provided and there is no need to sign-up... just come.

Courts are located on Chase Drive behind the Health Department. For more information contact: blairsvillepickleball@yahoo.com