

Sports

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Football: Red zone miscues haunt Panthers in Lumpkin loss

Union County and Towns County renew rivalry Friday night in Hiawasse

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Union County couldn't rebound from an early 21-0 deficit, turning it over on consecutive possessions to open the game while allowing touchdowns on Lumpkin County's first three drives during a 28-6 home loss.

Once the shell-shocked Panthers gathered themselves, a costly penalty negated Griff Young's 92-yard kickoff return, taking 6 points off the scoreboard and sewing further doubt that it simply wasn't Union County's night.

As Lumpkin County moved up and down the field at will, amassing nine plays of 10-plus yards during the first half, the Panthers found success between the 20s for much of the night but failed to finish drives. Union's offense moved into Indians territory on each of its four first-half possessions but scored only once, coming via a 16-yard, fourth-and-goal reception by Zach Taylor with under a minute left before halftime.

"We couldn't stop [Lumpkin] in the first half, but our inability to score in the red zone is why we lost the game," Union County head coach Michael Perry said.

After a thunderstorm delayed the second half by one hour, Union County failed to catch lightning in a bottle for a second time in consecutive games.

Potential scoring opportunities continued to stall on the Indians' side of the field, beginning with a pair of unsuccessful red zone trips to begin the third quarter.

Kicking off to begin the second half on the wrong end



Senior Griff Young slips the grasp of one final defender during his first-half kick return TD that wasn't meant to be. Photo/Todd Forrest

of a 21-6 score, the Panthers' defense delivered its first stop of the night, forcing a three-and-out and handing possession back to Cayden Tanner and the offense. From the Union 29, Tanner connected with Tyler Grasty for 9 yards on first down. Then the junior quarterback used his legs to scramble out of trouble and escape down the near sideline for 44 yards.

With a first down at the Lumpkin County 18, a costly holding penalty dropped Union back to the 35, followed by an incompletion and two sacks that turned it over on downs at the Indians' 45-yard line.

Once again, the defense

did its job and the Panthers took over at their own 8-yard line. On third-and-2 from the 16, Tanner and Connor Schuknecht connected a 76-yard wheel route after two airborne Lumpkin defenders collided on the interception try.

Schuknecht came down with the football and stayed in bounds before getting chased down from behind at the 5-yard line. But things immediately unraveled from there, beginning with a high snap that Braylen Rader was able to salvage for a no-gain, followed by a costly 8-yard sack.

On third-and-goal from the 13, junior wide receiver Jensen Goble laid out for a circus catch in the endzone, appearing to tap his right foot before his fully-extended body crashed to the sideline. However, the official stationed at the goal line signaled an incompletion, ruling Goble out of bounds. Things only got worse for the home team as an errant snap on fourth down forced Tanner into a desperation back-foot heave with two defenders bearing down. Despite Goble's best efforts to come down with the jump ball, two Indians were able to bat the ball away at the goal line.

"I was proud of our defense in the second half, and offensively, we moved the ball, we just couldn't punch it in," Perry said. "We'd drive down the field, and then we'd do something stupid. It reminded me of a scrimmage game. The mistakes were that bad."



Sophomore running back Connor Schuknecht is off to the races on a 76-yard, third-quarter catch-and-run. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union's defense awarded its offense another second-half opportunity, coercing Lumpkin into its third consecutive punt of the half. Union County would start from the shadow of its endzone early in the fourth, but a dropped pass on third-and-5 brought the punt team onto the field.

Senior punter Wilson Walker couldn't pull down the high snap at the 1-yard line, leading to a partially-blocked kick that allowed Lumpkin to set up shop 24-yards from paydirt.

Union County's defense quickly bumped the Indians into a third and 15, but a back-breaking 25-yard completion, just beyond the fingertips of Walker at the 4-yard line, awarded Lumpkin a fresh set of downs. The Panthers made the Indians use all four of those downs before senior quarterback Cooper Scott blasted his way into the endzone from two yards out.

Looking at a 28-6 margin with 4:44 on the clock, Union County continued to pile up the yardage but not the points.

From the 38-yard line, Tanner and Grasty hooked up for 13, then Rader took a third-down screen pass inside the Lumpkin County 40. Later, on fourth and 1 at the 29, Union's offense went to the Wildcat formation, but Lumpkin stopped Young's keeper a yard short, securing the Indians' victory.

The Panthers ended the contest with only 6 points to show for seven trips into plus territory. Three of those drives advanced inside the Lumpkin County 13-yard line, where Union's only score came via Taylor's 16-yard reception on fourth and goal.

Down 21-0 in the second quarter, the Panthers' lone scoring drive began with a 12-yard catch by Young and a 29-yard wheel route to Schuknecht.

Tanner hit Grasty in the flat for 18 yards when the junior tight end moved the pile inside the five, resulting in a first-and-goal at the three. And as was the case all night, Union shot itself in the foot with a chance to put points on the board.

A first down handoff to Rader got a yard, then Lumpkin gobbled up Tanner in the backfield for a loss of three. On third and goal, a missed assignment gifted an Indians' defensive end a free run at the quarterback, leading to an 11-yard loss with

held a 242-168 edge through the air while the visitors won the ground battle 143-63.

Goble finished with career highs of nine catches and 61 yards, Schuknecht's 102 yards receiving were also a career-best, coming on just two receptions. Young caught four passes for 40 yards and Grasty had three grabs for 40 yards - both career highs. Taylor's two receptions went for 17 yards and a touchdown; Rader finished with 10 yards on one catch.

Tanner turned in 21-for-33 passing performance with a career-high 250 yards in just his second start behind center.

To put those numbers in perspective, recent quarterback Logan Helcher's best passing performance through two starts was 212 yards in 2020. Pierson Allison topped out at 272 yards through two starts in 2018, and Cole Wright's two-start high was 166 yards in 2016. Joe Mancuso threw for 314 yards in his first career start in 2013, but it's worth noting that Mancuso went for 352 at Fannin County one week earlier while sharing snaps with then-starter Ralston Drake.

Tanner's night vs. Lumpkin County ended with 36 yards rushing on 11 carries. Schuknecht had 17 yards on five touches and Rader rushed four times for 8 yards.

Senior Elijah Helton and junior Seth Rutan led the defense with 12 tackles each. Rutan added one sack and five tackles for loss (TFL); Helton recorded 3 TFL.

Junior Kooper Ashcraft made 10 stops with 2 TFL; junior David Heredia added nine tackles and 3 TFL; Walker had nine tackles, a sack and 2 TFL. Senior Gage Barnes ended up with seven tackles, a sack and 3 TFL.

Senior Sam Page and junior Lane Lance recorded six tackles apiece, with Lance picking up one tackle behind the line of scrimmage. Seniors Elijah Haynes, Noah Helton and Nolan Thompson had two stops each.

Up next: Union County and Towns County get reacquainted in Union's first visit to Hiawasse since 2018. The Purple and Gold have won 20 straight over the Indians, sporting a 31-1 all-time series lead and a 16-0 mark at Towns County. Union's only loss came in a 27-17 affair on Sept. 24, 1993.

Like the Panthers, the Indians enter Friday with a 1-1 record following their 23-0 win over first-year varsity program Lake Oconee Academy (0-2). Towns County dropped a 13-12 heartbreaker on Aug. 19 at Hayesville, North Carolina, two weeks removed from a 20-0 scrimmage loss at Polk County, Tennessee.

The Indians are under the direction of fourth-year head coach Jason Roquemore, while first-year junior quarterback Connor Chastain guides the offense. Senior RB/LB Seth Gillis returns as Towns County's primary offensive weapon and defensive anchor. Offensively, the Indians are flanked by a speedy senior receiver in Grant Ingram.

"I'm excited to finally get the chance to play [Towns County]," Perry said. "They give a tremendous effort all the time, and I know it will be more of the same when they play us. I expect a really competitive game, and we're going to have to play well if we want to win."



Junior QB Cayden Tanner breaks free out of the backfield for 31 yards on a first quarter third-and-11 conversion. Photo/Todd Forrest



Jensen Goble (12) dives between a pair of defenders, giving up his body to secure Tanner's pass. Unfortunately, Goble was ruled out of bounds despite video showing his right foot touching in the endzone before his right elbow landed out of bounds. The junior receiver still finished with a career-high nine catches. Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Panthers sweep RGN and Rabun in 2022 home debut

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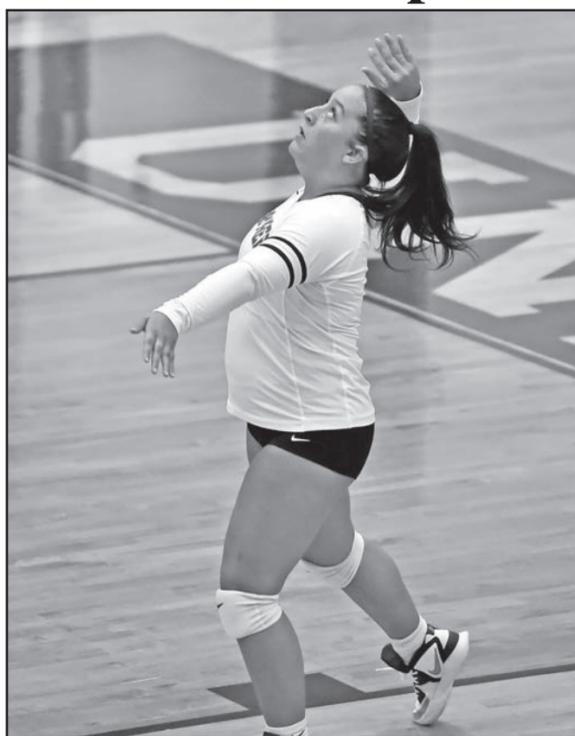
Union County (6-2) defeated Rabun Gap-Nacoochee and Rabun County in straight sets during its home opener on Monday, Aug. 22, then went on to sweep Fannin County and Rabun a day later in Blue Ridge.

After rallying from a 20-16 deficit on Monday to edge Rabun Gap 25-23 in set one, Union County trailed 18-17 in set two before fending off the Eagles 27-25 to secure the match.

"This team works really well together and the teamwork is definitely top-notch," said first-year coach Megan Brown following Union County's first home match. "They don't give up, they fight and they're scrappy. They work really well together and they bounced back after some early struggles against a tough [Rabun Gap] team."

The Panthers raced ahead 19-18 before the two sides began trading points, resulting in a 24-23 Union County advantage. On match point, a Panthers' service error evened the score once again, followed by another unforced error that put Rabun Gap in front 25-24.

But Union County answered with three straight points to secure the 27-25 victory. The late spark came via a



Senior Presley Berry serves during Union's first-set victory over Rabun County at home last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

Mattie Brookshire kill, a Kaylee Ashcraft ace and a Saylor Noe kill for the win.

"We had great fan support here tonight and that really helps the girls," Brown said. "It's a really fun and exciting atmosphere when all the fans and students come out to support us."

In Monday's tri-match finale, Union faced an old rival

in Rabun County, who was riding high off a come-from-behind 2-1 victory in its Hwy. 441 battle vs. RGN. Despite entering with momentum on their side, the Wildcats put up very little resistance in the 2-0 loss, dropping the first set 25-12 before losing 25-11 in set two.

With Presley Berry opening on the serve and Sofia Swartz controlling the net in



Senior Sofia Swartz attacks Rabun Gap at the net during the second set of last week's 2-0 victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

the early going, Union raced out front to leads of 6-1 and 7-2. Rabun showed a brief sign of life, narrowing its deficit to 7-5 until an Ashcraft kill ignited a 6-0 Panthers run.

Noe extended the Union advantage to 15-7, then Ashcraft delivered a pair of late kills as her team took the last four points of the set.

Early in the second set,

the Panthers continued to dominate in a matchup between the last two Area 8 champions, seizing control via a 9-1 edge.

Rabun County remained within single digits at 15-6 and 19-10 but were overwhelmed down the stretch, dropping six of the final seven points.

The Panthers and Wildcats met again on Tuesday, Aug. 23 in Blue Ridge with

Union prevailing by a 2-0 score. Unlike 24 hours earlier, the Panthers were unable to run Rabun County out of the gymnasium, taking the sets by a much-tighter margins of 25-17 and 25-21.

In Tuesday's nightcap, Union County held off Fannin County in straight sets, 25-21 and 25-22.

At press time, no results were available for Union's weekend tournament at North Forsyth.

The Panthers host Fannin County on Thursday, Sept. 1 at 6 p.m. Region play opens next Thursday, Sept. 8 at Athens Academy (7-6), who recently dropped a 2-1 contest (27-25, 18-25, 10-15) to Union's 2020 and 2021 final-four nemesis, Pace Academy. The Spartans, however, rallied past Lovett, another 2021 Class AA Final Four program, by a 2-1 score (21-25, 25-18, 15-13).

After Monday's victories over Rabun and Rabun Gap, Coach Brown praised her squad's ability to remain cool under fire, something that will certainly be tested in a revamped Region 8-AA.

"Whenever these girls find themselves in high-pressure situations, they always seem to rise up and perform," she said. "They've played together for a long time, which is why they work so well as a group and have such great team chemistry."

Softball: Lady Panthers win two of three at Oconee County tourney

Union County stumbles late during last Tuesday's loss at Pickens

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Union County (6-3) won two of four last week, beginning with a 10-2 loss at Pickens before taking two of three over the weekend at the Oconee County tournament.

The Lady Panthers have two more tune-up games before opening region play against the defending 8-AA champion Banks County on Thursday, Sept. 8.

Lady Panthers 2, Pickens 10 - The Dragons exploded for six runs in the fifth inning to finish off Union County via the mercy rule.

Pickens grabbed an early 4-0 lead, scoring two runs apiece in the first and second innings off Sierra Burnette. The junior pitcher worked four innings, allowing six hits, two walks and two earned runs.

Union County responded with two in the fourth when senior Jaycee Seabolt led off the frame with a double to left field. A one-out triple by junior Georgia Patton put Union on the scoreboard before she cut the lead in half by beating a throw home courtesy of a Slone Dyer grounder.

Trailing 4-2, the Lady Panthers would strand the tying run at first after senior Caroline Karnes drew a one-out hit by pitch.

Katie Byers' leadoff single went to waste in the fifth, and Pickens put the game away in the bottom half of the frame, capitalizing on four walks, two singles, a hit batter and an RBI groundout to break things open at 10-2.

Patton finished 2 for 2, scoring once and driving in a run. Byers went 2 for 3 at the dish, while Burnette and Seabolt each turned in a 1-for-3 performance. Sophomore Lily Helton scored once as a courtesy runner.

Dyer surrendered six earned runs over 1/3 of an inning. Freshman Jaslyn Roberts went 1/3 of an inning, giving up a walk and a hit.

Lady Panthers 21, BASA 5 - Union County unleashed the Kraken during the third frame on Friday night, plating 19 runs and ending the contest early in the Oconee tourney opener.

Barrow Arts and Sciences Academy (BASA) jumped out front 4-0 in the top of the first, then added a run in the second for a 5-1 advantage.

Byers started in the



Junior shortstop Georgia Patton reached base five times in four games last week, scoring four runs and driving in two. Photo/Todd Forrest

circle and was charged with four earned runs over 1/3 of an inning before giving way to Roberts, who allowed a run in the second but navigated a one-out, bases-loaded jam in the third.

Facing a 5-2 deficit, Union County opened the floodgates in the third. Nine straight Lady Panthers reached to begin the frame, taking a 9-5 advantage when Burnette, who started the inning with a single, eventually recorded the first out on an RBI grounder to third.

After Burnette's base knock led off the frame, Byers brought her home with an RBI single and junior Gracie Gladding worked a base on balls. Consecutive doubles by Seabolt and senior Chloe Potts moved Union County in front 6-5. A hit-by-pitch to Patton and a two-run single by Dyer built an 8-5 lead before they loaded the bases via a Karnes single and a Jewell Massey walk.

Burnette's groundout made it 9-5, but Byers walked to load the bags and set the table for Gladding's three-run double. Seabolt's second dou-

ble of the inning extended the margin to 13-5, scoring courtesy runner Brooklyn Brown. Following a Potts single and another Patton hit-by-pitch, Dyer drew a bases-loaded walk and Karnes brought home Patton on a fielder's choice.

Dyer later scored on an error, Massey worked a walk and Burnette followed with another free pass. Byers made it 17-5 on an infield single and Gladding dealt the knockout blow with a game-ending grand slam.

The junior catcher went 2 for 3 with 5 RBIs while belting her second big fly of the year. Seabolt doubled twice and knocked in three during a 2-for-3 game. Byers scored four times and drove in two while going 3-of-3 at the plate. Dyer went 2 for 2 with 2 RBIs and Potts finished 2 for 3 with one ribby. Karnes and Burnette each went 1 for 3 with a pair of runs, while Brown, Massey and Patton each scored twice.

Brown, Byers and Karnes stole one base apiece.

Lady Panthers 17, Pace Academy 2 - Union County's offense continued rolling in game two Friday night in Watkinsville, picking up where they left off with 11 runs in the first inning.

Gladding went deep for the third time this month - a three-run blast to punctuate the 11-run first.

The Lady Panthers piled on another half-dozen runs in the second inning and Dyer limited Pace to a run in the first and third innings, putting the finishing touches on her team's third run-shortened contest of the week.

Dyer notched her second win of 2022, going the distance in the three-inning contest, allowing four hits and two earned runs. At the dish, the



Junior catcher Gracie Gladding blasted her team-leading second and third home runs last Friday in Oconee County. Photo/Todd Forrest

sophomore went 2 for 2 with a pair of RBIs.

Gladding walked, homered, swiped a bag and scored twice during a 1-for-1 evening. Burnette scored twice on two walks and freshman Kaylee Rader went 1 for 1 while scor-

ing and driving in one.

Sophomore Aubrie Akins, Byers, Helton, Massey and Patton each walked and scored. Freshman Peyton Grisham walked and scored twice. Sophomore Mikala Souther went 1 for 1 with an

RBI and a run; Roberts and Potts both scored once and plated another run. Seabolt finished 1 for 1 and Brown added a run.

Lady Panthers 2, Savannah Christian 9 - Union County suffered its first loss of the weekend on Saturday morning, surrendering six unanswered over the final three frames.

The Lady Panthers committed seven errors behind Dyer, who yielded eight hits and two earned runs.

Despite the loss, Grisham turned in a breakout performance during a 3-for-3 day that included a double. Gladding, Dyer and Karnes each went 1 for 2 while Seabolt finished 1 for 3.

Down 3-0 in the bottom of the second, Union County pulled within a run when Dyer and Karnes opened with consecutive singles. Brown's sacrifice fly scored a run then a Byers groundout made it a 3-2 game.

A two-out Union error in the third led to another Savannah Christian run, then three singles, a walk and a sacrifice fly put the Lady Panthers in a 6-2 hole during the fourth.

Lastly, a leadoff error in the fifth paved the way for SCA's three-run frame. The Lady Panthers failed to capitalize on a one-out, bases-loaded opportunity in the bottom half of the inning. Union County also hit into an inning-ending double play in the fourth.

Up next: The Lady Panthers host Pickens on Wednesday at 6 p.m.

XC: Hunter, Union ladies set pace at Meeks Park, notch second win of 2022

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The Union County ladies outran the competition and the weather on Thursday Aug. 25 at Meeks Park.

With lightning forcing a cancellation of the men's race after one mile, the Union County girls departed as the day's only winners, picking up a team and individual victory.

Freshman Lola Hunter pulled away from the pack once again, finishing in 22 minutes, 39 seconds. Union's Ellie Adams placed third at 23:36, defeating Rabun County's Molly Jo Wright - the defending Region 8-AA champion - who placed fourth at Meeks Park.

Lydia Wagner crossed the line sixth with a time of 25:38. Hannah Kazmierzak placed seventh at 26:04 and Noel Hyatt was 10th, clocking in at 26:46.

Natalie Payne just missed a top-10, finishing 11th with a time of 26:55. Ashley Shipes rounded out the top-15, crossing the line at 28:55.

Individually, Fannin County took home second and ninth. Rabun was fourth, fifth, eighth and 13th. Towns County's lone runner was 12th and Gilmer's highest finisher placed 14th.



Freshman Lola Hunter crosses the finish line first at Meeks Park with a time of 22:39. Along with third-place Ellie Adams, Union placed two girls inside the top three to secure a team victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County Recreation Department Basketball Registration

Age you are 9/1/2022 is the age group you play in. Ages 5-8 registration ends 9/26.

Age 9-12 registration ends 10/17.

All late registrations will be placed on a waitlist. Practice will begin early October for 5/6. Practice will begin mid-October for 7/8. Practice will begin end of October for 9-12, tentatively. Registration fee is \$65.00.

Registration can be completed online at unioncountyga.gov or at the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd. If you need any additional information, please call 706-439-6074.

