

Sports

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Tanner's 5 TDs paces Union in 49-7 win over Towns

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County (2-1) rebounded from its first loss of 2023 by cruising to the program's 33rd victory in 34 tries vs. rival Towns County (0-3) during a 49-7 rout at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Friday night.

The Panthers' home opener went about as well as planned, seizing a 35-0 first-quarter advantage that included a quick 14-0 edge before the Indians' first offensive snap. Union County went on to build an insurmountable 49-0 halftime lead ahead of a running-clock second half.

Union put a bow on the victory via a balanced offensive performance of 214 yards passing and 208 rushing. Meanwhile, the defense limited Towns County to a coach Michael Perry era-low 70 total yards (60 through the air).

"We didn't come out flat, at all," Perry said. "I think the fellas were ready to get back out there after the Lumpkin game and prove we're still a good football team."

Quarterback Caiden Tanner fired a career-best five touchdown passes during a 13-for-16, 191-yard performance that included 66 yards rushing and a career-long 60-yard carry before the senior clocked out for the evening at halftime.

"We wanted to get different guys some touches because all our receivers are capable of making plays," said Tanner, who spread his five touchdown throws among four teammates. "Our O-line did a great job and gave us all day [to throw], and when that happens, it usually allows us to do what we want."

Two of Tanner's three incompletions came on Union's opening 11-play scoring drive that culminated in senior Braylen Rader's 3-yard touchdown run behind the blocking of junior guard Kaden Combs.

Things continued unraveling for the Indians on the ensuing kickoff courtesy of a strip from behind by junior Carter Deal and senior Seth Rutan's recovery inside the 20. Following a penalty on the offense, Tanner connected with senior Tyler Grasty over the middle on a 16-yard scoring strike for a 14-0 score.

Towns County, who went 0 for 13 on third down, punted to Union on fourth and



Senior Caiden Tanner threw five touchdown passes behind an O-line that gave him 'all day' to find an open man. Photo/Todd Forrest

13 thanks to junior Braden Plott's stop behind the line on an Indians' third-down screen pass. Plott's timely TFL allowed senior returner Jensen Goble to set up the Panthers with their second straight possession in plus-territory.

"Both the offense and defense set the tone right away," Perry said. "Braden Plott played an exceptional game. He was really sticking guys and was great in coverage. He was everywhere. I'm really proud of him. He might be the most improved guy on the team. He just gets better and better."

Setting up shop at the 46, Tanner bounced outside for six yards, and then Rader carried a pile of Indians for 13 more. With Towns County thinking run, Tanner went up top to sophomore Cade Dockrey for a 27-yard scoring strike with 5:46 to play in the opening frame.

"I thought Cade did some good things for us on offense," Perry said. "He and [sophomore WR] Tyler Parker will probably be playing a lot more now that our receivers are getting banged up a little."

Another Indians' three-and-out had Tanner back in business from his own 41, and

the senior immediately looked to his trusted tight end, allowing Grasty to use his legs for the bulk of a 49-yard pickup. On the next play, Rader snuck out of the backfield into the endzone, hauling in a 10-yard score from Tanner.

The Indians continued to face tough-sledding against the Purple Swarm, and a Towns punt awarded Union County the ball at midfield. On first down, junior running back Connor Schucknecht added his name to the offensive onslaught, cutting outside for 40 yards down the home sideline.

A penalty negated a 10-yard touchdown pass to Zach Taylor, but it didn't matter as Tanner and Grasty finished off the drive two plays later with a 3-yard hookup that built a 35-0 lead with 2:04 to play in the first.

"We ask [Grasty] to do so many things and he's an extremely intelligent young man," said Perry, who's now won 10 of 15 since the start of last year. "He's going to continue having a big year for us. We are really proud of him."

A roughing the kicker penalty extended Towns' next series, preventing Union from adding on in the first frame, but the Panthers eventually took



Senior tight end Tyler Grasty recorded the first multi-TD game of his career on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

over at their own 20 during the early stages of the second.

From there, Rader brought the thunder with consecutive runs of 13 and 6, and on the next snap, Tanner delivered the lightning via a 60-yard dash inside the one. Union County called Rader's number once again, and the senior blasted his way up the middle for a 42-0 margin.

Towns County's fourth-and-2 gambit went bust when Dusty Aaron and David Heredia sniffed out a quarterback draw in the backfield and handed the offense prime field position at the Indians' 33-yard line.

The Panthers' final score went to Schucknecht when the junior took a dump-off from Tanner and raced 22 yards to paydirt.

The drive opened with an 11-yard give to Schucknecht before Tanner ended a string of eight-straight completions by short-hopping a screen pass to Dockrey. But Tanner made amends one play later, finding Schucknecht underneath for

Union's fifth touchdown pass of the night.

When asked about his team's mindset entering Friday, Tanner declared the Panthers were determined to return to form following a disappointing visit to Dahlonega.

"We didn't play our best last week at Lumpkin County, and don't get me wrong, they're a very good football team, but we knew we needed to bounce back this week, stay focused and get things rolling again against our rival Towns County," he said.

Towns County opened the abbreviated second half by converting a pair of fourth downs but Union County eventually took over at its own 31, where the Panthers handed the keys to freshman quarterback Chetley Cox.

Union County picked up a first down on the ground, but the series went south with a blocked punt near midfield.

Towns' lone scoring drive started at the Union 40 and ended on the first play of the fourth quarter when senior

quarterback Connor Chastain threaded a needle to sophomore Morgan Walker on fourth and goal at the 7-yard line.

"I can't get too mad about that [Towns County TD]," Perry said. "I thought we played really well and we got our young guys into the game, some of them in the second quarter."

Tanner, meanwhile, earned his career a combined 4-0 vs. Fannin County and Towns as a starting quarterback, joining Pierson Allison (2018-2019) and Daniel Davenport (1999-2001) as the only Union QBs since 1990 to finish unbeaten vs. the two neighboring rivals in at least four starts under center.

"It feels really good," Tanner said after the win. "These are some fun rivalries, but you still always hate to lose to the border towns. So it's a good feeling to go 2-0 against both of them."

However, the win wasn't all roses for the Panthers, who were dealt a serious blow when Taylor left the game with a lower-extremity injury. According to Perry, the senior pass catcher will be out of action for at least a few weeks.

Union is back at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Friday night when they host Armuchee at 7:30 p.m.

Stats: Passing - Tanner 13-16, 191 yds, 5 TDs; Cox 4-5, 25 yds. **Rushing** - Rader 8 car, 67 yds, 2 TDs; Tanner 2 car, 66 yds; Schucknecht 2 car, 51 yds; Bentley Rich 1 car, 13 yds; Cox 5 car, 9 yds; Brandon Lynch 1 car, 2 yds. **Receiving** - Grasty 4 rec, 81 yds, 2 TDs; Goble 5 rec, 40 yds; Dockrey 2 rec, 29 yds, TD; Schucknecht 1 rec, 22 yds, TD; Parker 2 rec, 21 yds; Rader 1 rec, 10 yds, TD; Taylor 1 rec, 9 yds; Cade Walden 1 rec, 2 yds.

Defense - Rutan 9 tkl, FR; Ethan Lester 6 tkl, 2 TFL, QBH; Aaron 5 tkl, 2 TFL, FR; Plott 4 tkl, 2 TFL, PBU; Herculio 4 tkl, 1 TFL; Lane Lane 4 tkl, 3 TFL; Kooper Ashcraft 3 tkl, TFL; Nolan Thompson 3 tkl, FF; Dockrey 2 tkl; Deal 1 tkl, FF, QBH; Jonah Kluth 1 tkl, QBH; Gunnar Franklin 1 tkl, Beau Webster 1 tkl. **Kicking** - Ethan McBride 7-7 PATs; Zuriel Mancillas TB.

Panthers host Armuchee for Rec Night

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County High School will recognize its youth football teams ahead of Friday night's kickoff vs. Armuchee (Rome).

The Panthers are seeking their second consecutive 3-1 start after a 49-7 win over Towns County. Last year, Union County departed Rome's Armuchee High School with a 42-10 victory behind 153 yards and 2 TDs from Braylen Rader.

Caiden Tanner finished 19 for 29 with 242 yards and two scores after the defense set the tone early via Seth Rutan's pick-6.

This year, Armuchee is under the leadership of new head coach Eric Belew, who is breaking in a new starter at quarterback, but returns plenty of talent elsewhere.

First-team all-region selection Jacob Seagraves is back at receiver, along with a second-team tight end in Hayden Phillips.

Second-team all-region linebacker Ryaland Steen an-



The Panthers hope Braylen Rader delivers another huge performance vs. Armuchee on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

chors the Indians' 3-4 defense.

Armuchee travels to Blairsville to face a bye week and enters with a 1-1 record following a 34-21 loss to Gordon Lee. The Indians opened 2023 with a 35-14 win over Gordon Central.

The 6-foot-2 Seagraves leads the offense with nine catches for 145 yards and 2 TDs on the year. Senior Jackson Coonley is tops in the rushing department at 78 yards per game and 3 TDs.

Under center, the Indians have turned to junior Luke

Lively, who is currently 13 for 28 with 217 yards, 2 TDs and an INT on the year. On the ground, Lively has one score and puts up 47 yards a night.

"He's a good one and has a strong arm," Union County head coach Michael Perry said regarding Lively. "We're going to have to figure out a plan to stop him and Seagraves."

"We're just excited for another opportunity to play in front of the home crowd and glad [Armuchee is] the one making the long drive over this year."



Junior Braden Plott (7) drops Towns County's Julian Mosley for a loss on third down. Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Union fends off Hiwassee Dam, NC on Senior Night



Senior Claire Colwell with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County (5-7) recognized Claire Colwell, Ashlyn Gates and Emaleigh Todd during last Thursday's Senior Night victory over Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina, ahead of this week's Region 8-AA opener vs. Providence Christian.

During last month's scrimmage at Hiwassee Dam, the Panthers dropped the final two sets in a 3-2 loss and were

in the same position during last week's rematch in Blairsville. In Thursday's second meeting, Union took two of the first three sets before suffering a 25-20 loss in set four. But instead of once again wilting in the fifth, Union County never trailed after junior Katelyn Brown tied the score at 1-1 en route to early margins of 3-1 and 9-5. Later, Colwell made it a 10-5 score, then junior Charlei Robinson's ace spotted the Panthers an 11-5 margin.

The Eagles battled to within 11-9 until sophomore



Senior Ashlyn Gates with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

Reese Jones halted the spurt, allowing junior Lily Brookshire to finish off the Eagles with three consecutive kills.

Union County jumped out front during the opening set with leads of 3-1, 4-0 and 13-8. Jones' ace made it 17-11, but Hiwassee Dam raced ahead 20-19 before Brookshire and Brown led the late charge in a 25-20 win.

The Panthers couldn't protect a 15-12 advantage in set two, falling 25-17 to even the match at 1-1. Union County bounced back in the

third with leads of 3-0, 5-1, 9-3, 11-4 and 16-8.

Jones and Todd helped Union maintain a 20-12 edge, but the Eagles made things interesting with four straight points for a 20-16 tally. Despite the brief surge, Brookshire, Brown and Robinson kept Hiwassee Dam at bay and Union County held on for a 25-21 victory.

The Panthers grabbed a quick 3-1 lead in set four until the Eagles raced ahead 14-9 for a lead they never relinquished. Union clawed to within a point



Senior Emaleigh Todd with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

at 17-16 but would get no closer in a 25-20 loss.

During a weekend tournament in Blue Ridge, Union County picked up its second 2-0 win (25-20, 25-16) over Gilmer in nine days. The Panthers suffered a 2-1 loss (18-25, 25-21, 5-15) to Woodstock and another 2-1 (25-21, 17-25, 5-15) defeat at the hands of Pickens.

Earlier in the week, Union County dropped consecutive 2-0 sets during a tri-match at Rabun County involving the Wildcats and

Barrow Arts and Sciences Academy.

The Panthers open region play at home on Wednesday vs. Providence Christian. Union County will travel to White County on Tuesday and Franklin County on Thursday.

Thursday's region opener is a tri-match featuring non-region Dawson County. The Panthers and Tigers will meet at 5 p.m. followed by Providence and Dawson County at 6 p.m.

Union will face the Storm in the 7 p.m. finale.

Softball: Union County sitting at .500 ahead of Thursday's region opener

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Dawsonville - The Tigers used seven unanswered runs to pull away in Union County's 10-2 loss on Thursday, Aug. 31.

Dawson County pounded out 13 hits with seven going for extra bases, including two homers in the six-inning contest. The Tigers broke a 1-1 tie with two runs in the second before Union got one back in the fourth. But Dawson put the visitors away with two apiece in the fourth and fifth, then three more to end the game in the sixth.

The Lady Panthers (4-4) evened the score in the second when freshman Izzy Anthros' leadoff triple led to a run via an error off the bat of Jewel Massey.

Union County stranded two in the third, but following her leadoff double, Peyton Grisham came around on a wild pitch with two away in the fourth.

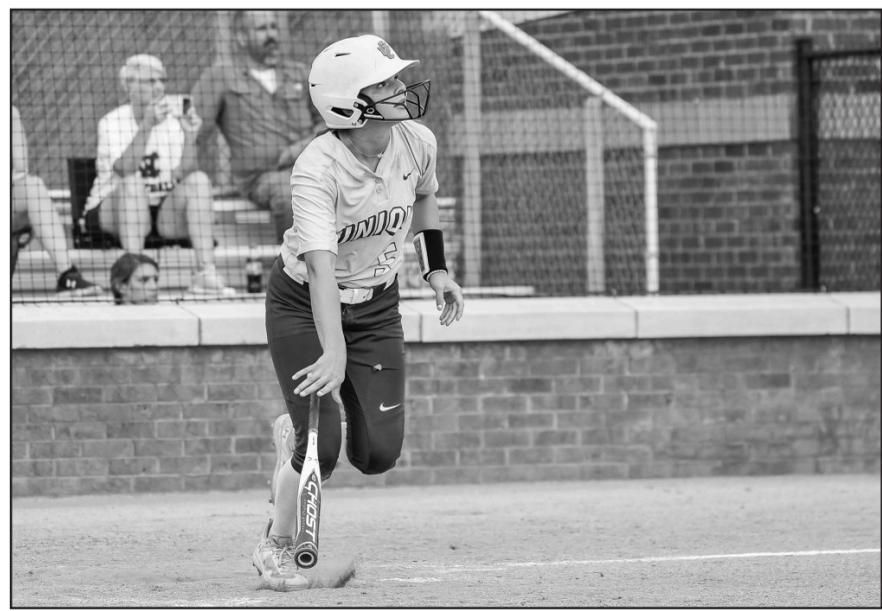


Junior Sloane Dyer records a putout at first base. Photo/Todd Forrest

It was all Dawson the rest of the way. A two-run homer made it 5-2 in the bottom half of the frame, then a leadoff homer and a two-out error during the fifth put the Lady Panthers in

a 7-2 hole. A pair of doubles and two singles propelled Dawson to the mercy-rule-shortened victory in the sixth.

Junior Sloane Dyer



Freshman Izzy Anthros' triple at Dawson County resulted in a Union County run. Photo/Todd Forrest

walked and singled during a 1-for-2 day. Anthros and Lily Helton each went 1 for 3; Grisham scored during a 1-for-3 game.

Anthros worked four

innings in the circle, giving up nine hits and six earned runs. Sophomore Ayla Jamison surrendered four hits and three earned over 1 2/3 innings.

Union County returns

home for a pair of games this week, beginning with Fanning County (3-6) on Tuesday at 5 p.m. Region play opens Thursday at 5:30 p.m. vs. Banks County (9-3).

Cross Country teams sweep again



Ellie Adams (top) and Wes Seiler (bottom) each contributed in Union County cross country's two wins at the Tri-County, North Carolina meet with a pair of sixth-place finishes. Lola Hunter's second-place finish paced the victorious UCHS ladies while Benton Gregory's bronze-medal performance led the Union men to the win. The girls ended the day with seven runners in the top 16; the guys placed seven among the top 13. Union will face a step-up in competition on Thursday, Sept. 7 when they participate in the North Hall meet. Photos/Todd Forrest

Swim teams thank UCRD for Meeks Park clinic



The UCHS and UCMS Panther Swim Team would like to extend a special thank you to the participants of the swim technique clinic held last week at the Meeks Park Pool. This clinic would not have been possible without the assistance from the Union County Recreation Department. A great time was had by all.

Meeks Park preps for debut of 'Rosco'



On Saturday, Sept. 2, local youngsters and their parents gathered at Meeks Park's Pavillion #3 to paint rocks that will eventually form the park's new pet, "Rosco the Snake." When completed, each rock will form a segment of Rosco, who will be located near the creek below the Bryant and Rich fields. Once Rosco debuts at Meeks Park, the public is welcome help him grow by adding their own painted rock to the display. Photo/Todd Forrest