

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Panthers overcome early gaffes but stumble late in 41-28 loss at Chestatee

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
tforrest@ngame.com

Murrayville - Trailing 20-0 following a pair of first-quarter fumbles, Union County raced ahead by way of 21 unanswered points, but down the stretch, Chestatee's rushing attack reasserted control over a shorthanded defense with two fourth-quarter scoring drives, propelling the War Eagles to a 41-28 victory.

When the dust settled, the Panthers were outscored 34-7 during the first and fourth quarters despite owning the second and third by a 21-0 margin.

Down 35-28 with time winding down, Union County's last hurrah was stopped 24 yards from paydirt as Chestatee snagged senior quarterback Logan Helcher's desperation heave and returned it 88 yards for the game-clinching score.

Despite a brief mid-game lull during the Union rally, Chestatee's spread attack placed its money on a more traditional approach -- riding the hot hand (and legs) of running back Jason Granados as the sophomore provided most of the heavy lifting in his team's 286-yard rushing outburst.

"We were missing [starting linebacker] Gage Barnes, which really hurt us, but that isn't an excuse, we just didn't execute," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "It came down to a simple lack of execution and not playing very well."

Meanwhile, Helcher tallied a pair of career-highs with 262 passing yards and four touchdowns, but unfortunately, the Panthers needed five.

Starting from its own 20 with 2:24 remaining, Union County needed seven to force overtime against a Chestatee team also dealing with attrition due to COVID-19.

Coming on the heels of a short completion to senior receiver Keyton Chitwood, a pair of 7-yard keepers by Helcher left the Panthers' hopes riding on a fourth-and-3 conversion from its own 40.

And that's when Helcher delivered a signature moment.

While the Union quarterback scanned the field for an open target with a defensive end in his face, he spun out of trouble and escaped the pocket. While rolling to his left, Helcher cut upfield and side-stepped the spying linebacker committed to denying a first-down scramble. With the end still bearing down from behind and the line of scrimmage quickly approaching, Helcher squared and hit sophomore Jensen Goble in the flat for a 9-yard gain and a fresh set of downs.

On the very next play, the senior delivered a perfectly-placed touch pass into the arms of junior running back Cayleb Rogers, who beat the linebacker down the sideline on a wheel route out of the backfield. However, Rogers' left foot stepped out of bounds at the 24-yard line after bouncing off a tackle inside the 30 with nothing but green turf between himself and the end-zone.

Just outside the red zone with 28 ticks on the clock, the Union offense finally flinched as War Eagles head coach and UCHS alum Shaun Conley dialed up a first down blitz that forced Helcher into his first



Junior running back Cayleb Rogers impressed during his first start, hauling in seven catches for 111 yards - becoming just the second Union running back in the last 10 years to top 100 yards receiving in a game. Photo/Todd Forrest

interception of the season. With pressure coming up the middle, Helcher play-faked then rolled right, taking a shot to the chin as he fired back across the middle and into the waiting hands of a Chestatee safety that jumped in front of the briefly-open receiver at the 12-yard line. The ensuing return set off a celebration at Lynn Cottrell Stadium as the home team ended an 11-game skid with its first-ever win over Union County.

The contest opened with the War Eagles driving 72 yards on eight plays. All of Chestatee's yards came on the ground while being aided by a pair of Union penalties.

"[Chestatee] was going up-tempo and we got caught trying to substitute, which you can not do," Perry said. "But credit Shaun Conley, he's a great coach and did a great job."

Trailing 7-0, a Panthers fumble nullified a 31-yard kickoff return by Goble, setting up Chestatee's second score of the first frame. Despite a safety-blitz sack from junior Wilson Walker, the War Eagles converted its only third down of the drive, then used consecutive runs of 12 and 15 yards to extend the margin to 13-0 following a blocked extra-point.

On the first play of the next series, Chestatee pounced on another fumble, this time at the Union 27-yard line.

"Logan [Helcher] complained early about the ball being slick," Perry said. "The first fumble was supposed to be a bubble screen that just fell out of [Helcher's] hand. The second [fumble] was another screen but the running back bumped into him and knocked [the ball] loose."

Fortunately, the defense responded by forcing a turnover on downs when senior Tyler Whitehead broke up a fourth-and-2 pass to the end zone. Union's still-struggling offense went three-and-out inside the 10, and Chestatee needed nine plays to turn the punt into 7 points -- converting a back-breaking second and 17 via runs of 14 and 3 yards, then capitalizing on two Union penalties.

The Panthers finally took advantage of the yellow flags as the offense answered with 5:01 before the half. After recovering its own fumble,

Union found new life, beginning with a 13-yard screen pass to Rogers that resulted in a Chestatee facemask penalty. Then, a third-and-1 roughing the passer moved the Panthers to the 25-yard line, where another personal foul set the offense up with a first and goal. Three plays later, Helcher lobbed a back-corner fade to the 6-foot-3 Chitwood on third and goal from the 10, trimming the deficit to 20-7.

The defense forced its first three-and-out and Helcher set up shop at the 39 with 3:27 remaining in the second. A fourth-and-2 check-down to Rogers went for 11, but Union gave up a sack and was flagged for holding, resulting in a second-and-26.

A 7-yard scramble brought up third and 19 where Helcher found Rogers down the sideline for a 29-yard scoring strike with 15 seconds on the clock.

"I'm very proud of Cayleb Rogers, he played very well," Perry said. "He was out against Fannin, but he's come back and established himself in our backfield. We hope that he will continue to progress and get better as we go along."

Union's opening drive of the third stalled deep in War Eagles territory thanks to holding penalty that wiped away a first-down run by Helcher. The possession ended with a blocked 52-yard field goal attempt from new Panthers kicker and soccer standout Kyler Robbins.

The defense stood firm on fourth and 2 and gave the ball back to the offense at its own 38. Three plays later, Helcher went up top to Chitwood on a 40-yard go-route down the visitors sideline for a 21-20 lead.

Playing ahead for the first time all night, Union County forced its only turnover on the very first play of the ensuing series. Despite the short field, the Panthers failed to move the chains on fourth and 1.

The offense regained possession following a three-and-out but were unable to take advantage of the massive momentum swing. Inside the War Eagles' 40 early in the fourth, Union failed to connect on a fourth-and-1 pass, setting up Chestatee's go-ahead 1-yard touchdown dive with 7:45



Senior Eli Peugh (10) prepares to recover a fourth-quarter Chestatee fumble courtesy of a mishandled punt off the foot of newly-minted kicker Kyler Robbins. Photo/Todd Forrest

remaining. "Like I said, it was just a lack of execution and that's my fault," Perry said. "If we do what we're supposed to do on those fourth-down plays, we easily pick up a first down."

"One of those plays was an RPO and we had Griff Young running wide open down the seam into the end zone and nobody saw him. It's just those kind of things that we need to shore up."

The drive used up almost four minutes as the home team went 63 yards on nine plays. Once again, the Panthers couldn't get off the field, surrendering 16 yards on a critical third and 11.

Behind 28-21, the offense spun its wheels and punted back to Chestatee with just under six minutes to play. But momentum swung back to the Purple and Gold when Eli Peugh jumped on a War Eagles muffed punt, gifting Union County prime field position at the 23.

"Credit to Robbins for that fumble, he punted the ball so high that the returner had a hard time coming down with it," Perry said of his new kicker that debuted on Friday.

On second and 6 from the 19, Young hauled in an over-the-shoulder grab from Chitwood to knot the score at

28-28 with 5:30 on the clock. This time, Chestatee needed just seven plays to go 80 yards against an exhausted defense, capping the drive with a 9-yard quarterback keeper at the 2:24 mark.

Rogers finished with career-highs of seven receptions and 111 yards. He added 21 yards on five carries.

Chitwood finished with four grabs for 77 yards and two scores - the first multi-score game of his career. Goble caught four passes for 32 yards; Young added two catches for 30 yards and a touchdown. Sam Page had two grabs for 12 yards.

Union County travels to Pickens County on Sept. 17. In the meantime, they will use the week off to try and restore some semblance of a two-deep that has been decimated by injury and COVID-19.

"We hope to get back our backup running backs, Gage [Barnes] and all the COVID guys back [before Pickens]," Perry said. "Injury-wise we should be okay by then. We also expect to get [freshman lineman] Beau Webster back - that will be another huge addition."

"But we just need to limit our turnovers," Perry added. "We went from four [turnovers] at Fannin to three

[at Chestatee]. We also need to execute within the play call and not try to operate outside the offense."

Game Notes
The victory marked Chestatee's first non-region home win since September 2017. Meanwhile, Union begins 0-2 in consecutive seasons for the first time since 1994 and 1995.

Helcher's 17 completions (17 for 27) on Friday matched the second-most of his career. He completed 21 at Chestatee. Helcher has now topped 2,500 total yards for his career (2,530). Additionally, he is just 40 passing yards shy of 2,000 for his career.

Making his first varsity start, Rogers' 111 yards receiving made him the first Panthers running back in a decade to top the century mark through the air. The last time a Union County back tallied 100 yards receiving in a single game was in 2011 when a freshman named Chase Barnett racked up 103 yards in a 22-19 loss at Dawson County.



Alongside holder Logan Helcher (8), senior soccer star Kyler Robbins (82) watches his first career extra-point sail through uprights during the second quarter at Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers down Fannin 9-1; begin region play Thursday at Banks

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Blue Ridge - Union County softball closed an abbreviated but successful week with a 9-1 victory at Fannin County on Thursday, setting the stage for this week's region opener at two-time reigning 8-AA champion Banks County.

Sophomore Sierra Burnette limited Fannin County to three hits and one fifth-inning run while fanning four and walking two batters in the victory.

Union County jumped out front with two in the first before adding on via one run in the third and fifth innings. Ahead 4-1 after six, the Lady Panthers exploded for five in the seventh to dash any rally hopes in the bottom half of the frame.

Ansley Collins and Lexi Sisum each singled and scored during the first, coming around on bases-loaded walks from Emma Roxbury and Aubrie Banton.

Roxbury and Banton were responsible for more damage in the third when Roxbury reached on an error and scored courtesy of Banton's opposite-field single.

Roxbury made it 4-0 in the fifth by taking advantage of another error and a Fannin passed ball.

The Rebels cracked the scoring column via an un-



Sierra Burnette deals during a recent Union County game. At Fannin, the sophomore right-hander went the distance, surrendering one unearned run with four punch outs. Photo/Todd Forrest

earned run in the fifth, but Union County exploded in the seventh, sending nine batters to the plate during the five-run frame.

Roxbury reached on an error for the third time. Kaelyn Jones singled and Banton took a hit-by-pitch to load the bases. Emily Byers and Caley Davis followed with RBI walks.

Following a strikeout and a force out at home, Sisum

cleared the bases with a base hit to left.

Collins finished 2 for 5 with a pair of runs. Sisum went 3 for 5 and knocked in three. Roxbury walked and scored three times; Banton walked twice and was hit by a pitch.

Jones ended her day 1 for 3; Davis scored once while drawing three bases on balls. Byers walked and scored a run.

Trailing 4-1, Fannin County stranded two runners in the sixth when Burnette induced a grounder to Rebekah Chambers at first. The Rebels also left two aboard in the seventh but a fly out to Collins in left ended the game.

This week, Union will visit Morgan County on Tuesday before traveling to Banks County on Thursday for a much-anticipated Region



Senior Lexi Sisum turned in a 3-hit performance at Fannin County - her first 3-hit outing since opening day of 2019. Photo/Todd Forrest

8-AA tilt.

The 2-6 Leopards have experienced their fair share of hiccups early in the year but appear to be turning things around at just the right time. After getting outscored 20-0 in two early losses to Commerce and East Hall, Banks County thumped East Jackson 9-1 and narrowly fell to Commerce 5-3 and remained competitive vs. East Hall at 5-1.

The Leopards also lost 6-0 to Franklin County, 14-13 to Morgan County but powered

past Hart County 15-14.

Tuesday's visit to Morgan County gets underway at 6:30 p.m., while Thursday's first pitch is slated for 5:30 p.m. in Homer.

Union and Banks met for the Region 8-AA title in 2019 with Banks rallying past Union in late innings. Last year, the Lady Panthers went undefeated in region play during the regular season but suffered a semi-final loss to Banks during the 8-AA Tournament.

Volleyball: Lady Panthers win two of three in return from two-week hiatus

Union County shakes off rust vs. Gilmer following quarantines, weather postponements

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County volleyball was back in action last week after going almost two weeks without a practice or match.

Despite the inconsistent play in their return -- including a loss to Banks County that didn't count toward the Area standings -- second year head coach Anna Chapman is confident her squad can top last season's final four run.

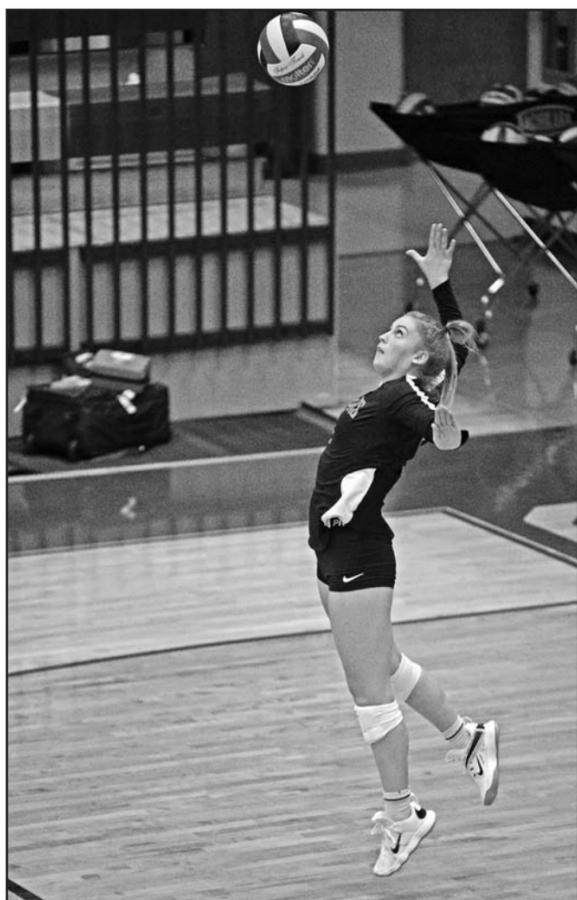
"I keep reminding our girls that we went a couple weeks without a win to begin last year," Chapman said. "I like where our team is at and think we're better than last year. Once we get some practices, work on some things and settle on our new rotations, I believe we're going to be fine."

Union County returned to the court on Monday, Aug. 30 when they hosted Gilmer in a best-of-three match. The Lady Panthers needed one set to shake off the rust before taking it to the Bobcats over the final two rounds.

Leading 7-6 in set one, Gilmer grabbed a lead it would never relinquish, racing ahead 10-7 before a Union timeout. The Lady Panthers battled back to within a point on nine different occasions, but each time they were unable to draw even with the visitors, who eventually prevailed 25-23.

Senior Emma Whicker opened the second set on the serve, helping Union jump ahead 5-0. Still leading 8-1, the Lady Panthers allowed Gilmer to chip away, cutting the margin to 9-5 before swatting them away with a 5-1 spurt.

A kill from senior Morgan Fussell extended the lead to 16-9 and sent the Bobcats



Newcomer Kaylee Ashcraft is already a key contributor for the Lady Panthers, leading the way with five aces vs. Gilmer. Photo/Todd Forrest

reeling, resulting in a slew of Gilmer errors that allowed Union to finish the set with a 9-1 outburst en route to a 25-10 win.

The abbreviated third set was all Union, storming out to early advantages of 4-0, 7-2 and 10-3. Four-unanswered by Gilmer made it 10-7 and triggered a Chapman timeout that proved to be the turning point.

After the stoppage, Union outscored the Bobcats

5-2 to take the set 15-9 and the match 2-1.

Fussell led the way with 10 kills, Saylor Noe had four, Kaylee Ashcraft added three and Sofia Swartz chipped in two. Addison Cross and Sofia McNabb recorded one kill apiece.

Whicker notched 10 assists and six digs; McNabb had seven assists and Ashcraft turned in a team-high five aces to go with four digs. Cross ended her day with five digs.



Another newcomer, sophomore Addison Cross (8 - in white) made an impact in several different areas of last week's Gilmer match, filling up the stat sheet in multiple categories. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Lady Panthers were unable to string together two solid matches on Wednesday, Sept. 1 - taking care of Stephens County 2-0 before falling 2-1 to host Banks County.

Union County downed Stephens in straight sets, 25-17 and 25-18. Later, in a potential preview of the Area 8 title game, the Lady Panthers' lack of practice reared its head against a quality opponent.

Chapman commented, "I was happy with how we looked

against Stephens, but we made way too many mistakes to beat a team like Banks. We plan on getting back into the gym so we can finally find a rhythm after missing two weeks from flooding and having half the team in quarantine."

Banks County took the first set 26-24 while the second went to Union 25-20. The Lady Panthers came up short in the third set 17-15 despite rallying from a 14-8 deficit.

Union County hosts

Lumpkin County and Murray County on Tuesday in a makeup game. Senior Night is Wednesday vs Fannin County. The Class of 2022 will be recognized after the 5 p.m. junior varsity match.

Area play gets underway Thursday with a tri-match at Washington-Wilkes where Union will face the host Tigers and rival Rabun County.



The Lady Panthers celebrate a point during their set two victory over Gilmer last Monday, Aug. 30. (L-R) Morgan Fussell (20), Sofia McNabb (22), Saylor Noe (15), Emma Whicker (42), Kaylee Ashcraft (2) and Addison Cross (8). Photo/Todd Forrest



Morgan Fussell blasts a shot past a Lady Bobcat during the third set of Union County's 2-1 win over Gilmer. Photo/Todd Forrest