

Sports

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Late TD pass halts Union's six-game win streak over Rebels Panthers' star running back Jonah Daniel out indefinitely with ankle injury

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Clinging to a late 20-17 advantage over rival Fannin County, the Panthers were the victims of a 24-yard touchdown strike to 5:50 to first, dealing Union County its first season-opening defeat since 2003.

The Panthers suffered another loss on the night when senior All-Region running back Jonah Daniel sustained an ankle injury early in the third quarter.

Daniel would leave the game with 54 yards on seven carries.

According to head coach Brian Allison, the injury is believed to be a fractured ankle. As of Monday morning's deadline, how much time Daniel will miss is unsure but it will likely be significant, Allison said.

Sandwiched between a pair of bookend Rebel touchdowns, Union County scored on two quarterback keepers by junior Logan Helcher and a first-quarter scoop-and-score by fellow junior Dalton Allen.

After Fannin County took the season's opening drive 67 yards on 13 plays, capped off by an 11-yard slant that went for six, the Panther offense sputtered to a quick three-and-out. But on the ensuing Rebels' possession, Elijah Helton stripped the Fannin quarterback from behind, allowing Allen to scoop up the football and trot untouched into the endzone from 22 yards out.

Tied at 7-7 with 2:37 left in the opening frame, Fannin County responded by regaining the lead 14-7 on the first play of the second quarter. With the Rebels facing a 1st-and-15 from midfield, blitzing linebacker Clayton Lester deflected a deep pass that still went for 49 yards when the Fannin receiver came back to make a play on the wobbly football at the 1-yard line.

(Fannin's second big play of the half that was the result of winning a 50-50 ball. On the first



Senior running back Jonah Daniel gets his ankle rolled up during the early stages of the third quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

scoring drive, a Rebels receiver hauled in a bobbled pass and turned it into 13 yards on 2nd-and-12.)

With 1st-and-goal from the one, a quarterback keeper put Fannin County back in front 14-7 at the 11:55 mark of the second period.

This time, Union County would answer the bell with an impressive 13-play, 88-yard scoring drive that spanned just over four minutes of game time.

Starting from their own 12, the Panthers overcame a pair of first-down negating penalties only to move the chains once again. On the verge of another three-and-out, Helcher found senior Noah Underwood over the middle on 3rd and 2, but an ineligible receiver penalty made Helcher convert once again - this time, rolling right and connecting with the 6-foot-3 junior Keyton Chitwood on an 18-yard out route.

Chitwood would finish with a team-high 110 yards on six catches.

Three plays later, a first-down carry by junior Carson Walker kept the drive alive until a flag moved Union back five yards. On 2nd-and-15, a counter handoff to Daniel picked up 20, then a 21-yard leaping grab by Mason McCombs and a 9-yard completion to Chitwood had the Panthers inside the red zone.

A 16-yard rush by Daniel set up 1st and goal from the three, and two plays later, an Underwood block paved the way for Helcher's first varsity rushing touchdown.

"I couldn't have been more pleased with Logan (Helcher)," Allison said. "He had some mistakes but he thought hard, he ran hard and I thought he played very well overall."

Fannin used a 22-yard field goal to go back on top 17-14 following an 18-yard run to start the drive and a 29-yard completion to move inside the Union 10. The Panther defense would batten down the hatches, and with the help of a delay of game, kept the Rebels out of the



Junior Dalton Allen eyes nothing but green turf between himself and the goal line following Elijah Helton's strip sack. Photo/Todd Forrest

endzone.

Union had one final drive before the break, but a fourth-down fumble kept points off the board after moving inside the Fannin County 37-yard line. A 14-yard connection to McCombs on second down had the Panthers on the move, then a pair of 10-yard runs by Helcher had the offense in business at the Fannin 37.

On fourth and inches, Helcher kept the QB option and picked up a quick four yards before the ball was jarred loose at the 33 and recovered by the Rebels with 1:35 on the clock.

"We made mistakes, but for the most part, I thought our guys played hard," Allison said. "But (mistakes are to) be expected. We're a young team and we didn't make the crucial plays like we have in the past."

"Fannin is an experienced team with several three-year starters, and they obviously made the plays necessary to win

and that was the difference in the ball game."

Down 17-14 to open the third, the Union County offense suffered a three-and-out and punted back to Fannin, who was denied on fourth and inches when the Panther defense stuffed a QB sneak near midfield.

Daniel took a misdirection carry for one yard when his leg was rolled up awkwardly underneath a Fannin County defender on the ensuing possession's first play. But Helcher picked up the slack on the ground, taking off for 11 yards to the Rebels' 35.

Later, on 3rd and 14, Helcher and Chitwood connected for 16 yards. Two plays later, the Union signal-caller returned to his go-to target, Chitwood, for 10 more before using his legs to move the chains on 3rd-and-1.

With 1st-and-goal from the nine and primed to regain the lead, the Panthers offense began to self-destruct. Confusion on the play call led to consecutive time-

outs, followed by a dropped flare pass on first down. On second down, another drop, this time at the 2-yard line, potentially took six points off the board. A third-down rollout pass sailed wide and off a diving Union receiver's fingertips, bringing on the field goal unit to even the score.

But that wasn't the case. McCombs, who was perfect on field goal tries in 2019, hooked the 26-yarder wide left from the right hash.

More problems followed in the kicking game after Fannin County shot itself in the foot, coughing up the ball at the Union 33. Spurred by Trace Wright's fumble recovery, the Panthers took their first lead of the night with an 8-play, 67-yard scoring drive.

Unfortunately, the snap was low on the point after and Union County was left nursing a 20-17 advantage with 1:03 left in the third.

Highlighting the drive was a 3rd-and-13 catch-and-run by Walker for 15 yards, followed by a 50-yard deep ball to Chitwood on 3rd-and-7. With another 1st and goal from the 10, the Panthers kept it on the ground, allowing Helcher to find paydirt on back-to-back keepers.

Helcher wrapped up his first home start with two scores and 70 yards on 13 carries. He also completed 12-of-25 passes for 170 yards.

Both squads traded punts before the Rebels took over at their own 38 with 8:02 remaining.

After four running plays picked up 14, 13, 4 and 7 yards, respectively, Fannin went deep over the middle, taking the lead for good on a 24-yard post route.

Starting from the 31, Union's final drive of the game was aided by a second-down helmet-to-helmet penalty on Fannin when McCombs was tagged while leaping for an

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Cross Country: Gambrell sets Meeks Park record, Gregory places third

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Luke Gambrell set a new Meeks Park course record, clocking in at 18 minutes, one second, narrowly edging the previous mark held by 2018 Union County graduate Lance Underwood (18:02).

As the senior entered the final straightaway with the finish line and course record in his sights, Union head coach Paige Dyer began shouting words of encouragement.

"C'mon, Luke, you've got 30 seconds," Dyer shouted as the clock passed 17:30.

"Fifteen seconds. Ten seconds," Dyer continued as he neared the finish.

At 18:01, Gambrell leaned across the line as cheers erupted from the gallery.

"When I got close, I heard (Coach Dyer) yell '30 seconds' and I thought 'oh, crud,'" Gambrell said after the race. "I looked down at my watch, which I shouldn't have done, but that's when I realized that I really was close (to the record)."

"Good. I'm glad I got his attention," Coach Dyer added with a laugh. "That was the point. I even pulled down my mask to make sure he would hear me."

Coming in, besting Underwood's time was high atop



Luke Gambrell nears the finish line. The senior battled pain, heat and humidity to set the course record by one second. Photo/Todd Forrest

issues before the race.

"He was absolutely amazing," she said. "On such a hot day while dealing with a sore knee, it was literally nothing but a will to break the record. In practice he was running in the 18:40s, so that proves just how bad he wanted it."

When asked if a region or state championship is the next accomplishment he wants to check off his list, Gambrell was hesitant to look too far ahead.

"Mavbe," he answered.

27:23.

Rounding out the Union County ladies' top five was Allie Brey in 13th place (27:38), Campbell Chambers in 16th (28:19) and Natalie Payne in 27th (30:47).

Other Union runners were Katelynn Rash in 28th with a time of 31:00 and Abigail Pruitt in 38th at 34:59.

The Lady Panthers would place third overall.

For the guys, Zander Rotko placed 15th at 21:25 and Zach Jackson was 23rd at 22:39. In the 24th spot was Brady Guild at 22:45. Daniel Griggs came in 31st with a time of 23:29.

Wes Seiler crossed the line three seconds later at 23:32, followed closely by Brady Hussion (23:33) and Benton Gregory (23:38). Ethan Rouse clocked in at 24:23; Anderson Clouse at 25:12; Braden Tanner at 26:28; Grayden Cobb at 27:28 and Preston Perren at 31:10.

I'm just glad we were able to race, even though it was a hot day," Helton said. "I feel like our runners did well overall. Our girls have no seniors on the team, but our times were good and I was pleased. The boys tied for first, and they ran hard, so there's nothing I could fault them for."

Union County will take part in the North Hall Invitational on Thursday.



Hana Gregory posted a career-best third-place finish. Photo/Todd Forrest

"My (personal record) is 16:45, so any time under that is what I want to do next before I start worrying about the rest of the season."

Gambrell's first-place time set the pace for the Union County men, who finished tied with Gilmer atop the team standings. However, the tiebreaker was settled by each squad's sixth-place runner, giving the nod to the Bobcats, whose No. 6 runner finished 21st - three spots better than Union's sixth-

best finisher.

While Gambrell's top spot was never in doubt, Gilmer placed two runners inside the top four (second and fourth) with Towns County taking the third spot.

Panther teammate Hunter Hartzog crossed the line fifth with a time of 19:19. Hunter Payne placed seventh at 20:11.

In the women's race, junior Hana Gregory clocked in at 24:18, good enough for third place. Rachel Reid was 11th at