

Sports

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Football: Resurgent Panthers enter Homecoming week at 3-1

Offense and defense log season-best performances in 42-10 win at Armuchee

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

Rome - With a 3-1 record through four games, the Panthers have matched last year's win total on the heels of their 42-10 rout at previously unbeaten Armuchee.

The Union County offense racked up a season-high 453 yards behind junior running back Braylen Rader's career-best 153 yards rushing and two scores. Junior quarterback Cayden Tanner put up 242 yards and two touchdowns during a 19-for-29 performance through the air.

Armuchee's 166 yards of offense marked a season-low for a Union defense that's held three of its four opponents to less than 220 yards.

"We're disciplined and very physical in the box," said senior Elijah Helton, when asked why Union's defense has been so stingy over the first month. "We need to work on some things, we had a lot of penalties tonight, but overall, we play tough. We get after it and we always try to be more physical than the other team."

When posed the same question, Union head coach Michael Perry concurred with the senior linebacker.

"Our box is really strong, we've got some really good players at defensive line and linebacker," he said. "The secondary is still coming along but they're making progress. But the box is definitely the strength of our defense."

Junior cornerback Seth Rutan opened the scoring Friday night with 6:38 left in the first, turning the defense's first interception of 2022 into a pick-6 and a 7-0 lead.

Rutan jumped a third-and-9 comeback route at the Indians' 28, returning the miscue down the visitor's sideline to spot Union County an early advantage it wouldn't relinquish.

"It's [Rutan's] first year playing [football] and he's



Union County junior defensive back Seth Rutan returns an Armuchee interception 28 yards during the first quarter to break a scoreless tie. Photo/Todd Forrest

turned into quite the player for us," Perry said. "That play really set the tone for us and I'm really proud of him and what he's doing for us on defense." A Lane Lance sack on the ensuing Armuchee possession resulted in a punt, followed by an 8-play, 77-yard Panthers' scoring drive that built a 14-0 margin with 2:19 left in the first quarter. Rader capped off the drive by rumbling 3 yards on third and goal behind the blocking of junior guard Cody Meeks.

Perry credited both the offensive line and Rader's comfort level for the 278 yards the junior has amassed in two games.

"I think it's a combination of both," he said. "He's getting more comfortable with the game since he hasn't played [football] since rec ball. His vision is starting to improve and the offensive line is getting better and better. They're doing

a good job."

Armuchee answered with its only touchdown of the night, coming at the end of a 14-play drive aided by a Panthers' unsportsmanlike conduct penalty.

Starting from its 20, Union countered with a scoring drive that featured a 36-yard strike over the middle to junior wide out Jensen Goble. On first-and-goal at the nine, Rader picked up 3 yards, then junior Zack Taylor snagged his team-leading third touchdown reception of the year, a 6-yard slant from Tanner with 6:03 left in the half.

Helton's second-and-7 sack proved instrumental in returning possession to the offense with a short field and 2:53 on the clock. Starting near midfield following an Armuchee special teams' penalty, senior Griff Young took a second-and-10 tunnel screen and weaved his way through the defense before



Junior Braylen Rader scores the first of his two touchdowns at Armuchee on a three-yard plunge to spot the Panthers a 14-0 first-quarter advantage. Photo/Todd Forrest

bouncing outside for 51 yards and a touchdown.

Junior Ethan McBride's fourth extra point put the finishing touches on Union County's first-half scoring at 28-7 with 2:35 remaining in the second frame.

Rutan's second interception thwarted Armuchee's scoring bid with 20 seconds on the clock, coming down with a fourth-and-5 jump ball at Union's 29-yard line.

"[Rutan and Rader] might be first-year guys, but they are fast, physical and very athletic," Helton said. "They play extremely hard and are very good players."

The Panthers failed to capitalize on an Armuchee fumble early in the third and punted on each of its first two second-half possessions. The Indians eventually broke through with a 28-yard field goal at the 1:43 mark of the period. A costly personal foul against Union

County moved the Indians to the 11-yard line, where they settled for 3 points to trim the score to 28-10.

"We had a lot of penalties which is something we need to clean up," Perry said. "That will be the focal point of practice this week."

The Panthers needed just 95 seconds to extend their lead to 35-10, courtesy of Tanner and sophomore running back Connor Schuknecht.

Tanner used his legs on a pair of quarterback scrambles, netting gains of 21 and 17 yards. On first down at the Armuchee 12, Schuknecht found a crease to his right, breaking loose into the Indians' secondary and dragging a helpless defensive back across the goal line for 6 points.

Facing a 35-10 fourth-quarter deficit, Armuchee punted back to Union County with 10:01 to play. From there, the Panthers turned to Rader, who

hammered Rader at an exhausted Indians' defense before they eventually cracked and surrendered a 36-yard scoring run.

Starting at its own 17, Union County advanced to the 42 behind five-straight gives to Rader. An 11-yard completion to Taylor, followed by Goble's 11-yard reception, brought up first-and-10 at the Indians' 36.

And following a quick breather, Rader established that he's more than just a between-the-tackles power back by racing untouched down the visitor's sideline to put the finishing touches on the 42-10 win.

Schuknecht accounted for 39 yards rushing and a score on six carries; Tanner added 37 yards on three carries. Rader also finished with a career-high five receptions for 42 yards.

"[Rader] has very good hands and running back is a unique position that can cause a lot of problems for defenses if you can catch the ball out of the backfield and be a sound runner between the tackles," Perry said.

Young caught three passes for 72 yards and a touchdown. Goble had five grabs for 69 yards.

Junior Tyler Grasty's three receptions matched a career-high, resulting in 33 yards. Taylor, meanwhile, has caught a touchdown pass in three-straight games and ended his night with two grabs for 18 yards. McBride ended with one catch for 8 yards, and was perfect on six PATs.

No defensive stats were available at Monday's deadline.

Up next: West Hall (1-2) visits Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium for the first time in 31 years (1991). The Spartans enter off a 26-0 loss to East Jackson on Sept. 2 after defeating Johnson 23-7 in the Aug. 26 "Battle of Oakwood."

Coach Perry's former team, East Hall, edged West Hall 19-14 in week one.

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XC: Girls place seventh, Hunter eighth against deep field at North Hall

Gregory finishes 22nd, Union guys 17th out of 25 teams at North Hall Invitational

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

Gainesville - The Union County ladies came in seventh out of 18 teams and were the highest placing Class AA or A program at last Thursday's North Hall Invitational.

Freshman Lola Hunter finished eighth overall at 21 minutes, 2 seconds, making her the day's fastest 9th grader. Hunter crossed the line 40 seconds back of seventh-place junior Abi Moore of North Hall while defeating Chestatee sophomore Caroline Bull by 12 seconds.

In the team standings, Union County (193 points) came up 10 points short of sixth-place Buford (183) but edged Flowery Branch (200) by seven.

Junior Ellie Adams finished 28th out of 148 runners, clocking in at 22:55. Sophomore Lydia Wagner was 52nd at 24:15, and sophomore Hannah Kazmierzak rounded out Union's top five, coming in 58th at 24:28.

Senior Ashley Shipes placed 60th, seven seconds behind Kazmierzak. Junior Natalie Payne crossed the line at 24:48 to finish 62nd, sophomore Noel Hyatt's time of 25:35 was good



Junior Ellie Adams logged a top-30 finish at North Hall. Photo/Todd Forrest

enough for 80th and freshman Avery Hussion placed 81st at 25:38.

Sophomore Katie Payne was 118th at 27:10; senior Italia Salazar finished 137th with a time of 28:47.

The race provided Union County its first glimpse of brand-

new Region 8-AA member Providence Christian Academy, which sent four individual entries. Providence's runners placed 62nd, 94th, 97th and 105th.

North Hall took home first, second and fourth individually en route to a team title



Junior Wes Seiler was back in action, placing 73rd at North Hall after missing last month's Meeks Park makeup race. Photo/Todd Forrest

with 32 points. Jefferson (157) placed second, White County (159) came in third, Dawson County (162) was fourth and North Oconee (173) rounded out the top five.

The Union County men placed 17th out of 25 teams and were led by junior Benton

Gregory's 22nd-place time of 17:54. Junior Wes Seiler came in 73rd out of 206 runners with a time of 19:30.

Junior Anderson Clouse finished 94th at 19:53, junior Zander Rotko crossed the line 109th at 20:11. Sophomore Alec Wilder's time of 20:52 resulted

in 132nd place, freshman Ty Hogsed was 144th at 21:10, senior Ethan Rouse came in 148th with a time of 21:26, while junior Ethan Hill finished 168th at 22:34.

With 402 points, Union County ended up 10 points back of 16th-place Kings Ridge Christian. Cherokee Bluff came in 18th with 444 points.

Region 8-AA opponent Providence placed 14th with 353 points behind individual finishes of 20th, 41st, 56th, 91st and 145th.

Greater Atlanta Christian (138) squeaked past Buford (146) for first place in the team standings. Jefferson, North Hall and Lumpkin County took home third, fourth and fifth, respectively.

East Forsyth came in 11th despite featuring the top individual finisher, senior Alex Arembide (16:03).

During the boys' Aug. 29 makeup race at Meeks Park, Gregory placed first overall, Clouse was fifth, Rotko came in sixth, Hogsed was ninth and Wilder placed 13th to lead the Panthers to a team victory.

Union County returns to the race course on Tuesday, Sept. 13 at Gilmer.

Softball: Burnette's complete game, 4 RBIs propels Union over Banks

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The Lady Panthers split two road games last week but came out on top in the one that mattered - a 7-4 region win at Banks County.

Lady Panthers 7, Banks County 4 - Union County (7-6, 1-0) picked up a victory at Banks County behind a complete game and a go-ahead two-run homer from junior Sierra Burnette last Thursday in its Region 8-AA opener.

Union County erased a 2-0 first-inning deficit with a run in the second and two in the fifth. The Lady Panthers stacked on three more in the sixth inning to build a 7-2 lead before Banks scored twice in the bottom of the seventh.

Trailing 2-1 in the fourth, Burnette launched a two-run homer to left field to move Union ahead for good. Freshman Peyton Grisham reached on an error to lead off the frame, setting the table for Burnette's blast, which came on a 1-2 count.

Burnette worked a 1-2-3 bottom half of the fifth and Union broke things open with a four-spot in the sixth. Senior Chloe Potts walked and swiped second, eventually coming around on an error off the bat of sophomore Sloane Dyer. Another error allowed Caroline Karnes to reach, then a one-out walk to Grisham loaded the bags for Burnette, who ripped a first-pitch, two-run double to left field. A two-out double by junior Gracie Gladding



Junior Sierra Burnette logged her third win of the year at Banks County while driving in a career-high four runs at the dish. Photo/Todd Forrest

built a 7-2 advantage, scoring Grisham on the play.

Burnette retired the Leopards in order during the bottom of the sixth, and Union County left the bases loaded in its half of the seventh.

A one-out error, a hit batter and an RBI double had Banks County in business during its final at-bat. A sacrifice fly made it 7-4 before Burnette induced a line-out to Potts at second base.

The Leopards used some two-out lightning to grab an early 2-0 lead, scoring via a

base hit and a fielding error. Potts cut the deficit in half during the second when she reached on an error and came around on a Dyer single.

Burnette escaped a two-out, two-out situation in the third, but Union failed to capitalize in the fourth after placing runners at second and third with one away.

Burnette finished 2 for 4 with a homer, a double and a career-high 4 RBIs. In the circle, she allowed five hits, one walk and one earned run while fanning two.



Junior centerfielder Katie Byers connected on her first career homerun Tuesday at Commerce. Photo/Todd Forrest

Dyer went 2 for 4 with a run and an RBI. Potts walked twice, stole a bag and scored two runs during a 1-for-2 game. Gladding finished 1 for 4 with an RBI double and Patton doubled during a 1-for-3 day. Karnes went 1 for 3, stealing a base and scoring a run; Grisham scored twice and drew a walk.

Union County out-hit Banks County 8-5 and committed three errors to the Leopards' four.

The win marks the third consecutive season the Lady

Panthers were victorious in their trip to Banks County. However, the Leopards would win Region 8-AA each of those years.

Lady Panthers 1, Commerce 8 - The Tigers broke things open with seven unanswered runs following junior Katie Byers' first career homer.

After Burnette allowed a leadoff homerun in the bottom of the first, Byers knotted the score in the third with a big fly of her own. Byers flashed the leather in the Commerce half

of the third, doubling off a runner at first after on a fly out to centerfield.

Union County stranded two runners in the fourth, and it was all downhill the rest of the way.

Dyer surrendered a one-out homer in the bottom half of the frame before the Tigers took advantage of two walks to mount a 3-1 lead. The Lady Panthers were retired in order during the fifth, then the Tigers' two-out single made it 4-1 in bottom half. But the backbreaker came two batters later when Commerce belted a grand slam to extend its margin to 8-1.

Singles by Jaycee Seabolt and Patton went to waste in the sixth after the Tigers struck out the side.

Dyer finished 2 for 3 at the plate and tossed 1 2/3 innings from the circle, allowing five hits. Burnette went 1 for 4 while giving up one earned run over three innings. Byers homered during a 1-for-4 game; Patton and Seabolt each finished 1 for 3.

Freshman Jaslyn Roberts allowed two hits over the final 1 1/3 innings.

The Lady Panthers visited Rabun County on Monday before resuming Region 8-AA action at home on Tuesday vs. East Jackson (5:30 p.m.).

Union County hosts Providence Christian on Thursday at 5 p.m. for Senior Night.

The Lady Panthers will face each region opponent three times during the regular season.

Introducing your 2022-23 Union County High School Homecoming Court

Photos by Todd Forrest



Bailey Adams - Sr



Caroline Karnes - Sr



Saylor Noe - Sr



Chloe Potts - Sr



Sophie Truex - Sr



Katie Byers - Jr



Georgia Patton - Jr



Addi Scott - Jr



Lara Turner - Jr



Brook LeQuire - Soph



Mallory Rouse - Soph



Mikala Souther - Soph

Football... continued from 2B

The Spartans' offense is guided by a pair of freshmen in quarterback Brett Sturm and running back Zac Wagner. Seniors Brady Clark (LB) and Isaiah Whitmire (DE) anchor a defense that forced three fumbles and a safety vs. Johnson.

"They've only scored three touchdowns this year, so offensively, they're still trying to figure some things out," Perry said.

Perry owns a 1-0 record over West Hall and head coach Krofton Montgomery, a 30-22 East Hall victory to open the 2020 season. Union is 0-2 all-time vs. the Spartans, falling 24-3 in 1991 and 54-0 on the road in 1990.

Kickoff is at 7:30 p.m. after the homecoming festivities.

Extra points: With a touchdown catch in three straight games, Taylor joins some elite company becoming the first Panther to accomplish the feat since Sawyer Drake's senior season of 2019 (Monticello, Putnam, Elbert). The last non-senior to catch a TD in three straight outings was 2018 junior Kyle Morlock (Social Circle, Rabun, Bremen), who was in attendance Friday at Ar-mu-chiee. Morlock is currently a redshirt sophomore tight end at Rome's Shorter University.

Union's 213 yards rushing is the most since last October's 273-yard performance in a 48-14 win at Riverside.

Rutan's two picks in a single game are the most by a Panther in three years. Then-junior Kaston Hemphill intercepted two passes in Union's wild 74-57 win at Putnam County on Sept. 27, 2019.

Rader's 278 yards rushing in two games is the most by a Union running back since Carson Walker tallied 303 yards during consecutive wins over Chestatee and Pickens in September 2020.



Senior linebacker Gage Barnes (35) is one of the primary reasons for Union County's 2022 defensive revival. Photo/Todd Forrest



Juniors Mayo Collins-Spiva (56) and Zack Taylor (88) celebrate Taylor's third touchdown catch in three games. Photo/Todd Forrest



Mady Adams - Fr



Lola Hunter - Fr



Kaylee Rader - Fr

Volleyball: Spartans down Union in straight sets



Union County looks to bounce back Thursday when they visit Banks County for a tri-match with the Leopards and Fellowship Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Athens - Union County volleyball suffered its first region loss in three years during a one-sided defeat at 8-AA newcomer Athens Academy on

Thursday, Sept. 8.

The Spartans (16-6) took each of the two sets by a 25-4 score, recording 21 kills, 11 aces and eight blocks during the match.

The Panthers resume Region 8-AA competition on Thursday when they travel to

Banks County for a tri-match including Fellowship Christian Academy.

Union County's Region 8-AA home-opener is slated for Tuesday, Sept. 20 with a tri-match involving Banks County and East Jackson.