

Sports

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Panthers crack win column with 48-14 rout at Riverside

Big plays from Helcher and Barnes swing momentum, spark 27-0 outburst

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

Gainesville - All head coach Michael Perry needed was some familiar scenery to record his first victory as a Panther.

Well, that might have helped, but Union's attacking second-half defense and a career-best six touchdowns from Logan Helcher didn't hurt either as the Panthers pulled away 48-14 at Gainesville's Riverside Military Academy (RMA) on Friday night.

The win couldn't have come at a better time for the first-year coach as Union County opened Region 8-AA play at RMA, where a loss would have dealt a severe blow to the Panthers' chances of making an eighth playoff appearance in nine years.

"I'm really proud of our offensive line and how well they opened things up for our running game," said Perry, a Gainesville High graduate and former Red Elephants assistant, who later served as head coach at nearby East Hall. "I couldn't be prouder of those guys. They've been decent in pass protection but they were very good [in run blocking at Riverside]."

Despite the eventual one-sided final tally, the Panthers found themselves in hot water late in the second quarter as Riverside capitalized on untimely penalties and two turnovers, quickly negating a 21-0 Union advantage.

What seemed like a near-certain runaway minutes earlier was on the verge of a 21-21 tie as the Eagles answered with 14-straight points and were set to receive the second-half kick.

Riverside's first score came with 1:39 before halftime, trimming the Union advantage to 21-6. However, an interception and a personal foul led to another RMA touchdown and 2-point conversion 48 seconds later, pulling the home team within seven at the 51-second mark of the half.

But Helcher had no intentions of allowing RMA to enter the break on a high note.

Electing to play it safe, the Panthers used a 4-yard pickup from Caiden Tanner and two short completions to move the chains with only 7 seconds on the clock.

At its own 46, Union County remained conservative, keeping the ball on the ground with a quarterback keeper, but after slipping a tackle and picking up a key downfield block, Helcher set his sights on the goal line, and he would not be denied.

"The plan was to try and get 10 yards then get down [to set up a long field goal], but I saw nothing but green grass in front of me, and I decided to take it," Helcher said regarding his game-changing 54-yard scamper. "It was a risk, but it worked out, and it really provided us with a boost going into halftime. Jensen Goble and Caiden Tanner had some great blocks to really set it up. It was a designed run all the way, get 10 yards and get down, but I guess we [altered] things a little bit."

From the Union sideline, Coach Perry saw the play unfold in similar fashion, but



Senior quarterback Logan Helcher posted career-highs with 351 total yards and six touchdowns at Riverside. Photo/Todd Forrest

reserved his celebration until he was certain his QB was safely in the endzone with no flags on the field.

"Logan made a spectacular play and I'm glad he made it," Perry said. "Once [Helcher] cut outside, he only had one guy to beat, and I would've been ticked off had he gotten tackled at the 2-yard line, or something like that. That run was a huge momentum swing, but the first thing I did was look back to make sure no yellow flags had been thrown before I could breathe a sigh of relief."

If "Logan's run" ripped the home team's heart out, then Gage Barnes' third-quarter interception spiked it into the turf.

With Union ahead 28-14 on the second play of the third quarter, the junior middle linebacker drifted left then dove into the passing lane on a wide receiver drag route, picking off the Eagles pass attempt at the 29-yard line.

"Logan's touchdown run and Gage's interception were the turning points of the game," Perry said. "After that our guys finally relaxed and started having fun. Sometimes they worry too much about messing up."

A run from Helcher and three carries by Tanner moved Union inside the 5-yard line, where Helcher kept it himself for his third rushing score of the night. On the ensuing Eagles possession, sophomore end David Heredia pressured the RMA quarterback on third-and-6, forcing a fumble at the 22 that the offense recovered after a 13-yard loss.

The Panthers fielded the punt and set up shop in plus-territory at the Eagles 45. From there, Tanner ran for five and Helcher kept it himself for 13 more. Inside the RMA red zone, Helcher connected with Goble for five, then a Tanner carry drew an Eagles' unsportsmanlike conduct flag, setting up a first and goal at the eight. On the next play, senior Keyton Chitwood hauled in a fade route in the back of the endzone to build a 41-14 lead.

The Panthers received one more crack at six during the third quarter when freshman Kaden Combs blew up an RMA option play on fourth

and short at the 26.

With 8 seconds on the clock, Helcher went up top to Chitwood, who used a double-move to get by the cornerback, allowing Chitwood to find the senior receiver at the goal line for the third scoring connection between the two seniors.

Senior Kyler Robbins finished 6 of 6 on extra-point attempts with every kick-off resulting in a touchback. Union's lone failed conversion came via a fake PAT.

The Panthers defense stymied RMA in the second half, smothering the Eagles to the tune of 31 yards of total offense (0 yards passing) after halftime.

The game opened with Union going 82 yards on 11 plays, highlighting the drive was a 21-yard scamper from Helcher on third and 11 that ended with a horse-collar tackle and 15 extra yards. The senior QB capped off the series with a 3-yard keeper to build a 7-0 lead.

After forcing a punt on their first defensive series, the Panthers went to work at their own 42. Completions to Chitwood, Goble and Young moved Union to the 33-yard line, where Chitwood glided under a Helcher deep ball and kept on running down the visitor's sideline into the endzone.

Each team swapped possessions, with Union turning it over and Riverside punting for the second time. Starting at the RMA 20, Helcher hit Young for 31 yards on second and 4. Two plays later, consecutive screens to Tyler Grasty gained 10 yards and 3 yards, then Tanner rushed for 17 yards, setting up first and goal at the three. The Panthers continued feeding Tanner, who needed only two plays to blast his way into the endzone for a 21-0 lead.

Union County appeared to force another punt when Riverside's third-and-12 throw fell incomplete. Unfortunately, the Panthers were hit with a roughing-the-passer penalty that extended the drive. Two RMA flags set up a second and 31, but a Union late hit brought up a manageable third and 8. The Eagles moved the chains with runs of 7 and 4 yards, and later, completed a 9-yard touchdown pass on



Junior linebacker Gage Barnes glares into the RMA backfield during the second quarter of Union County's 48-14 victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

fourth and 3.

Union's second interception led to a 3-yard Eagles touchdown run, followed by a 2-point conversion carry to slice the Panthers lead to 21-14 with 51 seconds left in the half.

Helcher finished 18 for 22 through the air with 234 yards passing and three scores. He added 117 yards rushing on 13 carries and three scores. Chitwood was responsible for six catches, 135 yards and three touchdowns. Griff Young caught three passes for 47 yards, Tanner rushed 10 times for 61 yards and freshman Connor Schucknecht added 61 yards on nine fourth-quarter carries. Goble caught three passes for 18 yards, Grasty had two grabs for 13 yards, Braden Plott added an 8-yard reception and Austin Hill caught one pass for 4 yards.

Up next: Union County hosts Banks County for Homecoming where the Panthers are looking for their sixth straight win over the Leopards. Union's last loss in the series came 10 years ago via a 16-14 home defeat.

The winner grabs the inside track to a top-three seed and will likely battle Elbert County for the No. 2 spot in 8-AA and home-field advantage at state.

The Panthers defense has limited Banks to seven

points or fewer in three of the last four meetings. The fourth was a 49-17 Union County blowout in 2018 that saw Banks do most of its damage during mop-up duty.

The Leopards haven't topped 28 points vs. Union County since they scored 47, 40 and 34 in three straight wins between 2006-2008.



Keyton Chitwood unleashes a devastating stiff arm on a Riverside defensive back during the first half of Union County's win. The senior receiver finished with career-highs in receiving yards (135) and touchdowns (3). He also matched a career-best with six receptions. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore running back Caiden Tanner extends for additional yardage as he approaches the Riverside endzone during the second quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

Helcher will make his third career start vs. Banks County, but his first at home.

"We have to bring the same energy [against Banks] that we brought tonight," Helcher said after the Riverside win. "We need to put together another complete game next week. I'm proud of the defense, they stepped up big tonight and our offense started rolling, and we need to keep rolling. We had a couple of setbacks, but overall, I feel like we did exactly what we needed to do, and did what we practiced during the week."

The Leopards enter with a 1-4 mark that includes a 30-13 home loss to Fanning County. And according to Coach Perry, Banks County's offense centers around his former East Hall running back, Andrew Shockley.

"He plays running back and safety and he can fly," Perry said. "He's their best player and we're going to have to do a good job of tackling him if we want to be successful on Friday."

"Offensively, we just need to execute," he added. "We'll have all of our running backs available this week and our offensive line is healthy, but it all comes down to which team can execute."

Kickoff is at 7:30 p.m. The homecoming festivities are scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.

Volleyball: Top-seeded Panthers to host this week's Area 8 tourney

Union County dismantles second-place Banks, runs Area winning streak to 19

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County reasserted its dominance over Area 8 last week by throttling second-place Banks County 2-0 (25-16, 25-11), proving the road to an area title still goes through Blairsville.

For the second straight year, the Panthers wrap up the regular season 8-0 in area play while taking all 16 sets. As a result, Union extends its consecutive Area sets-won streak to 39 (19 matches), including the Area 8 Tournament.

The Panthers returned home last Tuesday, Sept. 28, hosting Putnam County and Banks County in the Area 8 finale. In the tri-match opener, Union County was never threatened in a 2-0 win over Putnam, securing the first set 25-7 before taking care of business 25-10 in set two.

In the nightcap, Union County came out flat against an up-and-coming Banks County program that doesn't feature a senior. The Leopards jumped out to early advantages of 7-3 and 11-8 forcing Union head coach Anna Chapman to burn a timeout to settle her club.

"Our pace was just so fast at that point, so I called the timeout and I told them, 'I only called this timeout so we can stand here and chill.' When



Morgan Fussell led Union's dominance at the net. Photo/Todd Forrest

our girls start to rush they try and do too much and it makes them ineffective.

"I do think our girls turned it on too. I think they realized that with Banks' consistency, we needed to be on the offensive."

Chapman's calming influence paid dividends as the Panthers outscored Banks County 47-20 the rest of the night, beginning with a 22-9

onslaught to race past the Leopards in the 25-16 set-one victory. Union continued rolling in the second set, scoring eight of the first 10 points before cruising to a 25-11 win.

"I never want to feel too good too early, because I know anything can happen," said Chapman, when asked about finally cracking a smile during the latter stages of the second set. "But our girls just came out



Union County volleyball celebrates back-to-back regular season Area 8 titles. Photo/Todd Forrest

wanting it tonight and we are a very effective team when we want it and play together."

The net play of senior Morgan Fussell and juniors Saylor Noe and Sofia Swartz proved too much for a smaller Banks County squad. Meanwhile, senior Emma Whicker, junior Kaylee Ashcraft and sophomores Addison Cross and Sofia McNabb flashed their versatility, keeping Banks

County off-balance in all phases of the game.

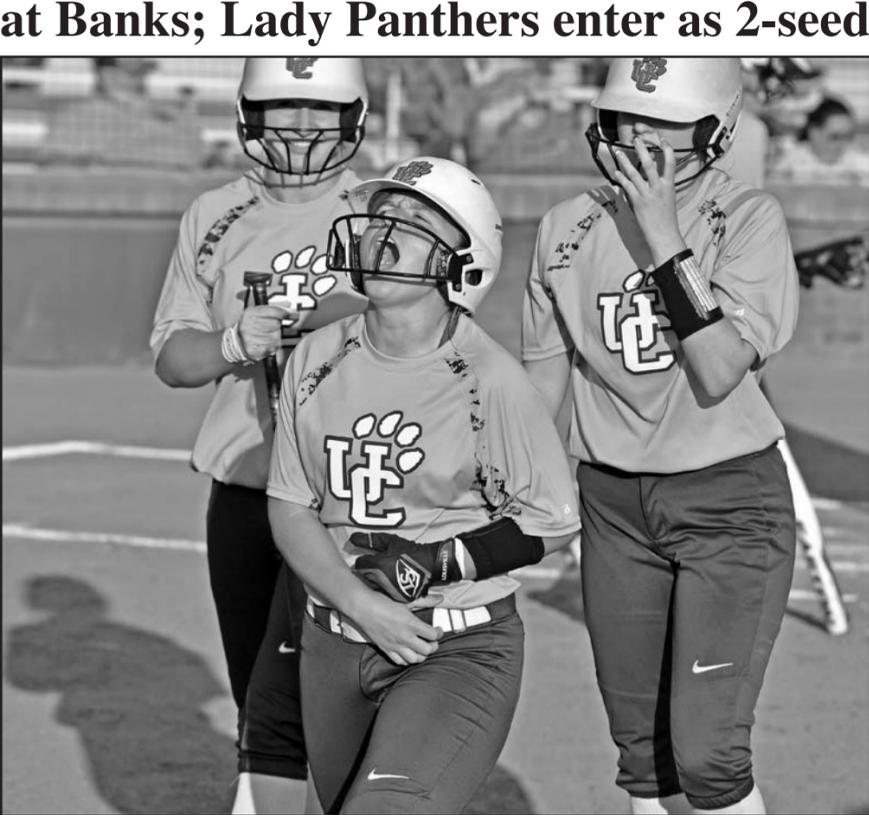
"We had a lot of errors the last time we played Banks (during an early-season non-area match that Banks won 2-1)," Coach Chapman said. "Our hitting wasn't effective, we had a lot of missed serves and we weren't nearly as aggressive [as we were in the recent meeting]. We worked on those things a lot in practice and

our hitters were great tonight. We're stacked with net players and we're very fortunate

The Panthers open Area 8 Tournament play this week when they host the play-in game winner at 5 p.m. Tuesday. The semi-finals will be Tuesday at 7 p.m.

The Area title match is Thursday at 6 p.m.

Softball: Region tourney starts Tuesday at Banks; Lady Panthers enter as 2-seed



A fired up Caley Davis will attempt to lead the Union County softball program and its nine seniors to the Lady Panthers' first region title in 10 years. Photo/Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The nine seniors on the 2021 Union County Lady Panthers softball team will take their final swing at a Region 8-AA title when postseason play opens Tuesday in Homer.

Union enters as the No. 2 seed after first-place Banks County swept the season series from Elbert County, knocking off the Blue Devils in two meetings last week.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers enter the postseason on a bit of a down note following a 12-4 loss at last-place Rabun County, who entered winless in region play.

Union County was unable to hang on after grabbing an early 4-1 lead, allowing four runs in the bottom of the second, then surrendering a



Lexi Sisum

nine-spot in the fifth as the Wildcats defeated Union via the mercy rule on the final day of the season for the second straight year.

Senior shortstop Emma Roxbury finished 2 for 3 and will enter the region tourney swinging a hot bat with nine hits in her last four games.

Senior Lexi Sisum went

1 for 1 with a triple while Jaycee Seabolt, Aubrie Banton and Caley Davis recorded one hit apiece.

In the circle, senior Tori Tracy allowed nine runs, five hits and three walks in 1 2/3 innings. Freshman Sloane Dyer gave up three runs on three hits over 2 1/3. Freshman Ila Bragg surrendered two unearned runs in 2/3 of an inning.

The region tourney opens Tuesday in Homer with Union and Elbert clashing at 2 p.m. A win and they would face the Banks-Rabun winner at 6 p.m.

Meanwhile, a loss to Elbert would force Union to play Tuesday at 4 p.m. vs. the Banks-Rabun loser to determine the No. 4 seed.

The Region title could be settled as early as 4 p.m. Wednesday. The if necessary game would be at 6 p.m.

Meet your 2021-22 UCHS Homecoming Court

Photos by Todd Forrest



Adaley Burnette - Senior



Niya Cobb - Senior



Savannah Evans - Senior



Mia McCombs - Senior



Tori Tracy - Senior



Caroline Karnes - Junior



Chloe Potts - Junior



Lexi Starling - Junior



Sophie Truex - Junior



Katie Byers - Sophomore



Linley Jones - Sophomore



Georgia Patton - Sophomore



Ila Bragg - Freshman



Abigail Pickelsimer - Freshman



Mikayla Souther - Freshman

Union Legends victorious again



Another victory for the "Legends." In the September fundraising tournament. It was a wet and exhausting win for the team, but they rose to the challenge.

Local Racing Report: Tri-County

By Blake Lynch
Racing Reporter
North Georgia News

Tri-County hosted Friday night racing Sept. 24 with last scheduled race set for Thursday, Oct. 7 -- the Tar Heel 50.

Pony: No. 4M Marty King took home the win again this week. No. C10 Julius Cross came in second. No. 18x Dylan Beaver came in third. No. 44 Dylan Hannah came in fourth place. No. 2 Colby McCulloch came in fifth.

Street Stock: It was another win for No. 7 Lynn Burchfield. No. 21 Troy Turner came in second. The No. 3 of Logan Exum came in third. Fourth was

No. 01 Jacob Lynch. No. 69 Jim Weller came in fifth.

Modified: No. 88 Ricky Smith got the win. No. 25 Jacob Hanty was second place. No. 03 Dante Curtis finished in third place. No. 12 Roger Beaver came in fourth. No. 56 Colton Berrong placed fifth.

FWD: No. J3 Josh Deese took home first place. No. J4 Josh Smith came in second. No. 192r Robby Lynch was third. Fourth was No. 1 Shannon Jones. No. 8 Michael Strickland was fifth.

Limited: No. 4 Danny Ledford took home the win. No. 7 Jason Deal was second. No. 108 Chuck Sudderth was third. No. 10 Berry Cross was fourth.

No. 51 Randy Dillard rounded out the top five.

Beginner 602: No. 117 Dylan Beaver was the winner. No. 23R Jerry Rogers was second. No. 50 Jerry Bice was third. No. J32 Shannon Jones was fourth. No. 100 Copper Twigg was fifth.

Super Late Model: No. 8 David Payne took home the checkered flag. No. 4 Danny Ledford came in second place. No. x15 Shawn Chastain was third. No. 11c Preston Crisp was fourth. No. 38 Jamie Oliver was fifth. Payne automatically qualifies for the Tar Heel 50 with the win.