

Sports

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Panthers overwhelm Banks County on Homecoming

Defense and special teams shine as Union County pulls away with 22 unanswered

By Todd Forrest
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The shorthanded Panthers overcame a sluggish first quarter and a slew of injuries to best Banks County 36-14 and move to 2-0 in Region 8-AA, setting up a high-stakes clash at the Elbert County Granite Bowl on Friday night.

For the second consecutive week, the game hung in the balance during the waning moments of the first half before the Panthers offense once again delivered in the clutch, swinging momentum to the Purple and Gold entering the intermission.

Tied at 14-14 following a Banks County touchdown, Union County awaited the ensuing kickoff with only 24 seconds on the clock. And like last week's touchdown drive at Riverside, the Panthers took advantage of an opponent's mental lapse to put up points on the final play of the half.

The Leopards' first of three blunders came courtesy of a false start on the kick, moving them back 5 yards. After the second kick rolled out of bounds, Union elected to take another 5 yards and force Banks to kick off a third time.

When play resumed, Union defended back Trace Wright fielded the kick at the 23-yard line and returned it across the midfield to the 49. Wright, who started at wide receiver with Keyton Chitwood out of action Friday night, left his fingerprints on all three phases of the game after hauling in a 70-yard touchdown catch in the first quarter.

"I came in [tonight] confident, wanting to make a few plays and play with a mindset that every ball that comes my way is mine," said Wright, with regards to his expanded role vs. Banks. "Even when I wasn't targeted, I just needed to stick with my assignments and let things play out."

Starting at the Leopards' 49 with 16 seconds on the clock, Union County was one first-down away from moving within range of senior Tyler Robbins' powerful right leg.

Following a first-down incompleteness, senior quarterback Logan Helcher hit Griff Young for 13 yards over the middle, moving Union into the outskirts of field goal range with under 10 seconds on the clock. Needing to hit the ground and call timeout, Young dropped to the turf -- leading to Banks' most costly gaffe of the drive and perhaps the game. With Young resting on his knees at the 36, a Banks County defensive back lowered his shoulder and drilled the junior receiver after the whistle, tacking 15 additional yards onto the catch.

As a result of the late hit, Robbins' 53-yard attempt became a 38-yarder with five seconds on the clock, and the senior split the uprights from the left hash as time expired, spotting the home team a 17-14 advantage.

"Having a reliable kicker like Tyler makes my job so much easier," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "He really takes a lot of pressure off everyone knowing we have 3 points in our back pocket."

Despite an up-and-down first half, Union's steadfast second-half defense blanked the Leopards, allowing Helcher and the offense to put the game



Senior Trace Wright returns a kickoff across midfield to set up a Tyler Robbins field goal before halftime. Photo/Todd Forrest

out of reach with 19 points after the break.

The Panthers fielded the third-quarter kickoff and drove 61 yards, converting a pair of fourth downs, including a pivotal 12-yard scoring strike from Helcher to Young on fourth and 4. Earlier in the drive, junior running back Caleb Rogers, who missed the previous two games with a concussion, moved the chains on fourth and 1 at midfield. Two plays later, Rogers gashed the Leopards with a 31-yard run up the gut. Later, with the Union offense facing fourth and 4 at the 12-yard line, Young lined up in a three-point stance at the tight end position, shoulder-to-shoulder with the right tackle. Before the snap, Jensen Goble went in motion, drawing a play-fake from Helcher that helped Young race past the safety into the back of the endzone, where the junior made an over-the-shoulder grab for his second score of the game.

"[Helcher] is playing with a ton of confidence lately and it definitely shows in the overall play of our offense," Perry said. "It also helps that our offensive line has made significant strides and really opened up our running game, which takes a lot of pressure off Logan and the passing game."

Trailing 24-14 and starting at the 20, Banks County found early success on the ground, advancing to midfield behind a pair of first-down runs. On second and 6 from the 50, middle linebacker Kooper Ashcraft applied pressure on an inside blitz and tripped up Leopards' star running back Andrew Shockley for a 5-yard loss. On the next play, junior safety Wilson Walker sniffed out the reverse and dragged Shockley to the turf for a loss of 11.

"I think guys just started to cut loose a little bit and began flying to the ball," Perry said, noting a change in confidence, not X's and O's, was responsible for the defensive turnaround. "Sometimes the guys play a little anxious and worry too much about messing up."

The ensuing Union drive eventually stalled in the red zone, where they settled for another Robbins field goal, but not before Helcher gained 11 yards with his legs, then connected with Young for 25

more. Starting at their own 29, the Panthers moved 61 yards on 12 plays, ending with a 27-yard kick and a 27-14 advantage with 1:06 left in the third.

The fourth got underway with an 11-yard Leopards run, but things quickly went downhill from there. A high snap resulted in a busted play, and sophomore defensive tackle Lane Lance bull-rushed the Leopards quarterback for a loss of five. A second-down penalty moved Banks County back five yards, bringing up second and 20, where things went from bad to worse with a wide snap that was recovered by the offense at the 4-yard line. On third and 32, sophomore defensive end David Heredia applied pressure off the edge from the 3-man front, disrupting the half-back pass and dragging the ball carrier to the purple endzone turf for a Union safety.

Leading 29-14 with 9:30 to play, Helcher put the finishing touches on the victory by orchestrating a 14-play, 66-yard drive that spanned seven minutes and 21 seconds.

Early in the drive, the Panthers fed Banks a steady dose of sophomore running back Caiden Tanner, with Helcher mixing in the occasional keeper to keep the defense honest. After a fumble out of bounds brought up third and 13, Helcher found running room up the middle before bouncing outside for 18 yards.

Three plays later, Tanner moved the chains on third and 5, slashing his way up the middle for 16 yards to set up first and goal at the two. On third and goal from the three, Tanner took a read-option handoff from Helcher and dove across the goal line to put an exclamation point on the 36-14 victory.

Things didn't look as promising in the early going, however, with Union falling behind 7-0 after the two teams swapped punts to start the contest.

The Leopards first score came via an 11-yard run on fourth and 8, capping a 13-play, 87-yard drive.

On Union's next play from scrimmage, Helcher went up top to Wright, hitting the senior receiver in stride for a 70-yard hookup down the home sideline.

"That play changed the momentum of the game,"



Sophomore Caiden Tanner (17) lunges across the goal line during the fourth quarter to put the finishing touches on a 36-14 Homecoming victory. Tanner ended his night with a career-high 70 yards rushing. Photo/Todd Forrest

Wright said. "It got the fans back into the game and it started a snowball effect that we were able to build on from there."

"I'm really proud of the way Trace stepped up on both sides of the ball," Perry added. "His [touchdown catch] helped our guys relax and was a big-time turning point."

Tied at 7-7, the Panthers forced a punt that Goble returned inside the 25. Following a Banks County penalty, Helcher found Young in the endzone from 14 yards out.

Leading 14-7, the defense forced a quick turnover when Walker stripped the Leopards ball carrier at the 30-yard line. Unfortunately, a high snap resulted in 15-yard loss, forcing the Panthers to punt.

Banks answered by driving 80 yards on 13 plays -- aided by a fourth-down offside and a red zone facemask penalty -- to even the score at 14-14 with 24 seconds remaining in the half.

Tanner finished the game with a career-high 70 yards rushing and a score on 10 carries. Helcher led the way on the ground with 90 yards on nine attempts. Through the air, the senior quarterback connected on 13 of 22 for 196 yards and three scores.

Helcher's favorite target, Young, ended his day with 90 yards and two touchdowns on five grabs. Wright caught two balls for 80 yards and a score; Goble had two receptions and

10 yards. Eli Peugh, Rogers and Tanner caught one pass each.

Injury update: sophomore receiver Jensen Goble, junior lineman Noah Helton and freshman lineman Beau Webster are doubtful for Friday's trip to Elbert County.

Linebacker Gage Barnes is banged up but the junior expects to give it a go on Friday.

Senior receiver Keyton Chitwood should return Friday after sitting out last week vs. Banks County (coach's decision).

Up next: Union County will visit Elbert County on Friday in a showdown that will likely determine a top-two seed and home-field advantage in the first round of state. The Blue Devils (2-3) enter off a bye week as they prepare to open region play with the Panthers. Elbert County lost 26-21 to Haralson County on Oct. 1 but have yet to win or lose in consecutive games. After opening with a 54-21 loss at Hart County, the Blue Devils defeated Commerce 27-14, one week after Commerce shutout Banks County 10-0. After dropping a 42-35 home shootout to Washington-Wilkes, Elbert County held off Lincoln County 28-16.

"Elbert is by far the most athletic team and has the best secondary that we have seen," Perry said. "They will present a real challenge to our passing game so we're going to have to

establish the run.

"Offensively, they are a spread team that's kind of similar to Banks. [Elbert] will run a lot of sweeps and use their speed to get outside, so we need to do a good job tackling if we want to have a chance."

Union and Elbert will meet for the fourth time with the Blue Devils looking to even the series at 2-2 after pulling away 35-14 in last year's contest. In their last trip to the Granite Bowl, the Panthers escaped in a 29-28 thriller via a late 2-point conversion run by wide receiver Sawyer Drake.

"We need to keep working and try to get some guys healthy," Wright said regarding the keys to victory at Elbert County. "It's going to take a total team effort with everyone giving 100% to get the job done."

Notes: Elbert enters Friday off back-to-back home losses -- the Blue Devils have not suffered a three-game home losing streak in consecutive seasons since 2006-2007. Last year, Elbert lost three straight (Hebron, Lincoln and Rabun) at the Granite Bowl.

Tanner has increased his yards rushing total (14, 61, 70) in each of his three starts.

Helcher sits 54 total yards away from 3,500 for his career. With three passing scores vs. Banks, he surpasses 30 total touchdowns (32) for his career.



Junior wide receiver Griff Young gives Union County a 14-7 lead in the second quarter with the first of his two touchdown catches vs. Banks County Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Panthers fend off LOA to claim back-to-back Area championships

Union extends Area winning streak with straight-set victories over Commerce, Oglethorpe, LOA

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The ninth-ranked Panthers survived a home-court scare from Lake Oconee Academy (LOA) in the Area Championship match to claim back-to-back Area 8 volleyball titles, capping a perfect run through last week's tournament.

The action got underway Tuesday, Oct. 5 in Blairsville with wins over eighth-seeded Commerce and fifth-seeded Oglethorpe County. On Thursday, the Panthers held off the third-seeded Titans 2-0 (25-23, 25-23) in a pair of tightly contested sets that provided Union its most challenging Area matchup in two years.

"I think this [Area Championship] is more special than last year because we hit a lot of ups and downs throughout the season," senior Morgan Fussell said after clinching back-to-back titles. "We had a bunch of [players] quarantined early on and that put us at a real disadvantage. Then we had a lot of other things going on more recently, but we were just determined to come out swinging and give it our best. But this one is really special because I'm a senior and it's my last shot."

With three tourney wins, the Panthers extended their area winning streak to 22 matches. During the stretch, which began at the start of the 2020 season, Union has taken 45 consecutive sets -- all coming under second-year head coach Anna Chapman.

"I think earlier in the week, it was about [the love the girls have for one another], but tonight, they simply wanted it," Chapman said after clinching a second Area crown. "We had a fire in our eyes and something to prove. A lot of that comes from the love, but I think tonight there was just a different tone."

During Thursday's opening set vs. LOA, Union found itself locked in an early back-and-forth affair until five-unnanswered from the Titans swung a 10-9 Panthers' advantage into a 14-10 deficit. Union began chipping away, however, beginning with an errant LOA serve and a Morgan Fussell kill.

Trailing 16-15, an ace from junior Kaylee Ashcraft evened the score and Fussell put



Union County volleyball caps off one of the most impressive two-year stretches in UCHS sports history. Photo/Todd Forrest

the Panthers on top 17-16. Moments later, Ashcraft delivered again by blasting a tie-breaking kill past a Titan, followed by a block by sophomore Sofia McNabb for a 20-18 advantage.

LOA refused to go away, responding with consecutive points to knot the score at 20-20, but Ashcraft delivered once again, putting her team on top 21-20. Still, the next two points went to the Titans as Union faced its latest Area deficit of the season at 21-22.

Even Chapman acknowledged that she began having concerns at that point.

"Yeah, I [was concerned] a little bit," she said. "[LOA] has a really good player and when she was at the net, we had a hard time stopping her. So as soon as she went to the back row, I looked at the girls and said, 'this is it. This is where we have to come back.'"

After battling back to even the score at 23-23, the Panthers grabbed the lead for good thanks to, you guessed it, Ashcraft, who struck one final time for a 24-23 advantage. Fussell secured the set-point when her spike at the net deflected off of bounds off an LOA fingertip to close the first session.

During the second set, it

was LOA that mounted the late rally, but Union County wasn't having it, putting the Titans away with a Sofia Swartz match-point kill.

The duo of Ashcraft and Fussell helped the Panthers build early leads of 4-1 and 5-2 before LOA raced ahead 7-5 via a 6-0 run. Consecutive kills from junior Sofia Swartz tied the score, then fellow 11th grader Saylor Noe pushed Union ahead 8-7.

Two more kills from Ashcraft kept the Panthers even during another back-and-forth stretch before Addison Cross sparked a 5-0 Union salvo that opened up a 16-12 margin. LOA roared back to deadlock the set at 16-all as the two teams remained even at 17-17, 18-18, 19-19 and 20-20. During that span, Ashcraft provided two kills before Fussell knotted the match at 20-20.

Union County appeared to seize control at 23-20 and were on the verge when an LOA serve drifted out of bounds, spotting the Panthers a 24-21 lead. With the home crowd on its feet, eager to celebrate another Area title, the Titans showed no intention of rolling over, answering with consecutive points that shaved the margin to 24-23.

But the Panthers would

not be denied as Swartz drove the final nail into the coffin, sending the Union bench storming onto the court in jubilation.

"I think [our success] is from the bonding that we've done over the season and that bond between teammates has played a big part in it," Fussell said. "Also, a lot of us that were on the team last year wanted to prove that we were capable of defending our title."

The Panthers also received a brief test from Oglethorpe County in the Area semi-finals, fending off a late charge in set one before cruising in the deciding second set.

Sparked by the arrival of athletic freshman Kenzie Henderson, who missed the Patriots' first meeting with Union, Oglethorpe County knocked off fourth-seeded Rabun County in straight sets to secure a semi-final bout with the defending champs.

After falling behind 1-0, Ashcraft took over serving duties where she helped Union build a 7-1 advantage, forcing an early Patriots' timeout. Coming out of the stoppage, Oglethorpe County pulled within a point at 7-6, but a block and a kill by Fussell sparked a 4-0 spurt. Later on, Mattie Brookshire,

McNabb and Swartz helped extend the margin to 18-13.

Union's cushion was short-lived thanks to five straight from Oglethorpe to knot the match at 18-18 until Fussell stopped the bleeding and Swartz added to the margin. Leading 24-22, the Panthers secured set one when the Patriots were unable to return Cross' serve.

The second set was all Union after the Panthers broke away from a 5-5 tie to build a 14-7 advantage. The Patriots never threatened again as the home team quickly extended its lead to 18-8, eventually cruising to a 25-13 victory.

Fussell finished with six kills, Swartz had four, Ashcraft recorded three and Noe added two. Ashcraft notched five aces while McNabb had four. Cross and Fussell chipped in three aces each.

Cross led the way with eight digs, Noe finished with six and Ashcraft had four. McNabb turned in a match-high 15 assists - her third double-digit assist total of the year.

Union made quick work of Commerce in the opening round despite falling behind 5-1 in set one and 6-4 in set two. Trailing 7-5 in set one, Union exploded with a 14-3 run en

route to a 25-12 win. Things were a bit tighter in set two, but Union pulled away from a 10-10 tie to finish off the Tigers with a 15-3 surge that ended in a 25-13 score and 2-0 final.

Fussell (8) and Ashcraft (7) combined for 15 kills vs. Commerce. Fussell also contributed eight aces while McNabb recorded seven. Junior Presley Berry led the way with seven assists and McNabb added five.

When asked about her team's two-year Area winning streak, an unaware Chapman replied, "Are you serious? Have we really?"

A simple nod from assistant coach Seth Merritt confirmed the news to Chapman, who paused momentarily before answering. "Honestly, I don't think about myself, I think all of the success comes from the girls and their mindset," she said. "I just try to be a positive influence. But their work ethic, their motivation and their desire is all from them and has nothing to do with me."

Bracket Breakdown:

The Class AA/A State playoffs open on Oct. 20 with the Panthers likely hosting Atlanta Classical Academy for a second-straight year. If Union County avoids the upset, they would host Area 2 runner-up Johnson County or Area 4's third-seeded Chattoahoochee County.

"We're super excited about state and this group deserves every ounce of it," Chapman said.

The Panthers could potentially face another 2020 rematch in the Elite 8 round if both Union County and fifth-ranked Armuchee survive -- Armuchee would also need to finish as the No. 2 seed in an area owned by third-ranked Gordon Lee.

Speaking of Gordon Lee, the Panthers wouldn't deal with that rematch until the State Championship, assuming the Trojans win Area 7. As for top-ranked Lovett and No. 2 Pace Academy, Union would once again run into one of the private school powers in the Final Four.

According to the GHSA, the home team in the Elite 8 will be determined by a "universal" coin flip. But unlike last year, both the semi-finals and finals will take place at a neutral site location (Cartersville) starting Oct. 30.

Softball: Union opens State Tournament at Pace Academy with Tuesday doubleheader

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Union County enters the Class AA State Tournament as a No. 3 seed for the second straight year following a two-game split in last weekend's region tourney.

The Lady Panthers will visit two-seed Pace Academy on Tuesday in a 4 p.m. doubleheader. Game three is Wednesday if necessary.

Union and Pace have already become acquainted this season with the Lady Panthers claiming a 7-2 victory over the Knights on Aug. 13 in Dalton.

Union finished in 8-AA's third position by way of a 5-1 loss to Elbert County and a 9-4 win over Rabun County during Saturday's Region Tournament at Banks County.

Rain washed out the first three days of an 8-AA tournament originally slated to begin last Tuesday afternoon at Banks County. With Saturday's deadline for region seeding fast approaching, region coaches scrapped the double-elimination format for a one-day single-elimination event.

The action began with Union County suffering a 5-1 loss to Elbert County after the Lady Panthers thumped the Blue Devils 16-2 in Elberton on Sept. 23.

Union rebounded with a 9-4 victory over a Rabun squad that took the Lady Panthers (without Sierra Burnette) to the woodshed on Sept. 28 in Tiger.

The winner of the Union County at Pace Academy best-of-three series will likely visit No. 1 seed Oglethorpe County, barring an upset. On the bright side, by finishing third, the Lady Panthers avoided a potential second-round matchup against the top two teams in Class AA - Vidalia and Jeff Davis.

If No. 1 seed Banks County and No. 2 seed Elbert County survive the first-round, the Leopards would likely face second-ranked Jeff Davis while the Blue Devils would visit top-ranked Vidalia in the round of 16.

Lady Panthers 1, Elbert County 5 - A pair of

two-out walks and an error in the third inning gifted the Blue Devils a 1-0 lead. They extended the margin to 2-0 courtesy of an error, a single and a ground out during the fourth.

Elbert followed the same script to build a 3-0 advantage in the sixth following another RBI ground out.

Union's lone run came in the bottom half of the sixth when Burnette's two-out double scored Ansley Collins, who led off the frame with a base hit to left.

Trailing 3-1, the Lady Panthers surrendered two singles and an error during the seventh. Both teams finished with four hits but four Union errors proved costly.

Burnette went 2 for 3 with an RBI double. Kaelyn Jones and Collins added one single each.

Burnette tossed 6 1/3 in the circle, walking two and allowing five unearned runs. Freshman Sloane Dyer finished the game, working 2/3 of an inning without allowing a hit.

Lady Panthers 9, Rabun County 4 - Collins belted her first career home run (a two-run shot in the fifth) during a 2-for-3, two-RBI day at the plate.

After yielding four runs in the fourth to squander a 3-0 lead, Union County scored two runs in each of the final three innings to push past Rabun County, 9-4.

Jones doubled and knocked in two during a 2-for-4 game. Potts finished 2 for 3 with a run and an RBI.

Caley Davis and Lexi Sisum each scored twice while going 1 for 3 at the dish. Burnette went 1 for 3 with an RBI and Aubrie Banton scored a run.

Tori Tracy and Burnette each allowed three hits over 3 1/3 innings. Dyer fanned one and walked a batter in 1/3 of an inning.

Union County and Pace Academy open the best-of-three series on Tuesday at 4 p.m. The games will not be played on Pace's campus but at the Walsh Athletic Fields, located at 5700 Riverview Rd. SE, Mableton, GA 30126. Admission is \$10.

UCHS Softball Batting Statistics

#	Roster	GP	PA	AB	H	1B	2B	3B	HR	RBI	R	HBP	ROE	FC	CI	BB	SO	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS
4	Lexi Sisum	17	61	49	25	17	5	2	1	12	20	4	2	2	0	6	6	.510	.583	.755	1.338
17	Ansley Collins	17	66	55	24	17	6	0	1	11	17	4	1	1	0	7	8	.436	.530	.600	1.130
5	Emma Roxbury	17	61	51	23	18	3	2	0	16	10	1	3	3	0	5	0	.451	.500	.588	1.088
1	Sierra Burnette	16	56	47	17	8	6	1	2	12	6	0	2	4	0	6	4	.362	.426	.660	1.086
11	Chloe Potts	17	60	49	14	14	0	0	0	8	8	0	2	1	0	9	7	.286	.397	.286	.682
2	Caley Davis	17	52	38	12	10	1	1	0	11	13	1	1	3	0	9	5	.316	.440	.395	.835
16	Kaelyn Jones	16	46	42	12	11	1	0	0	7	2	1	1	3	0	2	1	.286	.326	.310	.636
7	Jaycee Seabolt	12	29	27	7	4	3	0	0	4	1	0	2	1	0	1	3	.259	.286	.370	.656
8	Aubrie Banton	14	39	29	5	4	1	0	0	2	9	1	1	1	0	7	8	.172	.351	.207	.558
19	Gracie Gladdy	8	14	12	4	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	.333	.357	.500	.857
9	Tori Tracy	7	10	9	3	3	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	.333	.400	.333	.733
23	Katie Byers	13	7	6	2	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	2	.333	.429	.333	.762
3	Emily Byers	7	17	12	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	2	0	2	3	.083	.250	.083	.333
10	Rebekah Chambers	9	10	9	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	3	.111	.200	.111	.311
30	Brooklyn Brown	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
18	Georgia Patton	12	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	.000	.000	.000	.000
6	Jewell Massey	14	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
13	Sloane Dyer	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
Totals		17	535	441	150	112	28	6	4	91	108	13	15	22	0	58	53	.340	.424	.458	.882

UCHS Softball Pitching Statistics

#	Roster	IP	GP	GS	W	L	SV	SVO	BS	SV%	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HBP	ERA	WHIP
1	Sierra Burnette	67.1	15	11	6	6	1	1	0	1.000	66	49	23	25	40	10	2.391	1.351
9	Tori Tracy	26.0	9	6	3	2	0	0	0	.000	29	25	19	13	12	2	5.115	1.615
13	Sloane Dyer	9.0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	6	3	3	6	8	1	2.333	1.333
	Illa Bragg	0.2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	0	2	0	2	0	1	.000	3.000
10	Rebekah Chambers	0.0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000
Totals		103.0	17	17	9	8	1	1	0	1.000	101	79	45	46	60	14	3.058	1.427