

Sports

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Returning players lift Union to 42-28 win at East Jackson Panthers can clinch a top-two seed at State on Friday night

By Todd Forrest
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Nicholson - Union County remains in the postseason picture, using 21-straight second-half points to pull away from a 21-21 halftime score in a 42-21 win at East Jackson behind 235 total yards and 3 touchdowns from Braylen Rader and a pair of career-highs from Ethan McBride, who netted 156 yards on eight catches.

Meanwhile, with the team's leading receiver, Jensen Goble, back in the fold following a hamstring injury, senior quarterback Caiden Tanner logged two season-highs with 27 completions and 350 yards through the air.

In all, the Panthers offense posted a season-best 627 yards, however, the top story was the play of an inspired defensive unit that received a shot in the arm via the return of injured senior linebacker Seth Rutan.

"Neither [Goble or Rutan] was close to 100%, but the team matters that much to them," Union County head coach Michael Perry said. "They were a much-needed boost. I can't say enough about the energy that Seth brings on defense. He raises the level of play for all those guys on defense and they feed off him. He is such a bell cow on our defensive side."

Led by Rutan, Union County (6-2, 2-1) suffocated East Jackson's explosive rushing attack, limiting the Eagles to a season-low 60 yards and 2.1 yards per carry.

"It feels amazing to get back out there," Rutan said after the game. "I've really been pushing it in practice to get back. I hoped to be back this week, but [being a must-win] game, it pushed me a bit harder."

Paced by quarterback Drew Richardson and running back Quay Hill, East Jackson entered Friday night churning out a 203-yard-per-game clip on the ground. However, they discovered tough sledding against a Union defense still stewing over last week's struggles in the loss at Providence Christian.

"We took on a tougher mindset during practice and it was a hard week, but it paid off and showed tonight," said Rutan, who had 11 tackles, 3 TFL and a sack. "I think we did a good job tonight containing [Richardson and Hill] and keeping them in front of us."

Among the Eagles' four



The return of seniors Seth Rutan (18) and Jensen Goble (12) sparked Union to an important 8-AA victory at East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

sive back at the goal line. "[Tanner] is tough as nails," Perry said. "His scramble touchdown was a turning point in the game. He's such a smart, tough kid. He's not the biggest, but he's going to give you absolutely everything he has."

Sophomore safety Cade Dockrey sparked the defense's second-half efforts by picking off Richardson over the middle on East Jackson's ensuing offensive series, returning the interception to midfield. "That interception was probably the play of the game," Perry said. [Dockrey is] just a ball hawk back there and a very good football player. I think that was the turning point. After that, East Jackson's body language became very negative. I'm very proud of our guys for not retaliating when things started getting chippy."

Tanner immediately went back to work, beginning with first-down completion to McBride for 18. After Rader moved the chains, senior tight end Tyler Grasty slipped out of the backfield and took a short pass from Tanner 34 yards down the sideline, dragging a helpless defender into the endzone.

Union County got back an earlier missed PAT when Tanner hit Jensen Goble for 2 points and a 35-21 advantage. "Jensen is one of the best receivers I've ever coached



and he gives you everything he has," Perry said. "He's another one that raises the level of play of those around him. Whatever it takes to get the job done, I know he's going to lay it all on the line."

The defense continued terrorizing Richardson with Rutan's first-down sack. Schuknecht and David Heredia dropped Hill for no gain on second down, and then Schuknecht's pressure forced an incompletion and an East Jackson punt.

Union County averted trouble after a fumble, courtesy of a three-and-out by the defense. Still 35-21 in the fourth, East Jackson's final bid to make it a contest was derailed by a fourth-down false start at midfield, bringing the punt team onto the field.

Following a Union County punt, senior Kooper Ashcraft dropped Richardson in the backfield for a 6-yard loss. Dusty Aaron swallowed up Hill for a loss on second down and Braden Plott broke up a third-down throw.

The Panthers put the game away via an 8-play, 68-yard drive, culminated by Rader's dive across the goal line on a 9-yard carry with 3:21 left.

After Tanner opened the aforementioned drive with an 8-yard keeper, Rader took it from there, hauling in a screen

pass for 7 yards and a first down. But Rader's shining moment came on the ensuing play when he took a handoff up the middle and was met by a wall of defenders just shy of midfield. Aided by teammates, the senior drove the rugby scrum another 20 yards to the Eagles' 32-yard line.

"Every week [Rader] gives us another unreal highlight," Perry said. "I can't wait to see what he does next."

Tanner used his legs for 12 yards, moving the chains on third-and-8 from the 30, then a pair of gives to Rader stretched the lead to 42-21 on Homecoming in Nicholson.

"The guys were a little ticked off that we were crowned [East Jackson's] Homecoming opponent," Perry said. "I definitely heard a lot of comments about that before the game."

Union County's 627-yard output came behind a patchwork offensive line that lost senior tackle Mayo Collins-Spiva, followed by his sophomore backup Kai Burnett.

"East Jackson is a very athletic team but we were the more physical team in all phases of the game," Perry said. "I thought our offensive line did an incredible job. Beau Webster had to play right guard and we kicked Easton [Shumaker] out to right tackle. But I'm really proud of Beau and the energy

he brought."

Down 7-0 in the second quarter, Union got on the board when McBride dropped to the turf on a quick slant route to snag a 5-yard dart from Tanner to cap a 6-play, 42-yard drive.

"Ethan was clutch for us," Perry said. "He had lots of success all night. He practices hard every day and just does his job. He's the ultimate team player. A big part of our success Friday night was due to Ethan McBride."

The Panthers countered East Jackson's 54-yard scoring strike by going 64 yards on 8 plays, punctuated by Rader's 4-yard scamper on first and goal. Later, Rader put Union out front 21-14 with a 3-yard reception from Tanner, putting the finishing touches on a 10-play possession.

Tanner's lone miscue of the night came late in the half when a screen pass was picked off deep in Union territory, resulting in a game-tying touchdown four plays later.

With just over a minute to play before the intermission, Tanner took over at his own 35 and moved Union inside the 5-yard line before the drive ended with a blocked field goal.

McBride caught four passes on the drive, collecting over 50 yards and moving the Panthers inside the 10. But on second and goal from the 4-yard line, Rader hauled in an acrobatic catch near the endzone sideline, but he was ruled out of bounds despite photo and video evidence to the contrary.

The call proved costly as Union failed to get points out of the drive after East Jackson blocked McBride's 21-yard field goal attempt from the left hash.

Rader's night ended with 24 carries, a season-high 188 yards and 2 touchdowns on the ground to go with 44 yards receiving and a score on a career-best 7 receptions. Tanner rushed nine times for 65 yards; Schuknecht carried four times for 24 yards.

Goble netted five grabs for 72 yards; Grasty had five catches for 60 yards. Dockrey caught two passes for 15 yards.

Ethan Lester had 9 tackles; Aaron collected 7 tackles, 2 TFL; Schuknecht had 6 tackles; Lane Lance added 5 tackles, 1 TFL; Heredia had 4 tackles. Ashcraft had a sack and 3 tackles; Taylor Whitehead had 3 tackles; Carter Deal collected 2 tackles.

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Ethan McBride tallied career-highs in catches and yards at East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest



Kaden Combs (54) and Braylen Rader (34) celebrate one of Rader's three touchdowns. Photo/Todd Forrest

Super Regionals: Anthros, Lady Panthers take No. 1 Rockmart to the wire

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Rockmart - The Lady Panthers didn't let their 2023 season end without a fight.

Union County (15-11-1) left the bases loaded in the seventh inning of a one-run game during last week's double-elimination Class AA Super Regional at top-ranked Rockmart (29-3).

Lifted by the postseason heroics of freshman Izzy Anthros, the Lady Panthers stunned Rockmart with a 9-5 victory to force the third and deciding game on Thursday night.

After blasting Landmark Christian 14-2 on Thursday afternoon, Union County needed two wins over Rockmart to advance to the program's third consecutive Elite Eight. The Lady Panthers, who lost 8-4 to Rockmart on Wednesday, overcame an early 2-0 deficit in the second meeting behind a complete game in the circle and a homer from Anthros.

Anthros' October heat-wave continued into the finale, belting two homers and driving in three before earning an intentional walk while representing the tying run in the seventh.

Lady Panthers 5, Rockmart 6 (Thursday) - Trailing 6-3 in its final at-bat with a berth in the Elite 8 on the line, Union County's first three hitters reached to load the bags for senior Gracie Gladding, who singled home fellow 12th-grader Jewel Massey.

Down 6-4, Sloane Dyer bounced to third, resulting in a force at the plate. Anthros came around following her intentional walk via Lily Helton's infield single. But Union couldn't push across the tying run when senior Brooklyn Brown flew out



Freshman Izzy Anthros hit .571 in the Super Regionals with 3 homers, 2 triples, 8 RBIs and 7 runs while pitching 19 1/3 innings. Photo/Todd Forrest

to center and Peyton Grisham grounded out.

Anthros homered in the top of the third to put the Lady Panthers out front 1-0, but the Yellow Jackets answered with an RBI double in the bottom half. Another Izzy-bomb in the fifth, this one coming with one aboard and two outs, pushed Union County ahead 3-1.

Rockmart answered with a pair of runs to tie things up at 3-3, then took advantage of two Union errors to grab a 6-3 lead in the sixth.

Anthros finished 2 for 3 with 3 runs, 3 RBIs and a pair of homers. Senior Georgia

Patton went 2 for 4 with a run; Gladding drove in a run during a 2-for-3 game; Helton went 1 for 3 with an RBI; Massey scored a run.

Anthros tossed 6 innings, allowing 8 hits and 3 earned runs.

Lady Panthers 9, Rockmart 5 (Thurs) - Union County handed Rockmart its first loss of 2023 to a school that's not Class 6A or 7A to force the third and deciding meeting later that night.

Trailing 2-1 in the sixth, the Lady Panthers exploded for six runs, then added two more in the seventh to race past the

Yellow Jackets.

Anthros allowed 9 hits and 3 earned runs while fanning five hitters over 7 innings. At the plate, she homered during a 2-for-4 performance that included a pair of runs.

Gladding drove in two, finishing 1 for 4 with a pair of runs. Patton went 1 for 5 with an RBI; senior Katie Byers drove in two and scored while going 2-for-4 at the dish; Brown walked twice during a 1-for-1 game; Dyer added two runs and a walk.

Massey drove in a run and scored during her 1-for-4 outing; Mikala Souther walked twice

and scored; Helton reached on a pair of walks.

Lady Panthers 14, Landmark Christian 2 (Thurs - 4 innings) - In the first of three Thursday games, Union County put up 10 in the third and three in the fourth to break open a 1-1 game and earn a rematch with Rockmart.

Byers homered and drove in two during a 1-for-3 game; Gladding went 2 for 2 with 2 RBIs; Grisham knocked in two and finished 1 for 2; Patton went 2 for 4 with an RBI; Anthros went 1 for 1 with a walk and 2 RBIs.

Massey went 2 for 3 and

added a pair of runs; Dyer scored twice, drove in a run and went 1 for 2; Helton went 1 for 2 with two runs and an RBI; Brown doubled, walked and scored twice to finish 1 for 2.

Sophomore Ayla Jamison allowed 6 hits and 2 earned runs over 4 innings.

Lady Panthers 4, Rockmart 8 (Wednesday) - Trailing 8-2, Union County pushed across two in the seventh and left the bases loaded in the Lady Panthers' first of three meetings with Rockmart in 24 hours.

Anthros and Massey both tripled in the loss, while Gladding went 2 for 3 with a walk. Dyer finished 1 for 3 with an RBI; Brown doubled during a 1-for-3 day; Jaslyn Roberts walked and scored.

Anthros went 5 innings, allowing 8 hits and 6 earned runs. Roberts tossed a scoreless inning.

Lady Panthers 18, Landmark Christian 6 (Wednesday - 4 innings) - Union County scored 15 unanswered runs after falling behind 6-3 in the second inning of last week's Super Regional opener.

Gladding's grand slam headlined her 5-RBI day; Dyer tripled and drove in four during a 2-for-2 day; Patton went 1 for 2 with 3 RBIs and 2 runs.

Anthros walked twice and tripled to finish 2 for 2 with 2 RBIs and a pair of runs. Souther finished 2 for 3 with 3 runs and an RBI; Massey scored three times during a 2-for-3 outing. Helton drove in one to finish 1 for 3; Grisham walked, scored and drove in a run; Byers worked a walk.

Anthros allowed 5 runs (1 earned) over 1 1/3 innings. Jamison worked 2 2/3 innings, yielding 3 hits and an earned run.

UCRD: 5th grade rallies past White; regular season wraps up Saturday at home

Cleveland - The Union County 5th grade rallied from a 7-0 halftime deficit with 18-straight points during an 18-13 victory at White County. Parker Dillinger accounted

ed for all three Union County touchdowns, the first set up by his kick return, as the 5th grade came away with Union's only win of the day.

On Saturday, Oct. 28,

Union County will host Fannin County in the regular season finale. The 1st graders kickoff at 9 a.m. to open a full day of action at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.



Fifth-grader Parker Dillinger extends across the goal line at White County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Alexander Grey hauls in a critical fourth-down catch during the 5th grade's win at White. Photo/Todd Forrest



The 6th grade cheer team getting ready to support the Panthers at White County on Saturday. The following day, the girls collected their second Cheer Bowl title at Dawson County. Photo/Autumn Abercrombie

Perry: Need our fans 'rocking and rolling' Friday

Union County hosts Athens Academy (5-3, 2-1) for Senior Night in a matchup between a pair of 2-1 squads in 8-AA. The Spartans suffered a 55-28 loss to first-place Fellowship Christian two weeks ago but bounced back with a 56-27 victory at Banks County.

"[Athens Academy] plays a lot of guys both ways, but they have some very good players that will bring it," Perry said. "But I feel like we can get physical with them in the box and that's what we hope to do."

Athens Academy is led by junior quarterback Hampton Johnson and his 2,041 yards passing and 18 touchdowns. He has been interception-prone at times with 11 picks.

Juniors Jamari Welch and Jeremiah Wingfield headline a two-headed monster in the backfield. So far, the duo has combined for 1,594 yards and 19 touchdowns. Freshman



An animated Coach Perry after Friday's win. Photo/Todd Forrest

Keyon Standifer leads the receiving corps with 21 catches, 615 yards and 5 scores.

Senior Ricky Chastain's 31 tackles are tops on the de-

fense. Junior Bryan McClendon has two interceptions.

"We hope we have a big crowd for Senior Night and we need everyone rocking and rolling," Perry said. "We need every advantage we can get so we can come out and beat these guys."

A Union County win vs. Athens Academy would set up a region championship showdown next Thursday night in Roswell at Fellowship Christian. Meanwhile, an Athens Academy victory hands another region title to Fellowship.

Injury report: Collins-Spiwa and Jonah Kluth are both out, but Coach Perry added the injury list could grow at any moment.

"Goble and [Rutan], it wouldn't surprise me at any time if they were unable to go anymore," Perry said. "They are not 100% and we have to be smart with them."

UCRD: Union 6th grade secures back-to-back Cheer Bowl victories



Top: The Union County 6th grade cheerleaders after winning their second straight Mountain Athletic Conference Cheer Bowl in Dawson County on Sunday. Bottom: Cheer coaches Bridget Burgess, Kristy Rusk and Autumn Abercrombie with the trophy alongside their daughters. Union County defeated Chestatee, Dawson County and Lumpkin County to claim a second title in year two of the competition. Photos courtesy of Autumn Abercrombie.