

Sports

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Panthers move to 8-0 with suffocating defensive effort

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The sixth-ranked Panthers improved to 8-0 with a 43-0 victory over Oglethorpe County, clinching home-field advantage in the first round of state with a defensive masterpiece on a rainy Homecoming night at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Union County's defense recorded its first shutout of the year while limiting the Patriots to one first down, negative-eight yards of total offense and 0-for-10 on third down.

After the win, head coach Brian Allison was asked if his defense is starting to peak at the right time.

"I certainly hope so," he said. "We've played pretty well the last three games, giving up 14, 7 and 0 so I feel pretty good heading into the last two weeks."

On the other side of the ball, the Panthers' offense got off to a slow start with two early turnovers following an 18-yard scamper by Pierson Allison that spotted Union a quick 6-0 lead.

The first turnover came on 1st-and-goal from the 8-yard line when Allison, who was making his first appearance since Oct. 4, was stripped at the two and the Patriots took over in the shadow of their own end zone.

"On the first fumble, the (Oglethorpe) kid just made a great play; he punched it out from behind," Coach Allison said. "The others, I just think (Pierson Allison) was trying to do too much. Maybe it was from the three weeks off but I think we expect too much of ourselves. I mean, we won the game 43-0 and were disappointed about it."

"Yes, we could have played a little better on offense and we missed a few blocks, but I think we've gotten a little greedy. Sometimes we lose our composure, myself included, if we're not scoring a touchdown on every drive."

"Overall, we played really well on defense and when it was all said and done, we had over 400 yards of offense and



L-R: Noah Underwood (16) led a smothering Union County defense that held Oglethorpe County to negative rushing yards and no passing yards. Sawyer Drake pulls down a touchdown pass in the wind and rain while taking a shot from two Patriot defenders. Photos/Todd Forrest

completed 70% of our passes, which is pretty good in those conditions."

Following the Pierson Allison fumble, the defense responded with a safety on 3rd-and-11 from the 1-yard line. The two points came via Jonah Daniel, who chased down the Oglethorpe County quarterback on a B-gap blitz from the linebacker position.

Daniel's sack/safety provided a much-needed shot in the arm for the offense, who took over at the Patriot 38-yard line, leading 8-0 with 8:07 left in the half.

Daniel would break loose for 24 yards, then a 9-yard reception from Josh Orr moved Union inside the five. With a 4th-and-1 from the five, Pierson Allison rolled left and found Cayden Rich, who came open on a drag route in the end zone.

The extra point snap was low but holder Pierson Allison picked up the football and ran untouched around the left edge for the 2-point conversion and a 16-0 advantage.

Following another Union County fumble and a pair of Oglethorpe punts, the Panthers

made it a 23-0 game at the half when Sawyer Drake came down with a 9-yard scoring grab in the back of the end zone.

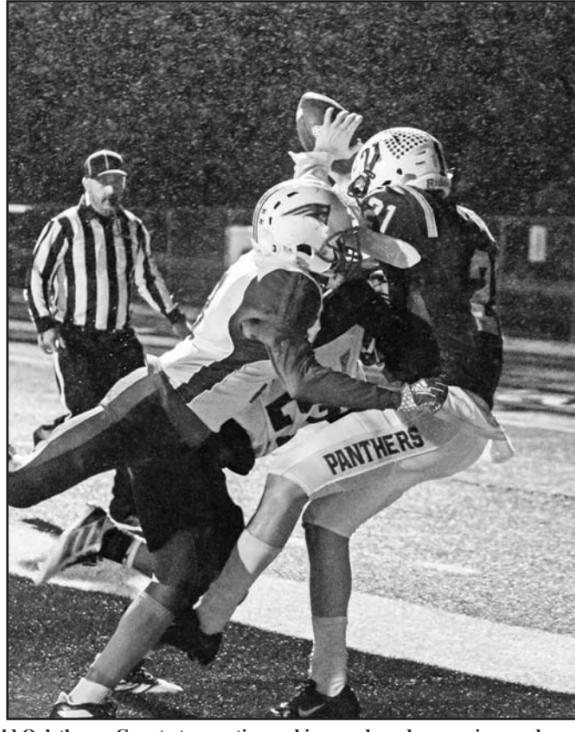
Drake caught two passes on the drive, Rich pulled in a 14-yarder and the Pats were tagged with a roughing the passer and an offsides penalty that moved the Panthers inside the 10.

Union's first drive of the second half stalled at the six but Mason McCombs split the uprights from 23-yards out for a 26-0 lead at the 8:18 mark of the third.

A third down sack on the ensuing Oglethorpe drive resulted in another three-and-out, and the Panthers set up shop at their own 31 following the punt.

An unsportsmanlike conduct penalty on the Pats, a 25-yard run by Daniel and an 11-yard reception by McCombs had Union County back in the red zone. From there, Sloan Sutton powered his way for six with runs of 10 yards and 2 yards to open up a 33-0 advantage with 3:49 remaining in the third.

Faced with a 4th-and-2 early in the fourth quarter, the



Panthers elected to let McCombs tack on three more points, this time from 28 yards out, extending the lead to 36-0.

With a running clock in the final period, Union's only other possession ended with a 25-yard touchdown run by Sutton as the clock approached the 2-minute mark.

The Panther rushing attack topped 200 yards for the first time since Putnam County as they churned out 206 on the ground. Daniel led the way with 127 yards on 15 carries, going over 1,000 yards on the season with his first carry of the game.

Sutton rushed six times for 27 yards and a score.

Pierson Allison connected on 21-of-30 for 230 yards and a pair of scores. He added 56 yards and a score on eight carries.

Drake caught 10 passes for 129 yards and a touchdown; Rich had four receptions for 35 yards and a score; Orr had two grabs for 30 yards; John Mancuso caught two passes for 12 yards; McCombs and Zion Ross each had one catch for 11 yards and Daniel added a 2-yard reception.

thing we're going to have to work on this week because (Social Circle is) huge up-front on both lines and that will present us with a major challenge.

"(Social Circle has) a good running back and wide receiver and we're trying to figure out how we'll defend both of them at the same time.

"Plus, it's a challenge anytime you have to drive three or four hours to a game, so that's something else we're going to have to deal with."

When asked if there were any concerns about the team looking ahead to Rabun County, Coach Allison quoted "Doctor Lou."

"Lou Holtz once said, 'over the course of a football season, you can get really fired up for only three or four games.'" Coach Allison said. "So we need to win these games that we're supposed to win, then get really fired up for Rabun County when the time comes."

Around the Region - Last week's marquee matchup in 8-AA was Putnam County's 24-13 victory at Banks County.

Putnam's win, combined with Elbert County's 35-18 victory at Monticello, results in a huge third-place showdown on Friday between a pair of 3-2 squads when Elbert visits Putnam.

The Monticello loss eliminates the Canes from playoff contention. As for Banks, they can still get in, but need to win out vs Monticello and at Elbert.

If Banks wins both, they're in.

Additionally, there's the possibility of a three-way tie for third if Elbert defeats Putnam and Banks knocks off Elbert. That would leave three teams at 4-3 (assuming Putnam defeats Oglethorpe in the season finale) vying for the final two spots.

Down the road - With Union clinching home field in the first round of State, the most-likely playoff opponents will be Region 6-AA's South Atlanta or B.E.S.T. Academy.

Depending on the result of Rabun at Union, and barring a major upset in 6-AA, the Panthers would host the No. 3 seed South Atlanta or the No. 4 seed B.E.S.T. on Nov. 15.

Homecoming Queen Cydney Rich braves the elements to accept her crown

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Cydney Rich was all smiles after receiving her crown.

And despite the delays and rainy conditions, the UCHS senior stayed outside to thank everyone that stopped by to congratulate her.

Then came pictures, interviews, hugs and more well-wishers, but with her hair waterlogged and makeup damp from rain and tears, a grateful Rich made certain that each person realized just how much she appreciated all of their kind words.

"I'm so thankful to all my classmates who put me on (the Homecoming Court), and honestly, I'm just thankful to God for this opportunity," she said. "I love all of these girls out here and I'm friends with all of them. I want to congratulate them for making it on the court and I'm just very thankful to everyone that allowed me to have this opportunity."

According to Rich, the butterflies in her stomach were more intense than expected in the moments leading up to the Homecoming Queen announcement. But once it was over, it was a huge relief as an extremely frenzied week had finally come to a close.

"It's been a really hectic and really nerve-wracking but we got through it," she said. "It's been a long day and I wish we could have done it before the game because it's a little colder now, but it is what it is."

Rich has been nominated to the Homecoming Court all four years, so this is the final year she will get to experience the excitement and drama of Homecoming Week at UCHS.

"It's bittersweet, for sure," she said. "But I'm just happy for the opportunity and it's such an honor to make it once."



The Union County High School 2019-20 Homecoming Court following Friday's festivities at halftime of the Panthers' 43-0 victory over Oglethorpe County. (Not pictured - Lasada Johnson) Photo/Todd Forrest



Cydney Rich receives a bouquet of flowers after she was crowned Homecoming Queen on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Runner-Up Miranda Lockaby. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Runner-Up Katie Baumeister. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Runner-Up Allie Brey



Freshman Runner-Up Lasada Johnson