

# Sports

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## Union thumps No. 10 Athens Academy, plays for 8-AA title Panthers can claim first region title in 50 years with another win

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Union County (7-2, 3-1) picked up its first win in 23 years, and fourth all-time, over an *AJC*-ranked opponent during Friday's 35-21 victory over No. 10 Athens Academy on Senior Night in Blairsville.

"This is a great feeling," senior running back Braylen Rader said after the game. "Everyone doubted us and we were definitely the underdogs, but we stuck together and practiced hard all week. And guess what? We did it."

With the win, the Panthers remain in the hunt for the program's first region title since 1973 ahead of Thursday's winner-take-all battle at No. 7 Fellowship Christian in Roswell.

"We want [the region title]; we want it badly," Rader said. "Now we just have to go out and get it."

Before the victory over Athens Academy (5-4, 2-2), Union County honored its senior players, trainers, cheerleaders and band members.

Later, the Panthers returned the favor to the Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium crowd with a performance for the ages against a Spartans program Union County had never defeated in five tries.

According to head coach Michael Perry, Friday's win marked the signature win of his three-season tenure in Blairsville, topping last year's playoff win at Model.

"This [win] was against a private school with all the advantages that come with that," Perry said. "Athens Academy has some very talented kids with lots of [college] offers. But it was such a fun night and our kids played so hard. It was a night they are not going to forget."

Rader paced the offense with 173 yards and two scores on 27 carries - putting the workhorse back at 1,020 yards and 18 touchdowns on the season.

"It feels great to [go over 1,000 yards] on Senior Night," Rader said. "This is just my second year playing [high school football], but I'm glad that I'm a part of this team."

But once again, it was another iron-fisted defensive performance by the Purple Swarm that set the tone from kickoff, helping Union build a 35-7 fourth-quarter advantage by limiting Athens Academy to



Seth Rutan (left), Kooper Ashcraft (center) and Ethan Lester (right) combined for 52 tackles in Friday night's victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

season lows of 211 total yards and 75 yards passing.

Leading the way for Union County was junior line-backer Ethan Lester, who recorded a career-high 24 tackles (19 solo), 2 sacks and 3 TFLs. Lester's 24 tackles is the most by a Panther since Jackson Colwell's 26 vs. Andrews, NC in 2017.

"Ethan just comes to work every day," Perry said. "He's a great kid and a real student of the game and works all the time with [defensive coordinator Mark] Wade, so it really doesn't surprise me."

In all, Union County had four players with at least a dozen tackles, including 16 stops, 3 TFLs and a sack from Seth Rutan; 13 (TFL, sack) by David Heredia and 12 from Kooper Ashcraft.

"Our defense was just attacking the ball all night and there was some serious hitting going on out there," Perry said. "I just can't say enough about [our defense]."

With the score tied at 7-7 in the second quarter following an early feeling-out process by both sides, Union County opened up a 21-7 halftime edge with two touchdown strikes from senior quarterback Caiden Tanner, who completed 19-of-21 passes for 243 yards and 3 TDs.

"Our gameplan going in

was to mix up [our offensive tempo] between huddling and playing fast, and I think it gave [Athens] a lot of problems," Perry said.

Tanner's first touchdown throw came on the heels of a fourth-down stop from the defense, setting up the offense at the Union 32-yard line. From there, Tanner moved the chains with consecutive third-down draw plays, and then a first-down screen to Jensen Goble netted 19 yards. Later in the drive, from the 3-yard line, Tanner rolled right on fourth-and-goal and hit senior Tyler Grasty in the back of the endzone.

A Spartans' punt handed possession back to Union with time winding down in the half, and on the fourth play of the series, Tanner went up top to Cade Dockrey on a 36-yard score down the visitor's sideline to mount a 21-7 halftime edge.

Union County's onslaught continued into the third with a pair of touchdowns, ignited by Dockrey's second timely interception in two games on Athens Academy's opening drive of the half.

With the Spartans 39 yards from making it a one-score game, Dockrey pounced on a deep throw over the middle and returned the pick 43 yards to the Athens Academy 40, where Union County needed

four plays to bump its lead to 28-7.

"Cade had two huge plays for us, the interception and the touchdown before halftime," Perry said. "He just keeps getting better and better."

"We did a good job taking away [Athens Academy QB Hampton Johnson's] first read and he really struggled getting to his second read."

Up 21-7, facing a fourth-and-1 with the Spartans expecting a run, the Panthers played-faked a runner, leaving Grasty wide open over the middle for a 32-yard catch and run, reminiscent of his 99-yard score at Providence.

"Grasty had two big touchdown catches, but I think Fellowship will be ready for that play cause we also got them on it last year," Perry said.

"And Tanner, he's been nothing but a pleasure to coach," Perry continued. "He's a very intelligent young man, who is going to work and it shows. We definitely wouldn't be where we are today without Caiden Tanner."

Rader led the game away moments later after the defense denied Athens Academy on fourth down at midfield. The senior rumbled for 12 on first

down before delivering the dagger one play later via a 35-yard jaunt that saw Rader bounce outside and out-run a defender to the left pylon for a 35-7 margin.

Both offenses swapped punts before Athens Academy finally halted Union's 28-0 run early in the fourth with a 1-yard touchdown rush. The score came courtesy of a short field when recently returned punter/kicker Zuriel Mancillas dropped to one knee to field a low snap, marking him down inside the 30.

But the defense didn't make life easy for the Spartans, forcing them into eight offensive plays to churn out 27 yards and a score.

Athens Academy's final scoring drive required a time-consuming 14 plays to move within 35-21 before a steady dose of Rader ran out the last 3 minutes of the contest.

Entering Friday night, it was no secret that Rader would be front-and-center in Union's offensive game plan, and by the Panthers' second offensive series of the game, Rader and the O-line's physicality was on full display when the senior back's 50-yard carry spotted his team an early 7-0 edge.

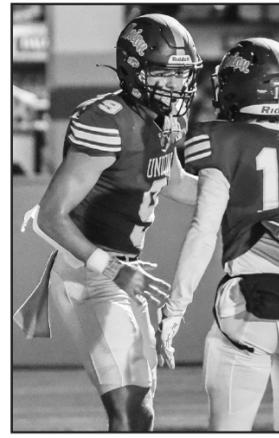
### Region title game: Union Co. at No. 7 Fellowship

At no point in 2023 has the playoff picture been any clearer for Union County: Defeat Roswell's Fellowship Christian (7-2, 4-0) on Thursday, Nov. 2 and end a 50-year region title drought.

A win hands the Panthers their first region crown since 1973, while a loss likely drops Union into a 3-way tie for second with Providence Christian and Athens Academy.

In round one of the Class AA State Tournament, Region 8-AA is paired with Region 5, where Callaway (Hogansville) has locked up the top spot. Columbia (Atlanta) is secure as the No. 2 seed, but the last two spots could go to Eagle's Landing Christian (McDonough), Redan (Stone Mountain) or McNair (Atlanta).

Meanwhile, Fellowship Christian is coming off a 21-10 win over last-place Banks County. The week before, the Paladins allowed 353 yards rushing in a 73-39 win over Providence. Fellowship surrendered 341 on the ground during a 52-28 win over Athens Academy on Oct.



Tyler Grasty

13. East Jackson put up 339 yards rushing during its loss to Fellowship on Oct. 6.

In non-region play, Fellowship allowed 411 on the ground in a 42-21 loss at Rabun County on Sept. 29.

Fellowship's recent defensive trend removes any doubt surrounding Coach Perry's game plan for Thursday night.

"We're going to run the ball," Perry said. "We're going

"We knew coming in we were going to run it right at them," Rader said. "We were confident we could have some success in the box, and that's what we were able to do."

Athens quickly tied things up by way of a lengthy kickoff return and a costly horse-collar flag against the Union defense when Heredia dropped Jeremiah Wingfield in the backfield on third and 5.

"Heredia did a great job and Dusty Aaron keeps getting better," Perry said. "I'm extremely proud of our defensive line."

At the end of the day, the Panthers overcame a vast penalty discrepancy that saw the Spartans flagged just twice for 8 yards, while Union County was tagged seven times for 62 yards.

**Stats:** Tanner rushed 13 times for 76 yards. Goble and Grasty led the receiving corp with 5 receptions for 62 yards each, while Grasty finished with his second two-touchdown night of the season. Senior Ethan McBride had 5 catches for 50 yards and made all five of his PATs; Dockrey caught two balls for 48 yards and a TD; Rader added a pair of catches for 21 yards.

Connor Schuknecht recorded 8 tackles; Dockrey had four; Aaron added 3 tackles and a TFL; Braden Plott and Anthony Heredia added two each; Carter Deal, Lane Lance and Taylor Whitehead had one apiece.

**Extra points:** Before Friday night, Union's only wins over *AJC*-ranked opponents came in 1967 at No. 7 Lumpkin County; 1976 vs. No. 3 Buford, and 2000 vs. No. 9 Dawson County. Those in attendance vs. Athens Academy witnessed the program's first victory over a ranked private school.

\* In the five previous meetings, Athens Academy outscored Union County 151-46, including a 38-7 final last October in Athens.

\* With two more rushing scores, Rader would become the first Panther since Cole Wright in 2016 to reach 20. Additionally, Rader is within 200 yards rushing of topping 2,000 for his career.

\* Coach Perry is one win away from his 40th coaching victory and 19th at UCHS.

to have to change tempo and put Caiden [Tanner] in good positions so he's not in third-and-long all the time. [Fellowship] has a very good defensive lineman that has a lot of college offers."

However, Perry's biggest concern is Fellowship's potent offense, led by quarterback Jonathan Grandby and wide receiver Evan Haynes.

"Everything goes through those two and they are very good," Perry said. "Haynes is also a very good defensive back and his dad is former Falcons' receiver Michael Haynes, who is also a coach there. But they want to throw it deep and we have to limit that."

Kickoff is at 7 p.m. Thursday night. Fellowship Christian is located at 10965 Woodstock Rd, Roswell, GA.

"I can't think of a better way to send out our seniors than we did on Friday," Perry said.

"The last two classes are the reason our program is going in the right direction. I couldn't ask for anything more. But now it's time to go out and make history again on Thursday night."



Braylen Rader drags tacklers en route to his fifth 100-yard game of 2023. Photo/Todd Forrest

# XC: Hunter's second-place finish propels Union girls to Class AA State meet

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Jefferson - Sophomore Lola Hunter turned in a personal-record time of 19 minutes, 36 seconds to finish as Region 8-AA's runner-up at Thursday's region meet hosted by East Jackson at Lamar Murphy Park.

Hunter's late pass of Athens Academy's Molly Smith (19:45) pushed her into second place, but the late charge wasn't enough to catch region champion Maya Davis (18:40), also from Athens Academy.

Hunter and the Union County ladies qualify for Saturday's Class AA State Championships in Carrollton behind a third-place team finish.

With 30 points, Athens Academy took home the team championship, 28 points better than Fellowship Christian. Union logged 68 points and fourth-place Providence Christian had 108.

Union County senior Ellie Adams came in 13th at 22:33; junior Hannah Kazmierzak was 16th with a time of 22:48; senior Natalie Payne placed 18th at 23:12; junior Noel Hyatt was 20th at 23:35.

Junior Lydia Wagner crossed the line in 24:40 to finish 23rd; Avery Hussion was 28th at 25:13.

The Union County ladies will race at 10:15 a.m. on



Lola Hunter looks at the clock as she crosses the finish line with a PR time of 19:36. Photo/Todd Forrest

Saturday, Nov. 4 at Carrollton High School.

The Union County men missed a state-qualifying finish by placing fifth at the region meet with 99 points. Athens Academy (48), Providence (50), East Jackson (80) and Fellowship Christian (85) claimed the top four spots,

while Banks County (148) finished sixth.

Senior Benton Gregory came in eighth, two spots shy of an individual qualifier, with a time of 17:22. Senior Wes Seiler finished 17th at 18:02; senior Zander Rotko was 21st at 18:37; sophomore Ty Hogstedt clocked in at 19:29

to place 26th; freshman Andrew Nushtayev finished 27th at 19:38.

Freshman Oliver Hillman was 28th with a time of 19:42. Freshman Noah Payne placed 29th at 20:07.

Overall, eight of the top 10 spots went to private-school runners in both races.



Ellie Adams (L) and Hannah Kazmierzak (R) at region. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Benton Gregory placed 8th at the region meet. Photo/Todd Forrest

## UCRD: Four teams punch playoff ticket

Union County's 1st, 3rd, 5th and 6th grade teams will open the postseason on Saturday with three teams playing at home.

On Saturday, Oct. 27, the final day of the regular season, Union won four of five over

Fannin with the 6th grade finishing off the day with a 36-0 victory.

The 5th grade took care of business 21-6; the 3rd graders held on 7-6 and 2nd grade survived 12-7.

This Saturday's action

at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium kicks off with the 1st grade facing Dawson at 9 a.m.

The 5th grade plays Pickens at 3 p.m. and 6th grade meets White County at 4:30. Third grade goes to Fannin at noon to face Dawson County.

## Union Co. swimmers already breaking records



The UCMS (bottom) and UCHS (top) swim teams competed Friday, Oct. 27 at Tallulah Falls. Kimberly Simpson broke the 50-yd backstroke record for UCMS from 2019. The Boys Relay team of Wyatt Yancey, Ian Lander, John Tippens and Henry Kazmierzak broke the 200-yd freestyle relay record for UCMS from 2014. Both teams will compete again this weekend in Clarkesville.



Sixth-grader Jacob Nichols (1) blocks a Fannin County punt on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest



Jonathan Wright scores the 3rd grade's lone touchdown of their 7-6 win over Fannin. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Meet the Panthers event another success



Union County football hosted its annual Meet the Panthers, along with a community pep rally on Thursday, Oct. 6. One of the evening's highlights was the wing-eating contest, the participants included: Cheer - Reece Chambers, Grace Rice. Band - Micah Messer, Dominic Sharp (winner). Football - David Heredia, Jonah Kluth (2nd), Ethan Lester, Anthony Heredia, Alan Godinez. The QB Club would like to thank: Save a Lot (sponsored hotdogs and buns); Ingles; Sam Hogstedt; Bob Overstreet and Jamie Marshall; Nelson Tractor and Parker Daniel; Mr. and Mrs. Dyer with Nanas & Papa's Ice Cream; Wes & Kona Ice; Mr. Jim at Sicily's; CJ the DJ - Casey Lusk; Michael Smith-Foot; Young's Wrecker Service; The Flower Garden; West Printing/NGN - Allison Caldwell and Todd Forrest; Jenni Dixon and all the volunteers that made this event possible. Photo/Todd Forrest

# PANTHER HOOPFEST

**FEATURING:**

- UCHS BASKETBALL TEAMS
- UCHS CHEER SQUAD
- UCMS BASKETBALL TEAMS
- UCMS CHEER SQUAD

**JOIN US**

- ATHLETE INTRODUCTIONS
- CHEER PERFORMANCES
- KONA ICE \$4
- BASKETBALL COMPETITIONS

**WHEN: FRIDAY, NOV. 3**  
5:30PM - 7:00PM

**WHERE: UCHS GYM**

## GO TEAM!