

Football: Panthers close regular season with 7-0 victory at Gilmer

Union County visits 2-seed Heard County on Saturday in first round of State

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Ellijay - Junior running back Carson Walker churned out 135 yards rushing, and the Union County defense recorded its first November shutout in eight years (Social Circle) to help the Panthers cap off the regular season with a 7-0 victory at Gilmer High School on Thursday, Nov. 19.

"I thought we were able to run the ball pretty well, we just didn't do a very good job of sustaining drives, sustaining momentum, getting into an offensive rhythm, and putting it in the endzone," Union County coach Brian Allison said.

Although points were at a premium at Huff-Mosely Stadium, the Union County ground game turned in its second-best performance of the season, finishing with 227 yards rushing. On the other side of the ball, the Panthers (4-5, 1-2) limited the Bobcats to 211 total yards -- 102 coming on their final two possessions. Gilmer's 211-yard output was the defense's third-lowest tally of the season behind Chastatee (141 total yards) and Banks County (167).

Despite the lack of points, there was no shortage of drama, especially over the final 30 seconds. With no timeouts remaining, the Bobcats had four shots to potentially even the score from the Panthers' 21-yard line, but the Union secondary delivered, forcing four incompletions to preserve the 7-0 victory.

Moments earlier, the Panthers appeared to seal the deal when JJ Littles picked off a pass near the goal line with under 30 seconds to play. However, a pass interference flag sailed onto the turf after the receiver tripped inside the 5-yard line, ultimately bailing out the Gilmer quarterback, who threw into triple coverage, and gifting the Bobcats a first down at the 21.

The stingy Union County defense also set up the game's only score in the second quarter when Hunter Young deflected a pass, allowing JJ Littles to pull down the jump ball at midfield and return the interception inside the Gilmer 43-yard line.

On the ensuing play, quarterback Logan Helcher, in action for the first time since the second quarter vs. Rabun Gap, picked up 6 yards but suffered another injury following a tackle that drove the junior signal caller hard into the artificial turf.

According to Coach Al-



JJ Littles (26) comes down with an interception off a deflection by Hunter Young (20), setting up the game's only score. Photo/Todd Forrest

lison, Helcher suffered a shoulder injury that will likely end his season. Senior Kaston Hemphill took over behind center and quickly found Mason McCombs for a first-down completion, then three consecutive gives to Walker picked up 4, 12 and 3 yards.

Later in the drive, a Gilmer offside penalty awarded Union a fresh set of downs following a fourth and 3 at the 7-yard line. Jonah Daniel, who also saw limited snaps after returning from injury, powered his way into the endzone from 3 yards out on the very next play - spotting Union a 7-0 lead with 6:24 before halftime.

The defense forced another Gilmer punt, but the kick rolled dead inside the 5-yard line, and the Panthers went nowhere from the shadow of their endzone, punting back to the Bobcats with just over two minutes on the clock.

Starting from Union's 35, Gilmer needed only four plays to set up a first and goal at the 8-yard line. But following a first-down incompleteness, senior linebacker Noah Underwood slipped through a pair of blockers to snuff out an end-around for a 5-yard loss. On the heels of another incomplete pass on third down, Gilmer's 29-yard field goal sailed wide left to send the Panthers into halftime clinging to a 7-0 advantage.

After trading punts to begin the second half, Union

County was back in business at the Bobcats' 31-yard line when Gilmer intercepted a pass in the endzone. Initially, the officials flagged Gilmer for pass interference when a defensive back tripped McCombs inside the five. But this time, the officials picked up the flag, allowing the pick to stand.

But it wouldn't matter as the defense continued to perform and the Bobcats punted back to Union early in the fourth quarter. The Panthers immediately went on the march, starting with a 5-yard gain from Walker and a 35-yard scamper by Hemphill. The drive would eventually stall, but the yardage and subsequent punt flipped the field position as Gilmer started from its own four.

The Bobcats moved to the Union County 33, where senior Clayton Lester barged into the backfield to blow up a fourth and 7 pass attempt with a crucial sack. With 3:32 remaining, the Panthers took over at their own 44, where Walker tore off a 17-yard gain, drawing a late hit at the end of the run, moving Union to the Gilmer 20.

Facing fourth and 3 from the 13 with under three minutes left, the Panthers' offense stayed on the field instead of attempting a 30-yard field goal to put Gilmer in a near-insurmountable 10-0 hole.

As a result, Union was



Junior running back Carson Walker piled up 135 yards rushing at Gilmer. As a team Union had 227 on the ground. Photo/Todd Forrest

dropped for a loss, allowing the Bobcats one last shot from the 17-yard line with no timeouts and 160 seconds to play.

"In warmups, Mason [McCombs] didn't feel comfortable and slipped several times kicking," Allison said when asked about the decision not to attempt the field goal. "That turf was kind of slick and whenever he tried to plant, he would slip, even on kickoffs."

"I felt that if he slipped [on the field goal] and kicked it into the back [of our linemen] then Gilmer could pick it up and run it down the field. I had confidence that our defense could stop them from driving 85 yards and I didn't want to risk giving them an easy score or great field position. If we were at home or in any other situation, I would have kicked it."

On the second play of the ensuing drive, Gilmer connected on its lengthiest play of the night, hitting an open receiver down the seam for 37 yards. Later, the Bobcats converted a fourth and 1 before consecutive incompletions brought up third and 10 from the Union County 36-yard line.

With time running out, the Bobcats looked deep over the middle where Hemphill was running in stride with the Gilmer receiver and safety Littles was providing help over the top. The receiver would trip at the five, and the pass sailed over Hemphill's fingertips, leaving Littles as the

only remaining player available to make a play on the ball. And as the senior pulled down the interception for the touchback and the victory, the Panthers erupted in celebration.

Not so fast. A penalty flag flew in, tagging Hemphill with pass interference on the fallen wide receiver and awarding Gilmer a first down at the 21.

On the next play, junior corner Eli Peugh got his hands on a jump ball and forced an incomplete pass in the back of the endzone. The Bobcats tried picking on Peugh once again and went back to the well on second down. But with Union in two-deep coverage and Peugh blanketing the wide out, the safety Hemphill was able to arrive in time to swat the ball away in the same location as the previous play.

Gilmer attempted a quick 5-yard slant on third down, expecting the Panthers' cornerbacks to remain in man coverage. But with eight defenders now dropping into a deep zone, the pass went through the hands of the open receiver, who likely heard the rapidly closing footsteps of Underwood and Peugh.

The fourth-down pass also fell incomplete when the quarterback threw behind his intended receiver, who was open for a split second near the 10-yard line.

"We practice those situations and we're just trying to

knock the ball down and not tip it up into the air," Allison said. "We made a play, we had the interception and they called us for interference. But it was a strange night. It's been a strange season."

The game also got underway with Union County turning away Gilmer on fourth down at the 25-yard line. The Bobcats, whose failed drive spanned 8 1/2 minutes on 15 plays, previously converted a pair of fourth downs, but this time, senior Aaron Helton applied pressure and forced an errant throw on fourth and 7.

A holding penalty negated a Helcher first down completion, but Trace Wright scooped up the Bobcats' fumble just two plays removed from a Union County punt.

The Panthers suffered another three and out, but Littles picked off Gilmer three plays later, setting up the night's only score.

Up next: Union pays a visit to Heard County, who finished second at 2-2 in an evenly-matched Region 5-AA. The Braves ended the season in a three-way tie for second but took the tiebreaker by way of defeating the other two squads. Heard's two losses came to first-place Callaway and last-place Temple.

The Braves' run game averages 229 yards a night and features seven players that scored a rushing touchdown in 2020. But they will do enough keep defenses honest, averaging 133 pass attempts, good enough for 118 yards per game. However, the ground attack remains the offensive anchor as Heard County is 4-0 in games with three-or-more rushing touchdowns.

"Their starting running back was hurt early in the year, but their backup is still really good," Allison said. "But with our linebackers, who are as good as any group we've had, I think I feel a little more confident facing a run-heavy team instead of a spread team."

Ball security has also been vital to Heard's success in 2020, with the Braves dropping all three contests where they turned it over at least twice.

"We're going to have take some chances by stacking the box to slow the run and force them into some mistakes by putting them in throwing situations on third and long," Allison said.

The first round contest was rescheduled for Saturday by the GHSA. Kickoff is slated for 1 p.m. at Heard County High School in Franklin.

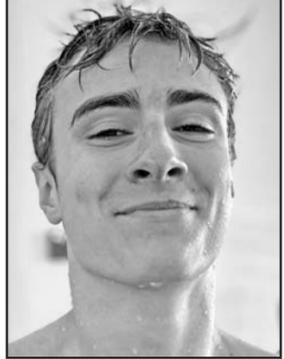
Union County swimmers excel in Canton

Canton - The Panthers Swim Team represented Union County High School with another excellent performance at the Chief and Eagle Meet in Canton this past Saturday, Nov. 21.

This high school-only meet provided swimmers with an opportunity to compete against athletes from the North Georgia area.

"The swimmers continue to drop times in each competitive event," Coach Stafford said.

The Panthers accomplished several personal-best times. The highlight of the weekend was Hunter White achieving a state qualifying time in the 50 Freestyle event. This is White's second state-qualifying time this season, as he qualified for State in the 100 Yard Breaststroke during



Hunter White the first meet.

"Hunter's performance this season proves that hard work and dedication pay off," Coach Helton said. "Voted team captain by the swimmers, Hunter sets

his goals high and is dedicated to success in the classroom as well as in the pool."

The Panthers had the following individual accomplishments:

50 Freestyle: 2nd White (State qualifier); 14th Liam Smith; 16th Rachel Reid.

100 Freestyle: 1st White; 18th Brooklyn Brown.

100 Breaststroke: 5th Reid.

200 Freestyle Relay: 6th White, Smith, Will Doyle, Grayden Cobb.

100 Backstroke: 11th Cobb; 12th Preston Perren; 14th Doyle.

200 Freestyle: 2nd Smith.

100 Butterfly: 6th Doyle

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Already owning a dependable jump shot as a freshman, Cook flashed her improved shooting stroke during last week's scrimmage at Pickens, pouring in 24 points on five 3-pointers.

In comparison, as Union's second scoring option last year, Hill averaged just over 9 points a game, with those numbers rising to almost 12 per game during the State Tournament. One would believe that Coach Beach would be more than pleased with 10-12 points a night from Cook, which will go a long way in picking up the offensive slack.

"I think Ellie is definitely ready to step up for us in that [No. 2 scorer] role," Beach said. "It's really exciting to see her come into her own out there."

Stepping up

When it comes to replacing McCarter's 6 points and 8 rebounds or Dockrey's 7 points and 3 assists, things get a little more complicated. And it looks like Union County will turn to a pair of role players from last season and one newcomer, at least in the early going.

Sophomore guard Corinne Hill and junior post Rebekah Chambers both started during last week's scrimmage contest after seeing action as reserves a year ago. According to Beach, Corinne Hill, who appeared in 21 games as a freshman, will share point guard duties with Cook for at least the first couple of weeks.

"We split time at Pickens between Ellie and Corinne running the point just to see [what they're capable of], and to be honest, they'll probably continue to flip-flop as we're trying to get [players] in and out of the game," Beach said. "Corinne and Ellie are just sophomores, but they're going to be leading the charge for us. Corinne gave such a great defensive effort [at Pickens], and it was exciting to see her step up and take charge the way she did."

Meanwhile, the 5-foot-10 Chambers will join Hunter in the post after appearing in 27 games last year -- averaging 2 points, 2 rebounds and hitting 70% at the line. As a freshman, Chambers appeared in 10 games, averaging 2.5 points and 2 boards. According to the Union coach, Chambers will begin the year primar-

ily at the center position, with Hunter occupying the power forward spot. However, Beach is continuously preaching the importance of understanding multiple roles due to the possibility of players missing significant action as a result of COVID-19.

"Ava and Rebekah are rotating back and forth at the 4 and 5 positions, but right now, we're mainly working Ava at the 4," Beach said. "With everything going on this year, we've really emphasized that every player needs to learn every position. With the reality of COVID, we need to be prepared to have somebody step into a new spot if someone goes out, and they've risen to the challenge so far."

Rounding out the Union County starting five is freshman Lara Turner, who didn't fill up the stat sheet at Pickens, but according to Beach, the sky's the limit for the first-year wing.

"She has one of the most natural shots that I've ever seen, and I'm expecting big things out of her, especially once she gets that experience in a game," Beach said.

Others to watch are juniors Ansley Collins and Caley Davis, sophomore Kaylee Helton plus two freshmen: Katie Byers and Kyra McKechnie, who scored 4 points in the scrimmage.

Collins scored 2 points in the scrimmage and Helton attempted two free throws. Byers saw action in three quarters and Davis appeared in two quarters at Pickens.

"Our girls are very eager and very hungry, and I'll take young and hungry any day," Beach said. "Some will play a few minutes for the JV because, again, the more game-time they get, the better they're going to be."

"And with the reality of what could happen at any time this year, we need to try and be as deep as we possibly can. We want fresh legs out there because we like a quick-tempo game, so we need as many people as possible to step up and be ready to go when their time is called."

The schedule

Union County opens Tuesday vs. Towns County, who is coming off a 47-16 scrimmage loss at Tallulah

Falls. The Lady Indians are still without standout senior Kenedi Henson, who underwent her second ACL surgery last season. However, she expects to be cleared for practice this month and return to game action in December.

"I just want our girls to go out and take a deep breath [on Tuesday] and play like we've been practicing for the last couple of weeks," Beach said. "And like we've always emphasized, it takes four complete quarters to win, so we have to make sure we're focused, and attacking and intense for four quarters."

The Lady Panthers feature a brutal non-region schedule that includes 8th-ranked Fannin County, Class AAA No. 6 Stephens County, Gilmer, Lumpkin County, North Hall, Tallulah Falls and White County.

In 8-AA play, Union will face No. 3 Rabun County, No. 10 Elbert County and defending region runner-up Banks County.

"I stand by what I said last year, in AA, we have one of the most competitive regions, in my opinion, when you look at the quality of the teams," Beach said. "Last year, Elbert was one win shy of a State berth, and they're returning a speedy group of athletic players."

"Banks lost an amazing point guard, but they still knocked off White [County] the other night, and White beat Rabun. It's just going to come down to who can get after it for four quarters and take care of business. But we're all going to be beating up on each other come January that's for sure."

Tuesday's season opener with Towns County will tip at 5:30 p.m. with the guys to follow.

"We may be a young squad and everyone has growing pains, but this is an amazing group of kids, who come out and get after it every single day, and that's really exciting and we're looking forward to a great year," Beach said. Any day we get to practice or play is a win. We don't know what is in store this season, but that is what my girls focus on every time they hit the court with an opportunity to get better."

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"I know it's a cliché, but with all this inexperience, we're just trying to get better each game," Garrett said. "Our goal is to come out Tuesday vs. Towns County and look better than we did at Pickens last week."

In region play, defending champion Banks County replaces its coach and do-everything forward Carl Cleveland. However, the Leopards return enough talent to contend for another 8-AA crown.

Elbert County won the region in 2019 but dropped to 9-18 last year with a roster depleted by graduation. The Blue Devils lost four seniors from last year's squad, but Garrett expects to see an improved product from them this winter.

Rabun County's recent struggles with Union County's 1-3-1 defense were well documented last season, but the Wildcats are another program Garrett expects to take a step forward in 2021. Rabun's roster was dominated by seniors and sophomores a year ago, so the development of this year's junior class should determine whether or not the Wildcats will avoid a third consecutive first-round upset loss in the Region 8-AA Tournament.

Rounding out Region 8-AA is Riverside Military Academy, which remains an enigma at this point. Following the cancellation of its football season, several of RMA's top athletes left for greener pastures. What kind of basketball team they field this winter remains a mystery. Whether they'll even

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have a basketball team remains up in the air.

"Last I heard, they were still on schedule to have a basketball team, but I haven't heard much else about them," Garrett said. "But with the way this year has gone, it's hard to say exactly what will happen with them."

On the COVID-19 front, Coach Garrett offered a shout-out to everyone in the Union County school system that made the upcoming basketball season possible.

UC Fishing Team wins B.A.S.S. Nation's Fall Tournament



Coby Thompson & Will Holloway of Union County's Fishing Team recently claimed a win competing in Bass Nation's Fall Tournament held on Lake Chatuge in November 2020. Thompson & Holloway, (Captained by Will Harkins) bagged 15.66 lbs., topping the other 157 competing school teams. Many thanks to those who support all of our UC Fishing members. N/Nov25,A2/SH