

# Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

## Football: Tanner 8-AA Offensive POY; 11 Panthers named all-region

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Junior quarterback Caiden Tanner headlined Union County's All-Region selections, earning 8-AA's Offensive Player of the Year, selected by the region's six head coaches.

Receiving first-team nods were Tanner's two favorite targets, senior Griff Young and junior Jensen Goble. On the defensive side, senior linebacker Gage Barnes and junior lineman Lane Lance also picked up first-team honors.

Senior safety/punter Wilson Walker earned a second-team nod, while seniors Noah Helton, Sam Page and Ian Sterna received honorable mentions.

Additionally, two underclassmen picked up honorable mention nods, junior offensive lineman Cody Meeks and junior defensive end David Heredia.

**Tanner** becomes the fourth Panthers quarterback in eight years to earn region offensive POY/MVP honors, joining Joe Mancuso (2015), Cole Wright (2017 - 7-AAA) and Pierson Allison (2019).

Tanner staked his claim to a spot among the program's top passers with 2,893 yards and 24 touchdowns to only eight picks in 2022. And when one considers that Tanner entered the fall coming off a significant knee injury that cost him spring practice and summer workouts, while transitioning back to QB after spending 2021 as a running back, who knows what kind of numbers the first-year starter could have posted?

Tanner's knee surgery did restrict his effectiveness on the ground, limiting him to 24 yards per game. However, the junior still maintained a nose for the end zone, finishing second on the team with eight rushing scores.

**Breakout game:** While Tanner orchestrated a pair of late drives to beat Fannin County, then looked solid over the next five outings, his true breakout came during a 403-yard, four-touchdown passing performance in Union's 56-49 win over Providence. With the defense struggling after halftime, Tanner continued to bail out his squad, making every big throw when called upon to keep the visitors at bay.

Tanner finished the night with seven touchdowns -- three coming on the ground -- while piling up a season-best 59 yards rushing. Overall, Tanner accounted for 462 yards, leading Union County to a program record 735 total yards.

**Defining moment:** Tanner's most notable play of 2022 came during the fourth quarter of that same contest. After allowing Providence to rally from a 35-7 halftime deficit, Union nursed a 7-point lead with under three minutes left and faced third-and-27 from its own 42.

With his defense reeling, Union County head coach Michael Perry rolled the dice, going for it all instead of the conservative approach of protecting the football and improving the field position for his punter.

With an energized Providence sideline egging on a defense ready to pin its ears back, Tanner took the shotgun snap and immediately scrambled to his left in the face of two bull-rushing defensive tackles.



Junior QB Caiden Tanner becomes the fourth Union quarterback since 2015 to earn an offensive POY award. Photo/Todd Forrest

As he rolled outside, Tanner lobbed a pass across his body, over the outstretched arms of a hard-charging linebacker. The wobbly spiral floated through the night sky in what seemed like slow-motion, finally dropping into the hands of Goble in-stride at the 40-yard line, allowing the receiver to pick up another 20 yards and the first down with his legs.

With a fresh set of downs near the Providence 20, the Panthers eventually ran out the clock, securing a winning season and a fifth-consecutive playoff berth.

**Goble:** Like Tanner, Goble entered the fall coming off knee surgery stemming from a season-ending injury in October 2021. While Tanner was allowed to throw during the summer, the junior receiver saw a few more restrictions before returning to the practice field just weeks before the opener vs. Fannin County.

Goble finished the season with team highs of 1,037 receiving yards and 87 catches while tying for the team lead with nine touchdown receptions. His 87 grabs set a school record, surpassing Sawyer Drake's 78 receptions in 2019 and Blake Gowder's 77 catches in 2008.

**Breakout Game:** Goble had nine catches against Lumpkin, scored twice vs. West Hall and topped 100 yards vs. Providence, but more than likely, his performance vs. East Jackson is what cemented his spot as an all-region pass catcher.

Goble tied or matched three-career highs during his 10-reception, 146-yard, two-touchdown outing to help Union clinch a top-three seed in 8-AA. He closed the evening with an exclamation point via a game-winning fourth-quarter touchdown reception -- pulling down a jump ball on second-and-goal from the 6-yard line.

**Defining moment:** Goble's acrobatic fourth-down touchdown catch to even the score vs. Fannin County set the stage for his record-breaking campaign.

Facing fourth-and-6 from the 16 with his team trailing 7-0 late in the third quarter, Goble found a crease in the zone defense in front of a Fannin County safety before giving Union County safety before giving Union County safety to secure the high throw, snatching the ball away from the defender on a twisting reception at the goal line.

**Young:** Spending his senior campaign as the offense's Swiss Army knife, Young punctuated his UCHS career with 55 catches, 838 yards and nine touchdowns in 2022. Young also spent time behind center in the Wildcat formation, averaging 7.8 yards per carry on 16 attempts, and led the team in kickoff return yards.

Despite finishing second on the team in receiving yards, Young ended the year as the only Panther to notch four 100-yard receiving games.

**Breakout game(s) -** Statistically speaking, Young's most impressive numbers came against Providence with eight catches, 138 yards and two touchdowns. Although, whenever the Panthers faced their toughest competition, the senior wide out had a tendency to find another gear.

Hosting the eventual region champion, Fellowship Christian, Young caught 12 passes for 110 yards and a touchdown. Two weeks later, he went for 120 yards and two scores at No. 2 South Atlanta.

**Defining moment:** Watching the replay of Young's second touchdown reception at South Atlanta still gets the adrenaline pumping, but his 31-yard over-the-shoulder catch vs. Fannin County probably ranks higher on the importance scale.

All tied up at 7-7 with under 90 seconds left, Young ran a go-route down the Union sideline, racing under Tanner's pass near the 5-yard line with a cornerback draped across his inside shoulder and sliding out of bounds at the 1-yard line on a rain-soaked Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium turf.

Sophomore Connor Schuknecht punched it in one play later for the Panthers' first and final lead of the night.

**Barnes:** As the only member of Union's stellar linebacking corps selected, Barnes wraps up his career on top following four years of program highs and lows.

The three-year starter led all Panthers with 102 tackles and seven sacks while ending 2022 tied for the team lead with 18 tackles for loss (TFL).

**Breakout game:** There's a real possibility West Hall's offensive line still has nightmares about No. 35.

Playing in his final homecoming game, Barnes recorded five tackles for loss



Junior wide receiver Jensen Goble returned from knee surgery to set a UCHS school record with 87 receptions in 2022. Photo/Todd Forrest

go with 12 tackles (10 solo) in Union County's blowout win.

**Defining moment:** Clinging to a 14-7 lead with the defense backed deep into their own territory during the first-round playoff game at Model, the Panthers needed a third-down stop to prevent the Blue Devils from answering.

Prior to Model's third-and-9 snap, Barnes showed his prowess in the passing game, tracking the quarterback's eyes, which led him directly to the open receiver and a momentum-changing interception at the Panthers' 20-yard line.

**Lance:** There are few guarantees on the gridiron, but it was almost a given that one could always spot Lance's long brown locks near or at the bottom of every pile.

With 52 tackles, four sacks, 14 TFL and 24 quarterback hurries, the junior end enjoyed a remarkable 2022 campaign while splitting time on the offensive line.

**Breakout game:** Lance took his A-game to Hiawassee for his first foray into the Union-Towns rivalry. The ju-

nior made life miserable for the Indians quarterback, hurrying Connor Chastain seven times in the Panthers' 49-7 win. Lance finished with six tackles and matched a team-high with three stops for a loss.

**Defining moment:** East Jackson had one final opportunity to escape Blairsville with a victory, but Lance had other plans.

Defensive coordinator Thomas Nelson sent his unit onto the field, pleading for one final stop up 21-17 with a minute left.

On the Eagles' second play, in an obvious passing situation, Lance lined up in the middle of Union's 3-man front, using a swim move to beat the center and create havoc in the backfield. The quarterback attempted to side-step the pressure but couldn't escape Lance's mitts, who sealed Union's win with a strip sack recovered by Heredia.

**Walker:** The Panthers' lone second-team selection went to its three-year starting safety. However, Walker took on added responsibility this fall, handling the punting duties for the first time in his career.

As Union's leader in the secondary, Walker finished with 78 tackles, eight tackles

for loss and two interceptions.

**Breakout game:** Walker finished with double-digit tackles on only one occasion, where he made sure to get his money's worth that night--posting three season-highs during a 14-tackle, three pass break-up, one-QB hurry outing at Banks County in the 8-AA opener.

**Defining moment:** Walker's non-stop motor helped separate him from the older, more experienced defenders as a sophomore in 2020. And even at the back end of his career, Walker displayed that same gritty attitude in the finale at South Atlanta.

After giving up 16 unanswered points to surrender a 14-0 second-quarter advantage, a reeling Union defense found itself on the ropes, praying for the halftime bell. South Atlanta set up shop at the Union County 35 with under a minute left before intermission, looking to take a two-score lead into the locker room.

On the series' second play, South Atlanta went for the jugular on a post-route to the end zone. Covering the deep middle, Walker found himself on an island with the outside receiver, and with the match-up South Atlanta wanted, the quarterback let it rip.

But Walker ran stride-for-stride with the speedy receiver, pulling down a leaping interception at the goal line to keep Union's deficit at 16-14, entering the break and showing there was still some fight left in the Purple and Gold.

**Honorable Mention:** Helton (Sr), Meeks (Jr) and Sterna (Sr) - the Panthers' front-five helped pave the way for an offense that averaged 245.2 yards through the air and 144.3 yards on the ground.

Heredia led all Union defensive linemen with 69 tackles in 2022. He also contributed three sacks and 15 TFL. The junior saved his best performance for the postseason, recording a career-best 10 stops at Model.

Page tallied 80 tackles and forced three fumbles as a senior defensive back. After starting 2022 with a game-saving tackle on the final play vs. Fannin County, Page notched a career-best 13 stops at Athens Academy.



Griff Young



Lane Lance



Senior Gage Barnes (35) and junior David Heredia (40) drop the Athens Academy quarterback for a loss on Oct. 28. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Football: North Georgia's prep all-stars edge Tennessee in FCA Senior Game



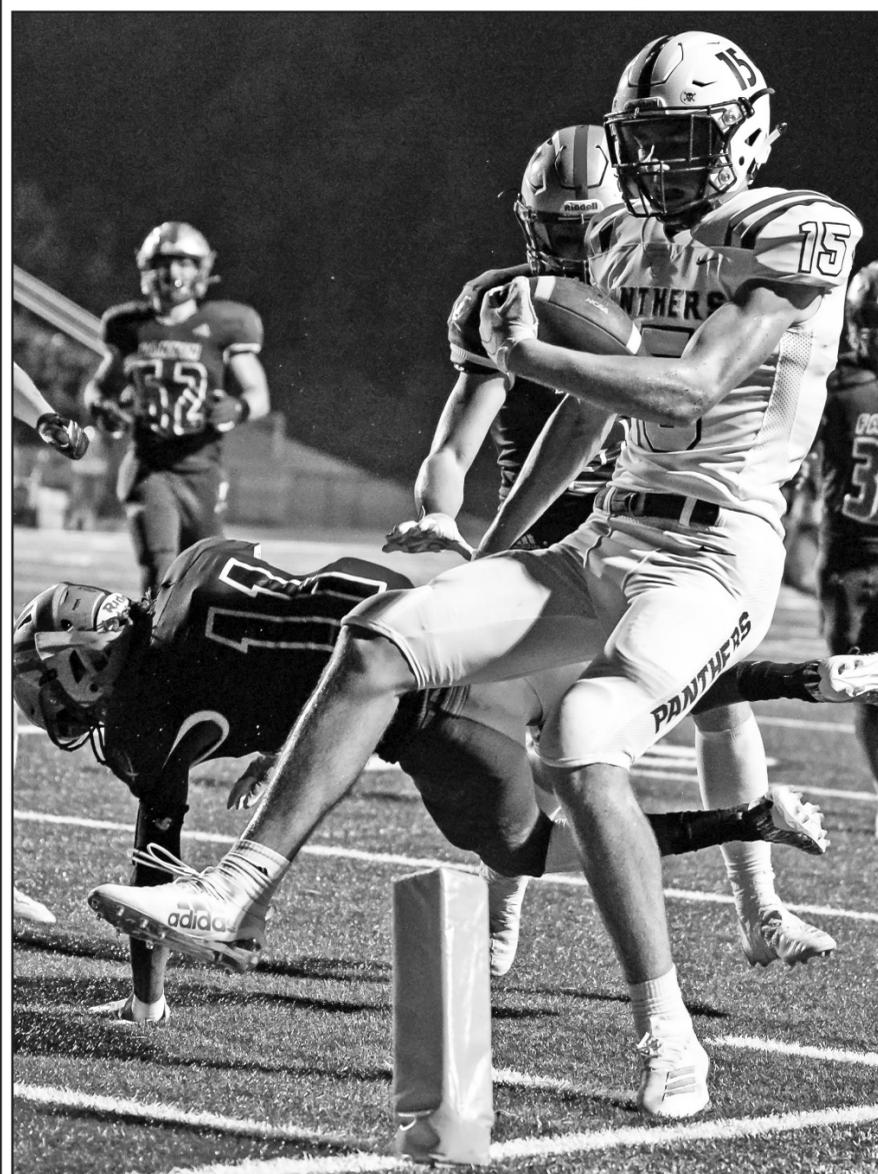
It's not often that Union, Towns, Fannin, Gilmer and Pickens are united in the world of high school athletics, but during the Dec. 16 Fellowship of Christian Athletes senior game, rivalries were put aside in the spirit of FCA as north Georgia's best faced a group of seniors from the Volunteer State. Despite trailing much of the night, the Georgia team (pictured) rallied for a 21-20 victory against a Tennessee squad that featured athletes from Bradley Central, Cleveland High School, Polk County, Walker Valley, Meigs County, McMinn County and McMinn Central. A popular event from 2015-2019, this year's meeting marked the first FCA game since the contest was put on hold following the 2020 pandemic. The UCHS participants included Gage Barnes, Alex Godinez, Elijah Haynes, Sam Page, Wilson Walker and Griff Young. Photo courtesy of Rev. Jerry Helton.

## Basketball: BOTS begins Wednesday; Region play underway Jan. 3 at Providence

## Blairsville's Kyle Morlock picks FSU

Remaining UCHS Basketball Schedule		
Tuesday, Jan. 3	@ Providence (boys only)	7:30
Friday, Jan. 6	@ Athens Academy	7:00
Saturday, Jan. 7	Lakeview Academy	2:30
Tuesday, Jan. 10	Banks County	6:00
Friday, Jan. 13	E. Jackson (Military appreciation)	7:00
Saturday, Jan. 14	@ North Hall	7:00
Tuesday, Jan. 17	@ Fellowship Christian	6:00
Friday, Jan. 20	Providence (Homecoming)	7:00
Friday, Jan. 27	Athens Academy (Senior Night)	7:00
Tuesday, Jan. 31	@ Banks County	6:00
Friday, Feb. 3	@ East Jackson	7:00
Tuesday, Feb. 7	Fellowship Christian	7:00
Friday, Feb. 10	Region Tourney Rd. 1 (Girls)*	
Saturday, Feb. 11	Region Tourney Rd. 1 (Boys)*	
Tuesday, Feb. 14	Region Semifinals (Girls)*	
Wednesday, Feb. 15	Region Semifinals (Boys)*	
Thursday, Feb. 16	Region Finals (Girls)*	
Friday, Feb. 17	Region Finals (Boys)*	

\* First round boys will be hosted by the boys' #3 seed; first round girls are hosted by the girls' #3 seed. The semifinals will be at the boys #1 seed and the girls #1 seed. The region finals will be at the boys and girls' #1 seed.



After tormenting defenders across North Georgia as a Panther, former Union County and Shorter wide receiver / tight end Kyle Morlock (pictured at Fannin in 2019) is now a headache for ACC defenses. The UCHS 2020 graduate will spend his final two years of college eligibility at Florida State. *More to come.* Photo/Todd Forrest

### 2022 28th Annual CHRISTMAS TOURNAMENT BATTLE OF THE STATES

DEC 28-29-30, 2022

**CONSOLATION BRACKET**

DAY 1 12/28/22

Franklin High, NC

DAY 2 12/29/22

1 10:00 AM

Murphy High, NC

5 10:00 AM

Polk Co., TN

2 1:00 PM

Union Co., GA

9 10:00 AM

Rabun Co., GA

3 4:00 PM

Hayesville High, NC

6 1:00 PM

Coosa High, GA

4 7:00 PM

Towns Co., GA

10 1:00 PM

W5

W6

**WINNERS BRACKET**

DAY 2 12/29/22

7 4:00 PM

DAY 3 12/30/22

12 7:00 PM CHAMPION

8 7:00 PM

11 4:00 PM

L7

L8

3rd Place

Bottom Team in Bracket is Home Team and Will Wear White Uniforms

### 2022 28th Annual CHRISTMAS TOURNAMENT BATTLE OF THE STATES

DEC 28-29-30, 2022

**CONSOLATION BRACKET**

DAY 1 12/28/22

Franklin High, NC

DAY 2 12/29/22

1 11:30 AM

Murphy High, NC

5 11:30 AM

Polk Co., TN

2 2:30 PM

Union Co., GA

9 11:30 AM

Rabun Co., GA

3 5:30 PM

Hayesville High, NC

6 2:30 PM

Coosa High, GA

4 8:30 PM

Towns Co., GA

10 2:30 PM

W5

W6

**WINNERS BRACKET**

DAY 2 12/29/22

7 5:30 PM

DAY 3 12/30/22

12 8:30 PM CHAMPION

8 8:30 PM

11 5:30 PM

L7

L8

3rd Place

Bottom Team in Bracket is Home Team and Will Wear White Uniforms