

# Sports

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## Acclaim pours in as Panther football reflects on 2013

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As Georgia's State Champions were crowned last weekend, Union County continued to reap the benefits of its most successful season in 12 years.

Liberty Baptist Church played host to Union County's Football and Cheerleading Banquet where the gridiron superlatives were announced.

The Panthers picked up three Region 8-AA First Team honors along with 8-AA Defensive Player of the Year and 8-AA Special Teams Player of the Year. Senior defensive lineman **Luther Jones** was selected by the region's coaches as the most dominant player on the defensive side of the ball. Junior kick returner/punter **Robert Prunier** was awarded the Special Teams Player of the Year for his work as a returner and punter.

Sophomore Quarterback **Joseph Mancuso** was selected as First Team All Region, along with his favorite target **Jacob Rogers**. Rogers, a junior wide receiver, was named First Team honors, as did junior linebacker **Chase Barnett**.

Sophomore Wide Receiver **Sam Gilbert** was named Honorable Mention in 8-AA with more than 600 receiving yards in 2013.

Jones finishes his career as a two-time 8-AA Defensive Player of the Year. He has been selected to play in the North-South All-Star Game on Dec. 30th. He finished with more than 50 total tackles - 34 of them solo tackles and 22 tackles for a loss.

"The other day I was watching T.V. and the weather report was going on after some big storms and some of the terms they were using made me think of Luther," Defensive Line Coach Gary Butler said. "They used the word havoc, which is something he causes in the backfield. Destruction. All year long he was never individually blocked. He was either double or triple teamed and sometimes they were illegally cutting him at the legs. Devastation. That was another term that they were using. Basically when he lined up on the field he was



Union County football seniors are presented with their shadow boxes at the banquet. Left to right: Luther Jones, Mekiah Martin, and Chase Stancil. Photo/Todd Forrest

an impact player."

Jones and Barnett also received the Captains' Award, voted on by their teammates.

"To me, this is one of the greatest honors that you can have," Head Coach Brian Allison said. "Fifty-six of your peers voted you their leader."

Prunier took over as punt returner, kick returner, and punter this season for the Panthers. He returned a kickoff for a score in the opener against Towns County.

"He punted for us, returned kickoffs for us, and returned punts for us," Assistant Coach James Avery said. "He did a great job gaining yards on his returns and pinning other teams deep when he was punting."

Mancuso finished the season with 435 yards rushing, averaged 5.6 yards per carry with 6 touchdowns.

"The most surprising stat to me was rushing the football," Offensive Coordinator Howard McCombs said. "Going into the season this was not something that we were looking for from this young man and he still did a fantastic job."

Through the air he lit up opposing defenses to the tune of 2,689 yards, 27 touchdowns and 9 interceptions. He totaled 3,124 yards of offense and 33 touchdowns.

"That's not too shabby," Coach McCombs said. "I mention the interceptions because that ratio is pretty impressive. When you are throwing it as much as we needed to this year, to only have 9 interceptions is just a great stat."

Rogers reeled in 1,060 yards receiving with 8 touchdowns.

"It's been a privilege to coach some really good receivers this year," Receivers Coach Paul McBride said. "When I first saw (Rogers) two-and-a-half years ago I sat and talked with him. He had a terrible game in his first game and I didn't know who he was. He had all the talent in the world but just had a confidence issue. He needed to be told, 'hey, you can do it' and he really worked hard."

"I think we have one of the best receiving corps in AA football when you look statistically. If they take it to that next level and continue to push themselves forward for next year, there is no stopping them. They will go as far as they want to go. We had one receiver with 1,060 yards, another at 700 yards, and one at 600 yards."

Meanwhile, Barnett set a school record with 172 tackles despite missing the better part of the Jefferson and Lovett games with an injury. Barnett



Senior T.J. Smith embraces Coach Allison as the Panther seniors were honored.. Photo/Todd Forrest

finished with 23 percent of Union County's solo tackles, and was in on 21 percent of all the tackles made by the Union County defense.

"He is special, that's all you can say" Linebackers Coach Justin Byers said. "If you were to put a picture or a face to the term 'linebacker' he would be right there with some of the best to have ever played here. He is an impressive individual. His dedication to this team. His work ethic outside of this team. Just all the things that he does are very special. He flies around and is a great example of what it means to play with heart."

Other position awards handed out at the banquet were to **Andrew Brown** for Defensive Back of the Year. **Chris Drost** received the Offensive Lineman of the Year.

Defensive Backs Coach Robby Roxbury handed out the award to Brown.

Brown, a sophomore, led the team in interceptions with 5 picks and was tops among defensive backs with 55.5 tackles and one for a loss.

"He is a sophomore and I actually had hair before I started coaching him if that tells you anything," Coach Roxbury joked.

Drost, another sophomore was named by Offensive Line Coach Neil Setzer

as Union County's Offensive Lineman of the Year.

"It is a pleasure to be here and to coach the offensive line," Coach Setzer said. "We don't have all the stats and all the yards but we must have blocked some, for all those other people to get all those (yards). These guys always give great effort. When I go back and grade film, I don't ever see anyone loafing. They're not the biggest guys in the world and their not the fastest guys in the world but they played really hard. I grade the lineman on 4-second blocks and the lineman with the highest average at the end of the year was Chris Drost."

Outside Linebackers Coach Kris Jarrell handed out the Academic Award to junior **Will Stone**.

"I want to think (him) personally for representing all of us so well," Coach Jarrell said. "His academic excellence is proof that students involved in after school activities can be top performers in the classroom. (He is) proof that I can take into the community and say hey, 'this kid did it. This kid is doing it right now so your kid can do it as well.'"

Union County also placed six players on the 8-AA All Academic Team.

Junior **Brett Dietz**, **Brown**, junior **Ralston Drake**,

sophomore **Brett Dobbins**, **Drost**, and **Stone**.

"We had six guys that made Academic All Region and I think that's very important," Coach Allison said.

The Up and Coming Panther Award went to freshman **Bo Lynch**.

"Last year we gave this award to Joe (Mancuso) so I think we picked that one pretty well," Coach Allison said. "This award goes to someone that we are expecting to step up and be a factor next year. Not to say that some of the other guys won't either, but this is a challenge for this guy because he has the ability to do it."

The next award was the Iron Panther Award, presented to senior **Mekiah Martin**.

"He broke his neck wrestling last year then hurt it again this year," Coach Allison said. "He started the first five games this year until he just couldn't go. But I can't think of anybody any tougher than someone who will break his neck and then come back and play the game."

Union said goodbye to five seniors, who Coach Allison thanked for providing a building block for the future of Union County football.

Jones, Martin, **Chase Stancil**, **Jonathan Floyd**, and **T.J. Smith**.

"It was (Jonathan Floyd's) first year playing football and he did a great job coming into a different situation and I appreciate all the work that he put in," Coach Butler said.

Meanwhile, Stancil finished fourth on the team with 46 tackles.

"We had some inexperience in the secondary with a lot of younger guys," Coach Roxbury said. "Chase was the only senior we had and he moved from safety to corner with an easy transition. He went from corner to outside linebacker when we were in third and long situations. He did exactly what you asked him to do."

Smith filled in nicely as kicker and connected on three-quarters of his field goals and was an automatic touchback on kickoffs."

"T.J. stepped in and did a great job on kickoffs, field goals, and extra points," Coach Avery said.

## Lady Panthers respond to loss with sixth straight over Fannin

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Coming off their first loss of the season, junior Ariel Maurer blocked a team record 14 shots in Union's 55-44 victory - their sixth in-a-row over the Fannin County Lady Rebels.

Junior Brooke Maddox led the Lady Panthers' (6-1) offense with 19 points on 9-of-12 from the line. She also tallied 5 assists and 3 steals.

Another junior, Kaitlyn Day poured in 17 points, going 6-of-7 from the charity stripe and 3-of-8 from beyond the arc. Day added 3 steals while dishing out 2 assists.

However, the Lady Panthers didn't heat up until late in the first half after falling behind 7-5 after one and 12-5 early in the second quarter.

Union County would respond by outscoring Fannin 13-5 to take an 18-17 lead at the break.

"We struggled shooting the ball early on but defensively we were everywhere," Union County Head Coach David Tucker said. "Kaitlyn (Day) made a couple of shots and it calmed us down a little bit."

The Lady Panthers continued to pull away, taking a 39-30 lead after three before putting Fannin away for good thanks to their accuracy from the line.

Union County finished 22-of-28 from the line.

"We made our free throws like we're supposed to do and it was total team effort and a good win for us," Tucker said.

Layne Colwell scored a career high 8 points with one steal and 6 boards, while Madison Rich chipped in five and blocked a shot.

On Tuesday, Union traveled to Lumpkin County and came away with a 56-34 win.

Once again, Maurer continued to dominate the paint, blocking 12 shots while Maddox, Day, and Rich provided



Ariel Maurer finished the week with 30 blocks in three games. She blocked 14 vs Fannin and 12 at Lumpkin. Photo/Todd Forrest

the offense.

Maddox scored 20 points with 7 assists and 2 steals. Day scored 16 points to go along with 6 boards, 3 steals, and 2 blocked shots. She connected on all four of her free throws and was nearly perfect from downtown - hitting 4-of-6 from three.

Rich hit 4-of-7 from distance on her way to a 14 point outing. The senior guard also chipped in 3 steals and an assist.

Lisa Nalaschi hauled in 6 boards and scored 4 points, Colwell had 4 boards, 3 steals and 2 points.

On Friday, a pair of undefeated teams met in Cleveland with Union County eventually falling to the Lady Warriors 51-25.

The usually hot-shooting

Lady Panthers only connected on six field goals with three coming from beyond the arc.

Maddox led Union with 9 points before fouling out. Nalaschi scored 8 points and grabbed 6 boards. Day had 6 points and 2 steals, Maurer added 2 points and 3 blocks.

"That shows the heart of these girls to come out and beat Fannin after a tough loss (at White County)," Coach Tucker said. "We stayed composed and stayed after it. This bunch keeps shocking me. All they do is practice and listen, and what more can you ask?"

This Tuesday's game with Murphy, NC has been postponed due to the Bulldog football team reaching the State finals.

Friday's game with Towns County has been moved up to Thursday, Dec. 19th at 6 p.m.

## Panthers weather late Fannin County surge to end two-game skid

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The Panthers (4-3) answered the bell on Saturday after two tough road losses on Tuesday and Friday.

Union County held off a relentless Fannin County squad 53-43 en route to their fourth win of the year and eighth straight over the rival Rebels.

Senior Dylan Coyne led the Panthers with 13 points, who opened up a 36-19 lead in the third quarter thanks to a 10-0 run to begin the half.

The Rebels stormed back with a 13-2 run, cutting the Union lead to 38-32.

The Panthers weathered the storm and held a 42-34 lead after three. The fourth quarter saw the teams play almost even with Union holding on to the 10-point win.

Juniors Ralston Drake and Tyler Odom added 11 each for the Panthers.

On Tuesday, Union traveled to Lumpkin looking for revenge after the Indians handed the Panthers a 19-point loss just four days prior.

Early on, it was all Union. The Panthers took control early and led 27-15 at the break.

Junior Hunter Hughes scored 11 first half points, Kyle Hamby had 7 points and Lake Arnick five to pace the Panthers.

The second half was a different story as Lumpkin turned it up on the defensive end - outscoring Union 35-11 to take a 50-38 win.

Hughes finished with 12 points, Hamby and Coyne had 7 points each, Odom and Arnick added five each, while Matthew Wasko scored two.

On Friday, Odom scored a career-high 18 points but it wasn't enough as Union fell 84-60 at White County.

The Warriors led 21-11 after one and 62-32 at the in-



The Panther defense swarms as junior Tyler Odom (far left) blocks a Rebel shot attempt in the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Ralston Drake puts back a missed Panther shot attempt during the second half against Fannin. Photo/Todd Forrest

termission.

Coyne finished with 12 points and Hughes scored 10. Hamby had 8 points, Drake added 6 points, Arnick had 4 points and junior Thomas Danek chipped in two.

This week's game with Murphy, NC has been postponed due to the Bulldog football team reaching the State Championship. The Towns County meeting has been moved up to Thursday at 7:30 p.m.