

Sports

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New-look Panthers show promise during White Co. scrimmage

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Editor's note: Practice jerseys were worn during the White County game and some player numbers were inaccurate, based on the 2016 roster. We apologize if any names have been excluded or are incorrect. - TF

Panther fans got their first look at the 2016 edition of Union County football last Friday night during a scrimmage contest with the White County Warriors from Class AAAA.

Despite not keeping score on Friday night and each team receiving a set amount of time on offense regardless if they scored or turned it over, Union County Head Coach Brian Allison took away plenty of positives from this team's performance.

"I saw some really good things tonight and I saw some bad things, but they are all things that we can fix," Allison said after the game. "We played a pretty good team tonight and things were a little shaky early on but we settled down in the second quarter and looked a lot better."

Cole Wright, a first-year starter at quarterback, dealt with low snaps from center for most of the first half - often resulting in broken plays where he was forced to improvise, which usually involved running for his life.

However, the junior signal-caller finished with solid numbers - completing 8-of-13 passes for 95 yards. He also carried six times for 15 yards before giving way to the backups to open the second half.

"I thought all three quarterbacks did pretty decent job (on Friday night)," Coach Allison said. "I think we've got a chance to be as deep at quarterback as we've ever had. Cole (Wright) is still learning so there's going to be some mistakes early on but as he gains experience I have no doubt he's going to get better and better."

Senior running back Bo Lynch was responsible for the play of the game when he took a pitch to the left, was spun around by a would-be tackler and was forced to cut back right, he would be met again by another Warrior defender that resulted in him spinning back to the left. As he turned the corner he picked up some blocks and raced 69 yards where he was forced out inside of the 1-yard line.

Unfortunately, a block-in-the-back, somewhere well behind the play brought the ball back to midfield on what turned out to be Union's final play of the first half.

At the end of the day, Lynch, a three-year starter at running back, finished with 60 yards on 7 carries in one half of action.

Senior wide out Slade Thompson led the Panthers' receiving corp with 47 yards on three catches.

Offensively, Union out-gained the Warriors 401-to-328 in the total yards department. The Panthers' three quarterbacks combined for 184 yards through the air (White County threw for 139 yards and 1 pick), Union's offensive line cleared the way for the backfield, allowing them to put up 217 yards and a score on the ground (White ran for 189 yards and 1 touchdown).

The Panthers won the turnover battle by a margin of 5-to-1 and were perfect on field goals and extra points. Meanwhile, the Warriors missed a pair of field goals, including one on the game's final play that kept Union ahead in points at 10-7.

"I thought we were able to run and move the ball pretty well despite a few snags here and there," Coach Allison said.

The first half saw the start-



Senior running back Bo Lynch (5) looks for running room behind his offensive line. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior QB Cole Wright throwing on the run. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Micah Gilbert comes down with the pick. Photo/Todd Forrest



Purple Swarm defense brings down a Warrior. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior WR Slade Thompson shakes a defender. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing units for both squads with each offense getting four minutes to work with from their own 30-yard line. If a turnover was committed, the ball was handed back to the offense at the play's original line of scrimmage. If a touchdown was scored or field goal kicked, the offense would return to the 30 until their four minutes expired.

The Warriors opened the game from the 30 and moved the ball at will with their rushing attack. When time ran out on their drive, they were on the Union 32-yard line following six runs for 44 yards and one pass completion for no gain.

White was hindered by a false start penalty but the Panthers surrendered carries of 19, nine, and eight yards on their first defensive series of the game.

Union took over on the 30, and after spinning its wheels

for the first three plays, they began moving the ball with a balanced attack.

Wright completed 3-of-5 passes for 25 yards while rushing once for 4 yards. Lynch ran five times for 25 yards, while senior Nic Rodriguez, and juniors Sean Dobbins and Logan Dyer each caught a pass.

White County's second possession included a missed 45-yard field goal after moving the ball 43 yards on 7 carries after the series began with a 13-yard pass completion.

After returning to the 30, the Warriors picked up a pair of 6-yard runs and tossed one incomplete pass before handing the ball back to Union.

The Panthers went backwards on its first two plays of

their second possession but Wright would find Dobbins for 9 yards, then two plays later, he hit Thompson twice for 24 yards and 15 yards.

The Warriors would find the endzone on the ensuing possession, although it came two plays after Union recovered a fumble. Without the change of possession, White County capitalized by burning the Panthers secondary with a deep pass for 33 yards. On the next play, the Warriors took a sweep 37 yards down the near sideline for their only score of the game.

"Defensively, I wasn't very satisfied," Allison said. "At times we looked good up front and didn't get knocked off the ball, but we were out of position to make tackles, our reads were slow, and we just weren't very solid. But they are things we can fix, and if we do, we'll become better tacklers."

White County returned to the 30 where they went deep once again - this time for 30 yards. But two plays later the Panthers pounced on another fumble, and on the very next play, junior Micah Gilbert came down with an interception inside the Union 10-yard line.

The Panthers answered with a scoring drive of their own that began with a 9-yard completion to junior Austin Pattee. Later, Lynch carried for 13 yards before and White County was flagged for pass interference.

Wright scrambled for a pair of 11-yard pick ups to give his team a 1st-and-goal at the 7-yard line. Junior Cole Dockrey powered his way for 3 yards before Wright drew the Warriors offside, allowing Rodriguez to

0-of-2 through the air. Union also recovered two fumbles early in the possession.

Each team received one 2-minute series to close out the third quarter.

The Panthers' two-minute drill resulted in a 27-yard field goal that both Thompson and Smith were able to convert.

Dockrey picked up 35 yards on 3 carries, Stone gained 20 yards on one rush, and Hemphill connected on one pass to Banton for 11 yards.

White's 2-minute possession was good for 25 yards on 5 carries and no passing yards.

Prior to the junior varsity squads entering in the fourth quarter, Union flipped the stats into their favor with 38 passing yards in the third quarter, while the defense pitched a shutout through the air.

On the ground, the Panthers picked up 74 yards to White's 46 yards in the third - giving Union 290 total yards (131 passing and 159 rushing) to the Warriors' 275 total yards (104 passing and 171 rushing) through three quarters.

In the fourth quarter, the JV squads were each given six minutes on offense and Union took over first and freshman quarterback Pierson Allison (son of head coach Brian Allison) had the Panthers on the move.

Union drove into the redzone but were unable to put points on the board.

Allison completed 5-of-7 passing for 53 yards (with a 38-yard completion) while carrying five time for 48 yards - including a 34 yard rush.

Sophomore running back Chad Buzzard carried five times for 10 yards while freshman Kyle Morlock caught two passes.

The Warriors final drive also ended in the redzone where Union's defense kept them off the board. White attempted a 25-yard field goal on its final play but the kick sailed wide left.

In the final quarter, Union totaled 53 yards through the air and 58 yards on the ground, but were victimized by penalties. Meanwhile, White gained 18 yards on the ground and 35 yards through the air and were aided by more Panther penalties.

"I thought the JV looked good, I thought some of our backups did a good job, and Hemphill did a good job at quarterback when he came in," Brian Allison said. "The second half gave us an excellent opportunity to get the younger guys some live action against another team. It let me see where we're at and I thought we did pretty good."

The Panthers defense clamped down on White's opening series of the second half - limiting the Warriors to just 21 yards on 6 carries while going



Senior Luke Winkler (51) leads a host of Panther defenders bringing down the ball carrier. Photo/Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers open this week with Lumpkin, North Hall

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Union County softball gets underway this week a pair of Region 7-AAA games on Tuesday and Thursday, while the junior varsity squad will host Pickens County for a Wednesday doubleheader, beginning at 4:15 p.m.

The varsity squad will host Lumpkin County in the season opener on Tuesday at 6 p.m.

The JV team will also be in action as they take on Lumpkin County at 4:30.

On Thursday, the Lady Panthers will square off with North Hall, who could provide the largest obstacle on Union's

road to a Region 7-AAA title.

The Lady Trojans return seven starters and their top two pitchers from a 2015 team that nearly upset eventual Class AAAA State Champ Buford on two different occasions.

They would fall to the eventual State runner-up Walnut Grove in the Class AAAA Sweet 16.

Union will host Dawson County on Tuesday, Aug. 16 before visiting East Hall on Aug. 18th.

On Saturday, Aug. 20th, the Lady Panthers will play a pair of games at Young Harris College - providing Union softball fans plenty of chances - at home or on the road - to come out and support our Lady Panthers this season.