

Sports

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Panthers overcome sluggish start; lay 27 on Oglethorpe in fourth

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Union County (3-2, 1-1) capitalized on seven Oglethorpe turnovers and rattled off 27 straight points in the final 11:24 of a furious fourth quarter scoring surge. The late rally put the Panthers on top for good as they posted an important 46-26 win in Region play.

Sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso went over 300 yards for the third time this season, going 23-43 with 318 yards, 3 touchdowns through the air, and one on the ground. Junior receiver Jacob Rogers hauled in 12 grabs for two scores and 200 yards - the most since Blake Gowder went for 220 yards on 13 catches at Fannin County in October of 2008.

If the teams were playing basketball, it would be considered a game of runs. The Patriots scored first before Union responded with 18 unanswered. Oglethorpe countered with 19-straight of their own, taking a 26-18 lead into the fourth quarter. The cornered Panthers fired back with the knock out blow. Twenty-eight straight points turned a potential loss into a 20-point victory. The final tally of 46-26 may look like a blowout on paper, however, the game was anything but. The contest was too close for comfort, especially for Union County Head Coach Brian Allison.

"We were awful tonight," Coach Allison said. "We did a horrible job of preparing these kids. We weren't ready to play and that falls directly on me, and we will get that fixed (this) week."

As injuries began to mount for the Panther defense, the Patriots' triple-option attack appeared to seize control of the game. A ravaged Union defense spent most of the third quarter trying to slow the Oglethorpe running game. And after leading 18-13 at the break, the Panthers allowed 13 in the third and were facing an 8-point hole to open the fourth.

"We had three defensive starters get hurt in the first half," Allison said. "That hurt us a little bit in the third quarter."

Finally, a spark came. Mancuso along with junior wide outs Rogers and Robert Prunier put their foot on the accelerator and refused to ease up.

Starting from their own 28-yard line, Mancuso carried for five, then hit Prunier for 17 yards on 3rd-and-5. Sophomore running



The Patriots couldn't find an answer for Rogers (22). Photo/Todd Forrest

back Nick Whittle was stopped for no gain but Rogers hauled in a 16-yard grab on second down. Mancuso went back to Prunier for 18 more yards, putting the Panthers at the Patriot 16-yard line. After a pair of pass interference flags on the Patriots put Union in a 1st-and-goal, the Panthers squandered a scoring opportunity when a holding call pushed them back 10 yards.

Knox Kiernan's 24-yard field goal sailed wide right, but the sophomore kicker more than made up for the three points he left on the field during that possession.

Oglethorpe took over on the 20 and on the first play, a botched pitch to the half back put the ball on the turf. As the mad scramble ensued, the Panthers eventually came up with the ball on the 2-yard line.

With new life injected back into "Pink-Out" crowd, junior quarterback Ralston Drake entered along with senior lineman Luther Jones at fullback. Junior running back/linebacker Chase Barnett followed his big man into the end zone, bouncing off a would-be tackler at the goal line. With a 2-point try between Union and a tie game, the Panthers went back to the well again. This time Oglethorpe was prepared and stuffed Barnett with a yard of green turf between the ball and the purple end zone.

Trailing 26-24, the Panthers sat back and watched the Patriots shoot themselves in the foot. Not once, not twice, but three times.

Two fumbled snaps put Oglethorpe in a 4th-and-19. Then a delay of game made it 4th-and-even-longer on the punt attempt.

A block in the back by



Team Captains: Ralston Drake (11) and Luther Jones (65). Chase Barnett is behind Jones. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union negated a decent return by Prunier, moving the Panthers back to their side of the 50. The penalty was quickly erased from everyone's memory banks however, when Mancuso hit Rogers over the middle for a 56-yard catch-and-run.

"Their safety was coming up to stop the run and we noticed the opening in the middle of the field," Mancuso said. "You can't get away with that when you're covering Ro-Ro (Rogers)."

"The safety was also biting on the quick screen so that allowed us to take some shots with the deep ball," Rogers added.

Kiernan's point after was good - giving Union a 31-26 lead with 8:28 to play.

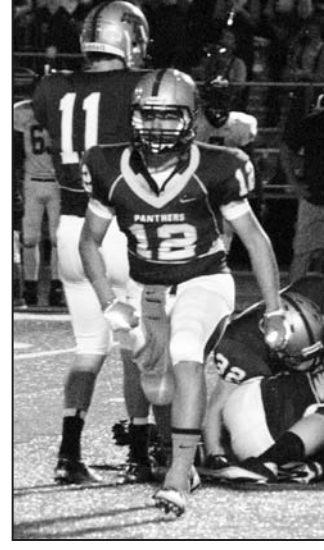
After the special teams stuffed the Patriots on the 17, the defense smothered Oglethorpe for a 2-yard loss. A first down loss is



Chase Barnett and Chase Stancil with a tackle. Photo/Todd Forrest



Quarterback Joseph Mancuso



Sophomore Lance Rich after a fumble recovery.

"Our kicker (Jake Walts) was injured a few weeks ago, and Knox (Kiernan) stepped in at Washington-Wilkes and has done a nice job for us," Coach Allison said.

On the Patriots' second play from scrimmage, sophomore safety Andrew Brown picked off a pass at midfield, bringing it back to the Oglethorpe 22-yard line.

Before the visitors could catch their breath, Mancuso went back to the middle of the field and found junior Brett Dietz for a 22-yard scoring strike. At the 3:59 mark, Union had things under control at 46-26.

"We were out of sync the whole ball game," Coach Allison said. "Offense, defense, we were out of sync and not ready to play. But we came back and made some plays at the end when we had to." In the early going, the op-



Pass Interference! Junior Brett Dietz is dragged to the turf.

tion-attack got the Patriots on the

board at 7-0 with a 44-yard touchdown run, right up the gut. The Panthers were forced to punt but a Oglethorpe fumble was recovered by sophomore Lance Rich. One play later, Mancuso hooked up with Rogers for the first of many times. The touchdown pass covered 33 yards and tied things up.

Another Patriot miscue handed the ball back to Union. Their second fumble in as many plays was recovered by junior Reid Watson at the 26.

A reverse to Rogers went for 16 yards and a pass to Clay Wallis picked up nine - putting the Panthers on the goal line.

Barnett powered his way to pay dirt from a yard out for his first of two scores. Kiernan worked his magic on the P.A.T., after Union struggled on the snapper-holder

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Lady Panthers returning to State; still hungry for more

By Todd Forrest
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The 11th ranked Union County Lady Panthers (18-12) are going back to State for the fifth consecutive year. But after getting bounced in the first round in back-to-back seasons, Union County Head Coach Jessica Stewart and her young squad are refusing to settle for just an appearance.

"We are never satisfied with 'just getting there,'" Coach Stewart said. "We practice starting in June to play in the Elite 8 in Columbus every year. Our goals in our program are always the same: win a Region and State Championship, and however close they get I am very proud of the effort but never satisfied with anything less."

Union County punched its ticket to State last week with a sweep of Washington-Wilkes in the first round of the Region 8-AA Tournament.

Coach Stewart handed the ball to freshman Laken Chambers in both games. Her teammates would provide plenty of run support in a 9-1 Game One victory. However, things got dicey in Game Two.

It would take the Lady Panthers eight innings to dispose of the Lady Tigers as Union went on to win 7-2.

Despite leaving 19 runners on base, and drawing 15 walks, the Lady Panthers waited until the extra frame before receiving their wake up call. Union broke open a 2-2 tie, after a game-saving catch by another freshman, Kendra Tanner, who snared a would-be walk-off RBI with a shoestring catch in right field.

The Lady Tigers were the home team in the second game and in the bottom of the seventh, with the winning run on second, Coach Stewart moved Tanner up a few steps to shorten the throw to the plate in the case of a soft grounder or bloop single. Stewart didn't realize it would put Tanner into the only position possible to snag the low, slicing, line-drive.

"Kendra (Tanner) has had to step in and take over right field since (Allie) Stroman got injured and had been solid in the



Chambers delivers against Washington Wilkes. Photo/Todd Forrest

outfield and at the plate," Coach Stewart said. "I moved Kendra

in on that play because there was a runner on second and I wanted her to be able to throw her out at home if there was a base hit, it just happened to be a shallow liner instead, and she was in good position."

Sophomore second baseman Karley Nix turned an unassisted double play in the bottom of the eighth to kill any hopes of a Lady Tiger comeback.

Washington-Wilkes had already tied things up after rallying from a 2-1 hole entering their final at bat when Tanner made her play.

Three straight one-out singles tied it up at 2-2 but Union caught a break when a base running blunder allowed catcher Courtney Busbee to gun down a Lady Tiger at third for the second out, after she rounded third a little too far on the tying single.

"We got sloppy in the seventh inning throwing the ball around and Karley Nix came up with a nice save to keep them from scoring," Coach Stewart said. "She has been outstanding at defense for us this season."

After Washington-Wilkes scored in the third, Chambers had sat down 10 straight hitters before the Lady Tigers came to life in the seventh.

The Lady Panthers took a 2-1 lead in the sixth when Maddie Garrett drew a one-out walk. Kelsey Nix smacked a single, putting runners on the corners for

lead off hitter Crystal Busbee.

Garrett would score the go-ahead run when the Lady Tiger pitcher one-hopped a 2-0 fastball to the backstop.

Courtney Busbee scored the game's first run on a passed ball in the third inning but Washington-Wilkes tied it up with a single and a Union error in the bottom half of the inning.

Chambers finished with a 2-for-2 day at the plate with a pair of RBIs, two doubles and two walks. She would work all eight innings, striking out six and yielding six hits and one earned run.

"I knew Washington-Wilkes could hit and I knew they wouldn't give up and often it's difficult to beat a team four times in a row, and I felt better with Laken (Chambers) starting the second game and Crystal (Busbee) relieving if needed," Coach Stewart said.

Garrett, Tanner, and Crystal Busbee each drove in a run, while Madison Rich, Halley King, and Lydia Arrowood scored. Kelsey Nix was 2-for-3 with two walks.

Meanwhile, the first game was over in five innings after Union put up two in the first, one in the second, three in the third, two in the fourth, and one in the fifth.

Garrett's two-out, three-run double in the third put Union in control and they never looked back.

Chambers gave up five hits in five innings, striking out two.



Courtney Busbee

Along with Garrett, the bottom half of the Lady Panther lineup drove in six of the nine runs. Tanner was 1-for-3 with an RBI, King went 2-for-3 with 2 RBIs, Kelsey Nix scored twice, and Karley Nix went 1-for-2 and scored.

"King has been hitting pretty much all season, she has stayed around .300 but it was very nice to see 'Maddie G' (Garrett) hitting the ball well," Coach Stewart said. "She is capable of being one of our top hitters in the line up. We have had to adjust the lineup some for players that are hitting because we have been inconsistent offensively."

Union got on the board early when Tanner brought home two on a dropped fly by the left fielder.

Rich drew a bases loaded walk in the second inning for the third run before Garrett made it 6-0 in the third.

King would bring in two more with a bases loaded double in the fourth, then Tanner ended the game in five innings with a bases loaded walk.

The Lady Panthers must now turn their focus to 4th ranked Social Circle.

The Lady Redskins swept a doubleheader from Union last month thanks in large part to a defensive debacle from the Lady Panthers. Social Circle is coming off a bye but Coach Stewart feels that not having an entire week off will benefit Union when they make the long journey south,



Maddie Garrett clears the bases in Game One. Photo/Todd Forrest



Kendra Tanner

looking for another shot at the 8-AA Championship Game.

"We have to hit with runners on base against Social (Circle) and not make errors," Coach Stewart said. "We had six errors against them last time we played and got beat 6-0. The first game we played well and got beat 2-1. I do think it will be an advantage that we played two games and saw live pitching. I'm hoping for a sweep on Tuesday because it is a long trip there and I don't think it would benefit us at all going back the next day. Social is ranked No. 4 in AA so we are going to need to play well to beat them."

The Lady Redskins, like Union are a young squad. Social Circle has just one senior on the roster. Yet for the first time since 2009, Union won't be going into the contest with a decided edge in post season experience. With Allie Stroman possibly out for the season, Rich is the only Lady



Madison Rich

Panther who has been beyond the first round.

"We are young and have several underclassman, and it has been a couple years since we've made it into the second round of State, but I'm confident in our work ethic when it comes to play-off time," Coach Stewart said.

First pitch will be at 4 p.m. on Tuesday in Social Circle. Game Two is scheduled for 6 p.m. and the "if necessary" game being held on Wednesday at 5 p.m. On the other side of the bracket, 3rd ranked Jefferson hosts Oglethorpe County, also a best-of-three series. The winners will meet on Saturday with the higher seeded team hosting. The losers will play for third place on Saturday, also at the higher seed. Jefferson has clinched home field throughout the Region Tournament and the only team Union could host would be Oglethorpe County on Saturday.