

Sports

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Season ends for Panthers in overtime heartbreaker, 56-55

Bowdon survives a Blairsville shootout with 2-point conversion in OT after Panthers rally in second half

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The Panthers and Red Devils squared off in a back-and-forth slobber knocker between a pair of offensive heavyweights at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium in the first round of the Class AA State Tournament, but in the end, it was Bowdon that delivered the final blow in the first overtime session, dealing the home team a 56-55 gut-wrenching defeat.

The visitors gashed the Panthers - who were without leading tackler, linebacker Chris Thompson due to injury - with more than 650 rushing yards, and when the game was on the line, they churned out the additional 2.5 yards on the ground to convert the game-winning two-point conversion and deny Union County its first ever State playoff victory.

"I told the guys that the disappointment would go away," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said to his troops following the game. "The seniors have had a great career and done some really great things, I'm proud of what they accomplished, and that's just a tough way to end their careers."

"Chemistry-wise, this year and last year's teams are as good as I have ever had," he added. "They band together and play hard together and that was their greatest asset."

Despite trailing 20-6 in the second quarter and 27-14 at the break, the Panthers rallied with 13-answered points in the third quarter to knot the game at 27-27 after three quarters of action.

The fourth quarter saw plenty of fireworks as both offenses combined for 42 points and 400-plus yards of offense with the Panthers tying the game on three separate occasions, yet when it was all said and done, the game remained undecided with the score knotted at 48-48.

In the extra period, Union got the ball first, which is usually the unpopular choice among coaches as it gives the opposition the advantage, similar to being the home team in baseball.

But that had little impact on the red-hot Panthers offense as they returned to the field, fresh off a game-tying touchdown drive. Starting from its own 15-yard line, junior Bo Lynch, who rushed for 158 yards in the second half alone, broke a would-be tackle-for-loss before getting dragged down at the 1-yard line. Following a pair of 1-yard losses, senior quarterback Joseph Mancuso went to work and sucked the Red Devils defense into the middle of the field, then hit a wide open Knox Kiernan, who came out of the backfield and reeled in a lob pass over the outstretched arms of a Bowdon defensive lineman and trotted untouched into the endzone, giving the Panthers their first lead since it was 7-6 in the first quarter.

Bowdon, knowing what they needed to do to tie the game, or win the game, went back to its bread-and-butter and it's ground game had them inside the 1-yard line after two carries. The third carry was an easy 6 points and the Red Devils' coaching staff decided to put the game in the hands of its running backs and offensive line.

Following a pair of timeouts by both coaches, Bowdon lined up for the two-point conversion.

With the quarterback in the shotgun and running backs flanking him on each side, the snap was high, forcing the QB to leave his feet to secure the exchange and come back down in time to hand the ball off to the back to his left. With unlimited success attacking the left side of the Panthers' defense, with featured running back Tay Sheppard doing most of the damage, Bowdon went to its right with the No. 2 back Aaron Beasley, who despite being met at the 2-yard line, powered his way into the endzone behind an O-line that got just enough push to get him into the endzone by less than a foot, but it was enough to deny the home team a trip to Macon County for the Sweet 16.

"Football is truly a game of inches," Coach Allison said. "Because if he got in, that's by how much because he barely made it."



Junior running back Bo Lynch (5) and senior Sam Gilbert (82) provided almost 300 total yards of offense for the Panthers vs Bowdon. Photo/Todd Forrest



Receivers Cole Wright (8) and Knox Kiernan (4) each made the biggest catches of their careers last Friday with both recording a fourth quarter touchdown grab. Photo/Todd Forrest

When asked where this loss ranks among the toughest losses of his career - playing and coaching, Coach Allison puts it near the top.

"I don't know if it's the most disappointing loss ever but it definitely comes in the top five. That's something that's hard to rank but it's at or close to the top."

The visitors took the lead on the game's opening drive when they went 73 yards on 8 plays, capped off by a 24-yard touchdown run. During the drive, the Red Devils completed their only pass of the game, a screen pass that went for 9 yards on the fourth play.

The extra point missed wide right and the Panthers quickly made them pay when senior Josh Daniel returned the ensuing kickoff 91 yards, untouched for a score. Kiernan's point after gave Union its only lead of regulation at 7-6 with less than 3 minutes gone by.

Bowdon went back to work from its own 20 and converted a critical 3rd-and-4, because two plays later, Sheppard would break off a 67-yard scoring run to put his team back on top at 13-7.

The Panthers took over at its 20-yard line and Mancuso had the offense on the move, connecting with three different receivers, Slade Thompson, Cole Wright, and Sam Gilbert, as well as carrying three times for 22 yards to move Union into the redzone.

Unfortunately, his fourth carry resulted in a fumble and the Red Devils took over on their own 13. From there they went 87 yards on 12 runs - an average of 7.3 yards-per-carry and cashing in on a 9-yard quarterback scramble after a high snap went through his hands.

Junior quarterback Cason Parmer (not to be confused with Arizona's Carson Palmer) scooped up the loose football at the 20-yard line and won the footrace to the pylon to give his team a commanding 20-7 with 11:06 left in the first half.

Just like it's previous two State playoff games at home, Union fell behind by two touchdowns (21-7 in 2001 and 14-0 in 2014), and keeping in stride with its playoff history, the Panthers would rally.

A personal foul on the kickoff gave Union excellent field position at the Bowdon 46.

A first down pass to Wright went for 7 yards, then on 3rd-and-3 from the 39, Mancuso hit an open Gilbert at the 35 and the senior did the rest. With Kiernan delivering a block downfield, Gilbert outran four Red Devils to the endzone, putting the Union back in the game at 20-14 at the 10:07 mark of the second quarter.

However, Bowdon's two-headed monster of Sheppard and Beasley moved the ball from their own 20 to the Pan-

thers' 1-yard line in just nine plays. On the tenth, Parmer dove over the pile and scored on the quarterback sneak, stretching their advantage back to 13 with 6:03 to play in the half.

The ensuing Union drive showed promise with a pair of first downs but a delay of game penalty and a third down sack brought up a punting situation and sophomore R.J. Union got off a sopping 56-yard punt that dropped the Red Devils back to their own 14-yard line.

That punt would turn out to play another critical role in the Panthers' third quarter comeback as Bowdon came up just short on its bid to extend the lead in the waning seconds of the half.

Following runs of 17, 18, and 16 yards to move into Union territory, the visitors appeared headed for 6 more points but senior safety Andrew Brown forced Sheppard out-of-bounds at the 12-yard line at the conclusion a 34-yard carry with under 20 seconds remaining before halftime.

On the very next play Bowdon went to the air and junior Zach Stone picked off Parmer's pass in the endzone to keep hope alive and well in the home locker room at the intermission.

"I thought we played pretty well overall in the first half, we just had a few mistakes that put us in a hole," Coach Allison said.

Whether it was Stone's interception, halftime adjustments, a spirited speech from Coach Allison, a team leader addressing his brothers-in-purple, or the perfect cocktail of all-of-the-above, it paid off.

While the Panthers stepped up their game coming out of the locker rooms, Lynch stepped up, up, and away, to a level beyond everyone else on the field.

A star was born during the final 24 minutes as the junior running back played out of his mind in the second half.

"I told them at halftime that we, the coaches, can't go out there and make plays, that you guys have to make plays," Coach Allison said. "So we went out, made some plays, and we were able to turn the momentum a little bit."

Union County took the field and the offense went 70 yards on 7 plays - highlighted by a 29-yard Mancuso-to-Kiernan hookup that was followed by a 27-yard touchdown run by Lynch, where the junior escape artist emerged from a pile of bodies at the 25-yard line, shaking defenders as he skirted the far sideline, all the way to paydirt.

On Bowdon's first possession of the second half, the Panthers defense forced the game's first three-and-out. The Red Devils' punt was fielded by Daniel, who found some daylight and gave the offense



Senior QB Joseph Mancuso has the option to run or throw as Tyler McConnell (59) and Blaine Brown come to his aid. Photo/Todd Forrest



Eddie Kemp (30), Zach Stone (7), Chris Drost (bottom) drag Aaron Beasley to the turf. Photo/Todd Forrest

the ball at the Bowdon 30-yard line.

Nine seconds later, Gilbert was crossing the goal line on the receiving end of a Mancuso dart over the middle on a deep post route.

The Panthers attempted some trickery on the PAT by faking the extra point with a pass to the front corner of the endzone that fell incomplete.

Nonetheless, Union had roared back to knot the score at 27-27 at the 7:35 mark of the third quarter.

Things would go from bad-to-worse for the Red Devils when another high snap resulted in an intentional grounding call, putting them in a 2nd-and-30 situation.

Two runs and a shanked punt gave the ball back to Union in plus territory at the 45.

A 23-yard screen pass to Gilbert and an illegal participation penalty put the Panthers back inside the redzone.

From the 17-yard line, Wright reeled in a 7-yard reception and Lynch rushed for 5 more yards to give Union a 2nd-and-goal from the 5-yard line.

However, Union shot themselves in the foot not once, but twice. A personal foul, away from the ball, following Lynch's carry made it a 2nd-and-goal from the 20-yard line. Then, the second fumble inside the 15 gave the ball back to the visitors with the game still even at 27.

The Panthers defense stood firm and forced a third down incompletion and as the fourth quarter opened, Union had the ball at its own 26.

A third down incompletion from the Panthers brought up another punt and the Red Devils took over at their 30.

"At halftime we made one defensive adjustment and it helped us for a quarter," Coach Allison said. "Offensively, we scored the first two times we had the ball in the third quarter and we were about to score for the third time but we had a penalty and then dropped the ball."

On the second play from scrimmage, Sheppard went 61 yards for another score and just like that, Union was playing from behind again, down 34-27 with 10:56 to play.

From the 29-yard line, Mancuso and Lynch churned out first downs on the ground, and with the help of a facemask penalty that was tacked on to a Lynch run, the Panthers were threatening.

Carries of 9 and 15 yards from Lynch gave Union 1st-and-goal at the 9 where Lynch's number was called once again, and once again, he delivered with a 9-yard touchdown run.

Kiernan's PAT would make it a 34-34 game with 8:46 left. He then booted the kickoff into the endzone for a touchback.

Starting from the 20, Bowdon rushed for 7, 4, and 5 yards before Beasley tore off a 63-yard touchdown run - making it a 41-34 game with 6:39 to go.

The Panthers responded with a quick strike of their own to draw even at 41-41.

From the 30, Mancuso ran for 14 yards, then hit Kiernan for 9 more yards.

On the ensuing play, Lynch worked his magic one more time, slicing his way through a sea of white jerseys, en route to a 47-yard touchdown run.

Not to be outdone, Sheppard reminded everyone that it would not be the 'Bo Lynch show' as he went 77 yards for a score on his team's third play from scrimmage, following another Kiernan touchdown.

Down 48-41 with only 3:43 left, Mancuso and the offense went back to work one more time.

With Bowdon refusing to kick deep to Daniel, senior Eddie Kemp fielded a pooch kick and glided 24 yards down the far sideline to the Bowdon 42.

The first play was a handoff to Lynch that was good for 4 yards. Following an incompletion, Mancuso scrambled for 7 yards and a fresh set of downs.

From the 31, Lynch ran for 8 yards and 4 yards, moving the chains again.

With a first down at the 19, Union dodged a massive bullet when the Mancuso-to-Lynch exchange was mishandled the ball fell to the turf where Mancuso dove on the loose ball.

Following the 4-yard loss, Mancuso dropped back to pass and found no one open so he tucked and ran for 10 yards.

Facing 3rd-and-4 with the clock approaching the 1-minute mark, Lynch carried for 4-yards but came up short by a few inches. On 4th-and-inches, Mancuso took a designed keeper up the middle for 4 yards and the first down at the Bowdon 6-yard line.

With a 1st-and-goal, Lynch took the handoff and punched it in from 6-yards out, but a late flag declared that Union took too much time.

The delay of game pushed the Panthers back to the 11.

Needing 10 yards, and then some, Mancuso got 2-yards back, but the defense was not going to allow the Union QB to beat them with his legs.

After an incompletion on second down, Mancuso scanned the field for an open receiver on third down but couldn't find anyone, stepping up in the pocket to buy some time, Wright got behind a defender and Mancuso, in full stride, just shy of the line of scrimmage, placed a perfect touch pass over two defenders and Wright secured the ball, got both feet down,

and the Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium crowd erupted with celebration.

With the option to go for two and win the game, Coach Allison originally elected to go for the victory with a fake extra point attempt, and as the ball was snapped and Mancuso fired a pass into the endzone that would send the Panthers to the second round, the official's whistle blew for a Bowdon timeout.

After showing his hand, Allison decided to send the game into overtime.

"Originally the plan was to go for two on the touchdown before that one but I couldn't get it signaled in time," Coach Allison said. "They called the timeout but I probably should have lined up our offense and went for two, but we didn't. As it turned out, we probably could have made a different decision, but at the time, I think it was the right decision."

When asked if he considered going for two after Bowdon was flagged for roughing the kicker by taking the penalty and moving the ball 1-yard closer to the goal line, Coach Allison gave it a thought, but decided to stick with his gut feeling.

"I considered it then," he said. "We could have moved the ball up to the 1 1/2 yard line but once I made the decision to kick it, I wanted to kick it and take our chances in overtime."

Mancuso finished the game with 251 passing yards and 4 touchdowns to go with 78 rushing yards.

His career ends with more than 10,100 total yards and 105 touchdowns (8,100-plus yards and 85 touchdowns passing, 2,029 yards and 20 touchdowns rushing).

His 8,100-plus passing yards and 85 touchdowns are school records, while his 10,100 total yards are believed to be the most by any player in UCHS history. (With respects to Mickey Jones, who was Union's only other 1st Team All State quarterback (1975), complete stats are unavailable for his career).

"We've just been fortunate to have a really great group of players, and even better kids this year," Coach Allison said. "Of these nine seniors, I think seven of them are going to college and one is joining the Navy. They will be fine citizens of this county or whatever city that they live in. I'm probably more proud of that than anything."

Gilbert caught 7 passes for 133 yards and 2 scores.

As for Lynch, it wasn't just the second half of the game that was impressive, the second half of the season has been a coming out party for the junior running back as the Union County's 2016 team appears to have found its 'go-to' guy.

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