

Sports

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Model rushes for 423 yards; Panthers can't keep pace

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Union County's historic 2014 football season came to an early end last Friday night in a 50-36 shootout loss to Rome's Model High School (9-2).

Temperatures were already below freezing when the game kicked off at 7:30 p.m. but it took the Panthers' high octane offense two quarters to thaw.

Although that wasn't the case for Model's running back Nakyle Watkins, who came out red hot and stayed that way for four quarters.

The Blue Devils' senior carried 36 times, en route to a 360 yard, 5 touchdown outing. As a team, the Model offense put up 495 yards with 423 of that coming on the ground.

"He's a good ball player and averages about 160 yards a game" Union Head Coach Brian Allison said of Watkins. "He is 5-10, 215 pounds and runs a 4.5 in the forty but we made him look a little better than he really is with some missed tackles."

Watkins scored twice during a first half when Union (9-2) fell into a 21-7 hole. In the second half he scored three more times.

The first one coming early in the third quarter on a 74-yarder just two plays after the Panthers made it a 21-14 game.

After Union took its first lead of the night at 29-28, Watkins found pay dirt from 31 yards out.

His final score made it a 50-29 game as he punched it in from 8 yards out with 5:06 to play.

The Panthers' woes began as soon as they elected to receive the opening kickoff. Despite 435 total yards (365 passing, 70 rushing) from junior quarterback Joseph Mancuso, the offense struggled for much of the first half, and by the time they were able to defrost in the second half, they were in a two-touchdown hole.

"We thought we would be able to throw it on them a little better than we did," Coach Allison said. "They were also a little bit better on defense than we thought. They are a good football team and one of the better teams we played all season."

Model's 21 first half points were the most that Union has allowed during the first half all season. Meanwhile, the offense's seven points were the fewest since the Panthers took a 7-0 lead into the half at Lumpkin County, back in early September.

Entering last Friday, the contest was expected to be a battle of wills between Model and its No. 3 scoring defense in Class AA vs Union's No. 2 scoring offense in AA.

Averaging only 17 points over its last three regular season games, not many were expecting the Model offense to steal the show.

But the visitors quickly erased all doubts of their offensive capabilities when they marched down the field for a pair of touchdowns on their first two possessions.

Union's defensive struggles date back to the Rabun loss. Since the Panthers gave up 45 to the Wildcats, two of the next three opponents scored a season high in points vs Union.

Riverside put up 27 points and Model 50 points - both season highs. Even Washington Wilkes' 34 points was its highest total of 2014 with the exception of one-sided blowouts over Oglethorpe County and Social Circle.

"We weren't very good



Junior quarterback Joseph Mancuso faced a relentless pass rush from Model and was sacked five times. Photo/Todd Forrest

on defense," Coach Allison said. "It was a combination of missed tackles and not being prepared well enough. That's something that we're going to have to look at in the offseason."

On the Panthers' first possession, quarterback Joseph Mancuso was sacked on first down and Union punted on 4th-and-17.

Model took over and connected on a 31-yard touchdown pass to take a 7-0 lead.

On the ensuing drive, Union was denied on a fake punt attempt and the Blue Devils took over at the Panthers' 47 and needed just five plays to make it a 13-0 game as Watkins punched it in from 12 yards out.

Union's offense finally got its wake up call when they set up shop at their own 34.

Mancuso hit junior Sam Gilbert for 17 yards. After a pass interference awarded Union another 15 yards, senior Chase Barnett carried for 8 yards and 11 yards. A screen pass to senior Jacob Rogers went for 5 yards and on 3rd-and-5 Mancuso found senior Robert Prunier for 6 yards.

From the 9-yard line, Barnett powered his way to the four where Mancuso hit Prunier for the score on second down.

As the second quarter began, Model was faced with a 4th-and-2 at their own 34. The Blue Devils would roll the dice and the gamble paid off as Watkins broke loose for 48 yards. Four plays later, Watkins scored from 6 yards out, and after a successful two-point conversion, Model led 21-7 with 10:16 remaining in the half.

The Panthers then turned it over on downs at the Model 42 but the Union defense would stiffen and force a punt.

Union's hopes of getting a score before the break were put to rest with a delay of game that was followed by a sack. On fourth down, Prunier's punt pinned the Blue Devils at their own 16.

On the first play from scrimmage, senior defensive back Luke Chatham jumped on a fumble but the runner was ruled down and Union would enter the locker room trailing 21-7 - the same halftime score that the Panthers faced when they last hosted State in 2001.

When the Panthers took

the field to open the second half, they were a team on a mission and resembled the same football team that the Union County faithful were used to seeing in 2014.

On its first series of the third quarter, the Blue Devils punted following a three-and-out. The Panthers would move into Model territory but were denied on a 4th-and-3 at the 28-yard line.

After stopping the Panthers, Watkins coughed up football and senior Will Stone recovered it at the 35-yard line.

A first down pass to Prunier went for 21 yards then Mancuso kept it himself and used his legs for a 14-yard touchdown scamper.

With the score at 21-14, Model went back to Watkins on 2nd-and-7 where he was stuffed at the line of scrimmage, but he bounced outside, broke a tackle, and took it 77 yards down the Union sideline and into the endzone.

Starting from its own 35 and trailing 28-14, Union went on an 8-play, 65 yard scoring drive that took just under 2 minutes.

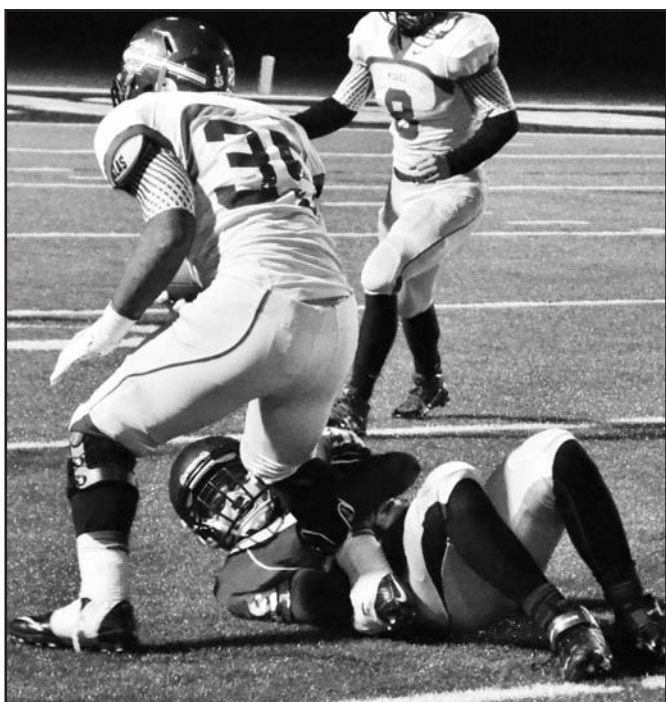
The drive almost came to an early end but on 3rd-and-7 Mancuso connected with senior Brett Dietz for 9 yards. Then, just shy of midfield, Union was flagged for a false start and an ineligible receiver but Mancuso and Gilbert erased the penalties with a 20-yard hook up.

Barnett carried for 3 yards and Dietz reeled in an 11-yard grab to give the Panthers 1st-and-goal from the five. Union would go back to its workhorse Barnett and the senior was able to find his way into the endzone to bring the Panthers back to within seven points at 28-21 at the 5:57 mark of the third.

On Model's next drive, the Panthers' defense was given a heavy dose of Watkins and quarterback Kyler Eldridge on the ground. They would advance as far as the Union 14-yard line but the defense, led by seniors Billy Elder and Reid Watson, forced the Blue Devils into a 4th-and-5 at the 11 where the field goal attempt came up short.

Still within a touchdown, the Panthers offense went to work and needed just 66 seconds to move 80 yards.

On 2nd-and-8 Mancuso hit



Chris Thompson holds on to Model's Watkins. Photo/Todd Forrest



Chase Barnett scored three touchdowns vs Model. Photo/Todd Forrest

Prunier for 9 yards, then picked up five on a quarterback keeper. A grab by Rogers went for 10 yards, then Prunier hauled in a 30-yard grab and took a late hit for an additional 15 yards. Barnett capped off the drive with a 12-yard touchdown run on first down.

On the extra point, Mancuso faked out everyone as he fired left to junior Tyler McCoy who stretched out across the goal line for the two-point conversion.

"That play is something that we work on every week," Coach Allison said. "But it went a little different than planned. Joe (Mancuso) improvised and just made a great play"

With 16 seconds left in the third, the Panthers had momentum and their first lead of the game at 29-28.

The Blue Devils took over at their own 48 following another Panthers' pooch kick.

"We were trying to keep it away from their speedster, number 11," Coach Allison said. "We didn't want to give up a cheap touchdown."

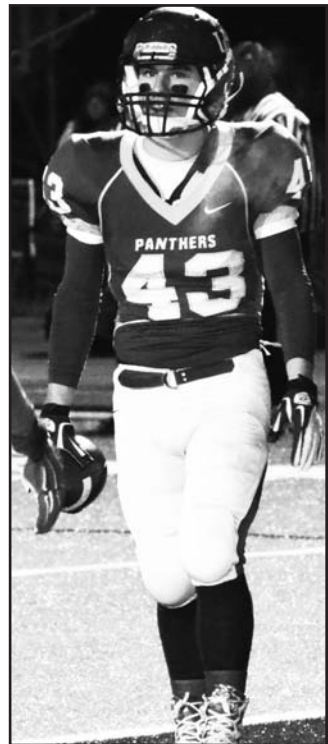
Five plays later and faced with a third-and-3, Watkins snatched the momentum back for his squad with a 31-yard carry for a score. The two-point conversion was successful and the guests were back on top at 36-29.

On the ensuing kickoff, Prunier gave the offense favorable field position with a 22-yard return to the 43 yard line. On the first play of the series the offense was handcuffed by a false start. Facing a 1st-and-15 Mancuso found Gilbert over the middle but the junior receiver was stripped and Model took over 45 yards away from a two-touchdown advantage.

The Panthers defense brought up a 3rd-and-4 but Watkins tore off a 27-yard run to the 1-yard line. Eldridge kept it himself and scored on 1st-and-goal - stretching the Model lead to 43-29 with 7:32 left.



Junior Sam Gilbert



Senior Robert Prunier

their blood, sweat, and tears into this program and our program will be eternally grateful for everything they've done.

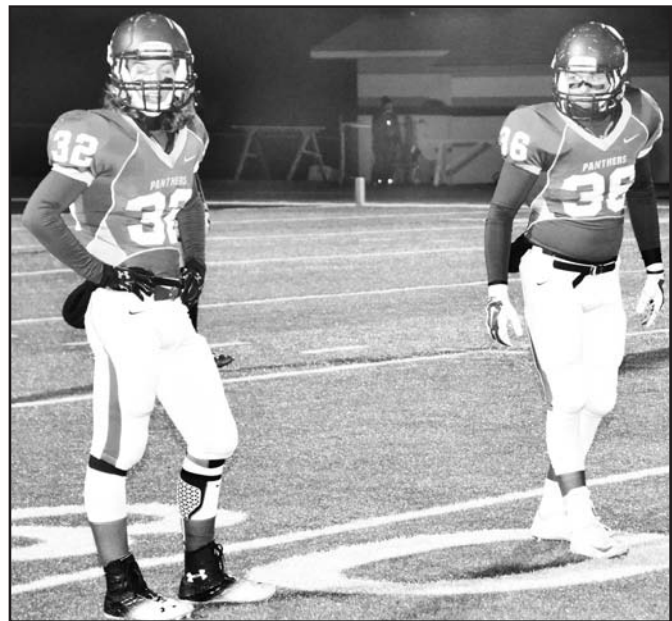
"I am thankful for all of the support that we get from our administration and hats off to the Quarterback Club," he added. "I also want to mention our Student Section and what a great job they did"

As for the rest of 8-AA, Rabun County and Washington Wilkes will move on to the second round. Greene County barely missed a win by falling in overtime to Coosa.

UC stats vs Model:
PASSING - Mancuso 29-43, 365 yards, 2 TD's, 1 INT.

RUSHING - Mancuso 11 carries, 70 yards, 1 TD, Barnett 13 carries, 61 yards, 2 TDs

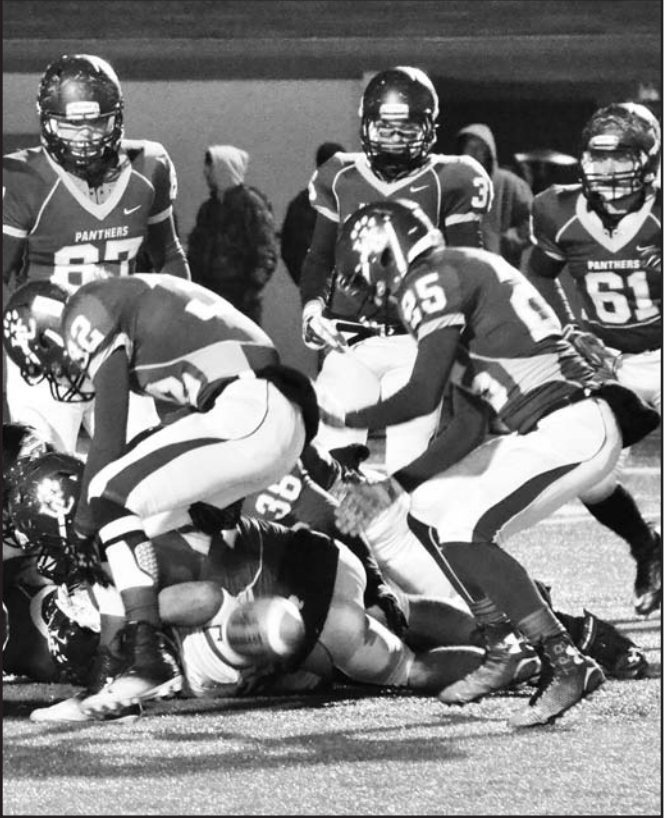
RECEIVING - Prunier 11 catches, 142 yards, 1 TD, Gilbert 6 catches, 109 yards, Rogers 6 catches, 54 yards, Dietz 3 catches, 38 yards, Barnett 1 catch, 14 yards, 1 TD, Wallis 1 catch, 5 yards



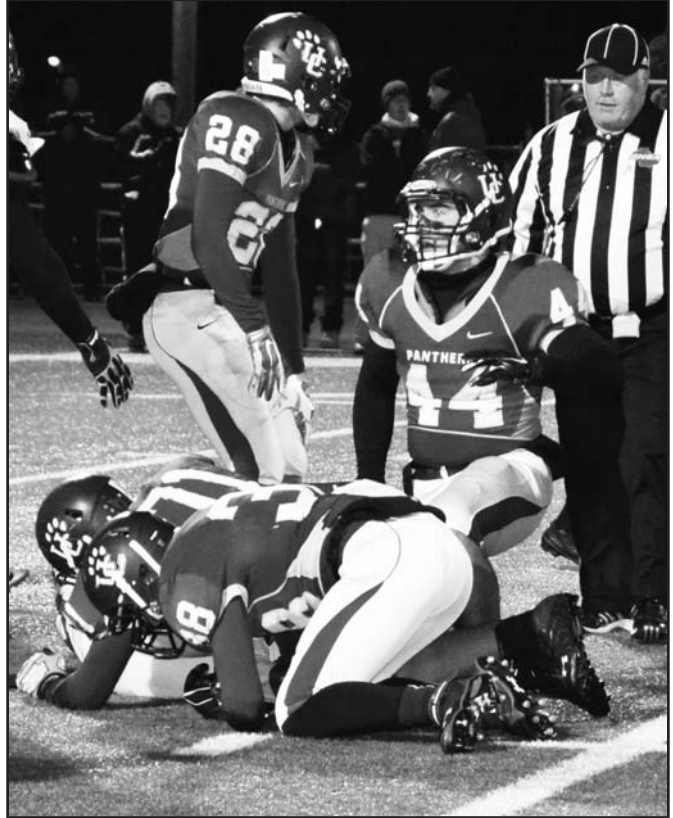
Seniors Luke Chatham (32) and Nic Sparks (36). Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County offensive linemen: senior Jacob Witting (68) and junior Parker Daniel (72). Photo/Todd Forrest



The Panthers defense gets a strip late in the first half vs Model. The runner was ruled down by contact. Photo/Todd Forrest



Chase Barnett (44), Brett Dietz (28), Chris Thompson (38), and Reid Watson (71) on defense during the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest