

# Sports

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## In Memory of Noah Helton #67

### Brian Allison, former players reflect on five-decade coaching career

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Earlier this year, Union County native and former Panthers football coach Brian Allison retired following 28 seasons (36 overall) at the prep level, amassing 161 wins at Union County, Winder-Barrow and East Forsyth.

"I really want to thank the community for everything they did [during my time at UCHS]," Allison said. "It's been good to be back in Blairsville (post-retirement), just walking around town and having people speak to you, seeing old players and talking about the good old days."

With 121 victories coming at Union County, Allison departed UCHS after the 2020 season as Union County's all-time winningest football coach, compiling a 121-77 record during two stints in Blairsville. Allison set the mark in 2012 with his 58th win, surpassing his old high school coach, Terry Rogers (1980-93), during a 40-14 victory over Andrews, NC.

"It's bittersweet to hear the old man is retiring," said Joe Mancuso, a 2016 graduate and Union County's all-time leading passer. "But he left behind a legacy in Union County that will not be forgotten."

During Allison's playing days at UCHS, he earned All-State honors in 1983 as a defensive lineman before heading off to Furman University. While at Furman, Allison was a member of the 1985 Southern Conference Championship squad that reached the 1-AA National title game, losing 44-42 to Georgia Southern. After graduation, Allison joined the Paladins coaching staff as a defensive assistant. Allison helped guide the Paladins to a 17-12 victory over Georgia Southern in the 1988 1-AA National Championship Game.

While Allison was on top of the world at Furman in the late 80s, back home, the Panthers were trending in the other direction.

The Panthers posted a solid 6-4 mark in 1988 but went 4-6 in 1989 and 1-9 in 1990. Union County mustered only five combined wins over the next two seasons, finally hitting rock bottom in 1993, suffering the program's only loss to Towns County during a 2-8 campaign.

Former Tennessee Volunteer-great and College Football Hall-of-Famer Chip Kell replaced Rogers at UCHS in 1994, but Union County couldn't dig out of the rut, going 1-9 in '94 and 2-8 in 1995.

With Kell out after a 3-17 record in two seasons, the Union County Board of Education and Rogers (athletic director) hit it out of the park with the ensuing hire.

"It was time for me to start thinking about family," Allison said regarding his decision to return home. "The [Union] job came open and I talked to my dad about it. I talked to [then-Union County Superintendent Tommy Stephens] about it and we ended up working it out. I came back home and it turned out to be absolutely the greatest blessing to come back and coach in my hometown."

"I was 30 years old at the time, and I was so young I thought I could coach with anybody and the [program's



Head coach Brian Allison celebrates with Sawyer Drake following Union County's late go-ahead 2-point conversion to knock off Elbert County 29-28 at the Granite Bowl in September 2018. Photo/Todd Forrest

recent struggles] never crossed my mind," he continued. "But when I got here and saw the culture, I realized it was a situation where the kids didn't believe in themselves."

"We went to a summer lineman camp at Furman and the kids didn't believe they could compete, then we placed first in a few drills and their confidence just exploded from there."

Allison went 5-5 in 1996 -- the Panthers' first non-losing season since the aforementioned '88 campaign. Two years later, with senior Robby Brown under center, Union went 7-3 -- marking its most wins since 1985. The Panthers narrowly missed the playoffs in '98, suffering a 44-27 November loss at eventual State runner-up Commerce, knocking Union from contention.

Brown, who went on to play QB at Georgia Tech before entering the coaching ranks and working his way to the NFL as the Miami Dolphins QB coach, discussed the early days of Allison's tenure at UCHS.

"When Coach Allison took the job, he told us 'I am not going to promise y'all anything except when you walk down the halls wearing a Union County Football T-shirt, you will be proud.'"

"I would say he accomplished that, and then some," Brown said.

Bad luck and untimely injuries denied Union County a postseason bid in 2000 while posting another 7-3 record -- ending the regular season in a four-way tie for third in 8-AA with Dawson County, Lumpkin County and Rabun County. However, a wonky tiebreaker system kept the Panthers out of the postseason despite owning a 2-1 head-to-head record vs. the three squads tied in the 8-AA standings.

Union County's fortunes started to turn in 2001 when the heartbreak of the previous year flipped karma in the Panthers' favor, prompting a 9-1 regular season that included thrilling victories vs. Apalachee, at Lumpkin County and at White County, as well as a pair of 5-point victories at Dawson County and vs. East Hall.

However, Allison's first

stint in Blairsville came to a close via a last-second field goal during a 31-28 playoff loss to Morgan County.

Andrew Williams (DB/QB/RB) was an integral part of Union's success in the early 2000s before playing under Mark Richt at UGA, where he recorded 33 tackles between 2006-08.

"He was a great mentor," Williams said of Allison. "He had this way about him that made him very relatable, but he demanded respect, he demanded excellence and did all the things a coach is supposed to do. But he had this way of not making you afraid of him, but still fearing him at the same time."

"You develop special bonds with those guys. The game of football is a lot like the game of life. Everybody always says that and it's true. Especially when you have a mentor like Coach Allison facilitating those life lessons through a game. You just develop bonds with guys like that and they don't ever fade away. That's what was so special about him -- he made the game fun."

The success of 2001 turned bittersweet when Allison departed for Winder-Barrow, sending the Panthers program into a spiral that led to six consecutive losing seasons. Meanwhile, Allison's six seasons in Winder were highlighted by an 8-3 mark in 2003 but he ended his tenure with a 25-36 overall record.

When asked about his decision to leave Union County after the 2001 season, Allison admits he regrets leaving his alma mater, but says if he could go back in time, he would make the same decision.

"Obviously, I would have loved to have stayed at Union County, but sometimes to move up [in coaching] you have to move away," Allison said. "But the six years at Winder were the largest growth of my coaching career -- personally and professionally. I was able to learn so much in that environment."

The biggest question mark surrounding Allison's return to UCHS in 2008 was whether he would reinstall his wing-T offense or stick with former-head coach Todd

Peugh's spread attack that was making progress on the backs of Kolt Owenby (QB) and future Vanderbilt Commodore Blake Gowder (WR).

Fortunately, Allison kept the spread offense and the Panthers have been airing out ever since.

"We switched [Union's] offense to the wing-T in 2000 and it was the best thing for us and then we took it to Winder," Allison said. "But toward the end at Winder, [the wing-T] was struggling a little bit. So the offseason before I knew I was coming back to Union, I visited some colleges and clinics and was on the verge of switching to the spread. Then we were able to bring it back to Union and maintain what Todd [Peugh] had already started. Looking back on it now, I think [going spread] was something that was meant to be."

Allison had the Panthers sitting at 5-2 through seven games in 2008 before Owenby suffered a season-ending injury, resulting in three straight losses to close the season at 5-5.

The Panthers went 6-4 in 2009 but missed the playoffs following a late-season loss to Riverside Military Academy. Union went 4-6 and 3-7 over the next two seasons but bounced back to 6-4 in 2012.

Luther Jones, an all-state defensive lineman in 2012 and 2013 before spending the next

four years at Kennesaw State, spoke fondly of Allison. Later, Jones joined Allison's UCHS coaching staff.

"Coach Allison did so much for me and all the athletes at Union, Winder and East Forsyth," Jones said. "He is an amazing man and football coach that deserves retirement. The game of football will miss a man with his knowledge."

Things started clicking in 2013 when Allison turned the offense over to an unproven sophomore quarterback named Joe Mancuso, and what followed was 24 wins and three playoff appearances between 2013-15.

"To this day Coach Allison was one of the most impactful coaches I've ever had," Mancuso said. "He had an aura about him and a calmness that made players gravitate towards him. Especially in today's world, young athletes need role models to emulate how to go about your business and stay disciplined towards a goal."

The Panthers went 9-2 in both 2014 and 2015, even cracking the Class AA top-10 for the first time in nearly 30 years. Union County climbed as high as No. 9 in 2014 following a nail-biting 35-34 victory over Washington-Wilkes in the regular season finale.

Under Allison and offensive coordinator Howard McCombs, Mancuso rewrote

the Union County record books, totaling over 8,200 yards passing, more than 2,000 yards rushing and accounting for 106 touchdowns.

At Richmond, Mancuso became the first player in program history to throw for more than 5,500 yards and rush for over 1,500 yards. Mancuso is currently playing in the Indoor Football League (IFL).

"I've been coached by a lot of people throughout my career, and oftentimes they come across those who curse and scream at every mistake," Mancuso said. "While sometimes [Allison] would lose his cool and get red as a tomato, he knew how to coach each player differently and motivate us towards a common goal; instilling skills in his players that go beyond the football field -- maturity, discipline, hard work, etc., all attributes that you need in the real world."

"Looking back on my career, Coach Allison was the one that took a chance with me my sophomore year and allowed me to pursue my dream of playing professional football."

Entering 2016, with Mancuso headed off to Richmond to become a four-year starter and the Panthers moving up to Class AAA, Panther fans checked their expectations after the previous three years.

But with future Army-committee Cole Wright moving behind center, the Panthers went 8-3 during their first year in Class 7-AAA topping 60 points in a game twice during the 2016 season.

Injuries derailed the 2017 campaign but Union County still limped to a respectable 6-4 mark with wins over Fannin and Lumpkin to close the year.

"I was so proud of that [2016-2017] group," Allison said. "They could have complained but they stepped up and battled and picked up some big wins, especially North Hall at home (in 2016)."

Allison handed the offense's keys to his son Pierson in 2018 as the Panthers returned to Class AA, immediately going 9-2. Union County won a school record 10 games in 2019, culminating in the program's first playoff victory -- a 19-15 win over South Atlanta.

That same year, Union County also set a school record with 74 points in a win at Putnam County after scoring 60 vs. Towns County three weeks earlier.

"We had a pretty impressive stretch of quarterbacks

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After 19 seasons in Blairsville, head coach Brian Allison left UCHS in 2021 as the program's winningest football coach. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Noah Helton...from Page 1A

Noah's relationship with his father, Nathan.

"Now let's talk about my dad," Noah wrote. "(He is) the best father I could have ever asked for. He is very strong in his faith in God, and that's most important. Dad had just went through a very traumatic time and he showed us he was Godly and trustworthy throughout it all.

"I have very fond memories of playing games with my brothers and my dad. Dad would always make sure we felt his love and his support. Above all, Dad led us with scripture and biblical knowledge. We prayed together and read together every night, and I am thankful."

Noah is survived by his brother Aaron Helton and

sister-in-law MaKenna Helton; brother Elijah Helton; sister Miriam Grace Cunningham; brother Zeke Ellis; grandparents Terry and Darlene Helton, and Ron and Susie Winkler; and girlfriend Ineska "Inna" Harbovska.

Pallbearers included Aaron Helton, Zeke Helton, Elijah Helton, Brayden Torres, Isaiah Ortiz and Franklin for

the graveside service that occurred on Monday, July 8, at House of Prayer Church Cemetery. The Union County Panthers football team served as honorary pallbearers.

At the family's request, donations may be made to Luther Jones Football Camp or to Canal Lake Bible Camp in Noah's memory.



UCHS offensive line coach Tyler Perry speaks during the service.



Noah Helton served as a team captain during the 2022 season.



Noah Helton (No. 67) with family during his Senior Night recognition in November 2022. Photos by Todd Forrest

# Retirement...from Page 8A

going back to Kolt in 2008," Allison said. "But things really started rolling in 2013 with Joe, who came in right after T Bentley, who was another good quarterback. But when Joe took over we had a phenomenal run with Joe, Cole and Pierson.

"It shows that when you have a consistency with your coaching staff, things start to build and build. I think that was a huge part of it. Administratively, we were in a good situation in that time period. The community was supportive and overall, it was a great time to be a Union County Panther."

On top of the graduation losses of Pierson Allison, Sawyer Drake (WR) and current FSU star Morlock (WR) in 2020, COVID-19 threw another wrench into Brian Allison's final season. Forced to rework their schedule and pick up games during the season, the Panthers still finished third in 8-AA with a 4-6 overall record but suffered a last-minute playoff loss at Heard County in Brian Allison's last game with the Panthers.

"That was a crazy year with no spring practice and social distancing," he said. "I hope and pray that no one ever has to go through that again. It



L-R: Todd Forrest, Brian Allison and assistant coach James Avery following a Union win. Photo/Jenni Dixon

was miserable. Everything has changed since then in the way education is done."

Brian Allison left to take over a brand new program at East Forsyth in 2021, leading the Broncos to their first playoff appearance in 2023.

"Thirty-six years of coaching has led to some back issues and I just felt like it was time to do something different," he said. "I'm working with [wife] Pam and [daughter] Riley in real estate now. They supported me during my coach-

ing career and now I think it's time to support them the same way they did for me.

"I have to thank all the players I've coached over my 36 years, specifically the 19 years at Union County," he added. "We've had some really good assistant coaches. We were very fortunate to maintain consistency on the coaching staff. Over the last 13 years [at UCHS], Howard McCombs and Robby Roxbury were there for every step of it.

"I'm thankful for all the

businesses that supported our football team, but I can't say enough about the former players and administration. I also appreciate all the coverage and support from the *North Georgia News*. You guys have been fantastic and made me sound good over the years."

In closing, Mancuso speaks for everyone with these final remarks to his coach.

"Congrats on a great career and happy retirement," he said. "I know Mrs. Pam is happy."

# Racing: McClure leads wire-to-wire in Cumming



Levi McClure wins the Senior Honda Nascar Youth series race at NGQMA in Cumming. Levi qualified on pole and led all 40 laps of the main event. Special thanks to our sponsors: Nelson Tractor, B.E.L.L. Equipment, Joey Martin Auctioneers, Charles Kelley Construction, MBC Trading, Brock Kelley Trucking and Shook's Welding.

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