

# Sports

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## Softball: Lady Panthers rally past Banks in extra innings

Sisum's walk-off single caps perfect week, ends four-game skid to Leopards

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Sixth-ranked Union County rallied not once, but twice, in a 6-5 extra-inning victory over defending State champ Banks County.

"It's the best feeling ever," Union County senior catcher Hannah Patton said after finally getting over the hump vs. Banks. "We came (into the year) calling it our 'revenge tour' and this was a huge revenge win for us."

After overcoming deficits of 3-0 and 5-3, the Lady Panthers forced extra innings only to watch Banks open the eighth inning with consecutive singles. With runners on first and second, senior Trinity Queen got the strikeout, but a dropped third strike resulted in a Leopards' baserunning miscue.

Believing the batter was free to run on the dropped strike (she couldn't with first base occupied), both baserunners took off, resulting in a second out on the basepaths when Union County caught the runner between first and second in a rundown.

"That was one of the few breaks that we caught," Union head coach Stephen Mitchell said. "(Banks) made a mistake and we were alert and didn't get caught off guard."

Queen escaped the inning with a grounder to first, keeping the score deadlocked at 5-5.

The Lady Panthers also caught an unlucky break in the bottom half of the inning after junior Ansley Collins led off with a bunt single. With head coach Stephen Mitchell electing not to sacrifice bunt on the first pitch, sophomore Chloe Potts lined a hard ground ball up the middle, where the would-be single was snagged by the pitcher, resulting in a 1-6-3 double play.

"I thought 'Chloe is seeing the ball well and there is only one bad thing that could happen here so let's take a chance,'"



Junior Lexi Sisum singles up the middle in the eighth inning to score Patton and end the game with a 6-5 win. Photo/Todd Forrest

Mitchell said of the decision not to bunt. "Sure enough, she hit it right back to the pitcher. If (the ball) is a few inches to the right, it's a base hit up the middle. So I was a little upset with myself over that one."

Stepping to the plate with two down and the bage empty, Patton nearly ended the game with one swing of the bat, sending a deep fly ball into right-center field. She may not have ended the game with a walk-off homer, but her two-out triple set the stage for junior Lexi Sisum. "The (double play) was a little rattling at first, but I went up there knowing that I still had a job to do," Patton said. "Our motto this year is to 'flush it' and that's what I did."

Despite struggling for most of the night with two strikeouts and two walks, Sisum delivered in the clutch, lining a game-winning, RBI single into centerfield for the 6-5 victory.

"I try not to think about things too much and just went up there wanting to put the bat on the ball," Sisum said. "I just

have to thank the One above for giving me the ability to do those type of things."

"In the past, she might have given up on herself, but this time, she kept on fighting," Mitchell said when about Sisum overcoming a tough day at the plate.

Not only did Union County battle back from a pair of multi-run deficits, but they also overcame a scary moment involving junior first baseman Rebekah Chambers. With two down in the top of the first, Banks County's left-handed cleanup hitter Kylee Brooks turned on an inside pitch, smoking a hard line drive toward first.

To her credit, Chambers didn't bail, but at the last second, the ball short-hopped and caught her just above the eye. The Leopards would score on the injury, taking a 1-0 lead after one. They added two more in the second via another unusual play on the right side of the infield. A ground ball to shortstop Emma Roxbury appeared to end the



Senior catcher Hannah Patton makes a put-out at home in the third inning to keep the Lady Panthers within one run at 4-3. Photo/Todd Forrest

inning when she fired to first for the third out. Immediately, the Banks first base coach began arguing that first baseman Kaelyn Jones stepped off the bag. As two Leopards came around to score, and Union County headed to the dugout, the umpire agreed with the coach and ruled the runner safe.

"Things didn't go our way early and we had a tough injury but we just didn't quit and kept going," Mitchell said. "I was very proud of them. Our demeanor never changed throughout the ball game."

Trailing 3-0 entering the bottom of the second, the Lady Panthers finally received their wake-up call. Queen walked to lead off the inning, then Caley Davis drew a two-out walk. Collins followed suit with another free pass to load the bases for Potts, who beat out an infield single - scoring courtesy runner Caroline Karnes.

Patton kept the rally going with a two-run double that evened the score at 3-3 before Banks County escaped by strik-

ing out Sisum with two runners in scoring position.

The Leopards regained the lead in the third as control issues plagued Queen in the early going. After a leadoff single, Queen plunked the next hitter, allowing Banks to take the lead on a fielder's choice.

Things could've been worse for Queen and the Lady Panthers, but a put-out at home by Patton resulted in the first out, limiting the visitors to just one run.

Still down 4-3 in the fourth, Union wasted a first and third, one-out situation when Banks County starter Jacy Ayers fanned Patton and Sisum to preserve the lead. In the ensuing at-bat, the Leopards extended their advantage to 5-3 when an error and a walk led to a two-out, RBI single.

"(Banks) scored four runs off some weird situations, but our kids didn't let it bother them," Mitchell said. "We didn't flinch, we didn't waver, we just kept on going."

Roxbury led off the Union

half of the fifth with a base hit up the middle, then Queen was hit by a 1-1 pitch, putting the tying run at first.

A wild pitch moved both runners into scoring position, allowing pinch-runner Katie Byers to score on an Aubrie Banton sacrifice fly. Pinch hitter Sierra Burnette followed with another sac-fly, scoring Karnes and tying the game at 5-5.

Queen started to look like her old self and retired the side 1-2-3 in the sixth. Later, she worked around a two-out walk in the seventh.

"T.Q. is one of the best around and I told her a few times just to keep battling," Patton said. "Another motto this year is 'control the controllable'. We can't control what the umpire calls so I told her to keep throwing her best stuff and if we play the way we know how, we will come out victorious."

Unfortunately, the Union County lineup could not end things in regulation, wasting

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## Football: Panthers unable to keep pace at 7th-ranked Commerce

Union hosts Chestatee for Senior Night, look to avoid first 0-3 start under Allison

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Commerce - No. 7 Commerce out-rushed Union County 438 to -8 and used 14 unanswered points to pull away with a 32-14 home-opening victory, dropping the Panthers to 0-2 for the first time since 1997.

Trailing 18-7 late in the second quarter, Union County used a 10-play, 67-yard scoring drive to pull within four at the 2:04 mark of the half.

Junior running back Carson Walker punctuated the drive with a 20-yard catch-and-run on third and goal, trimming the Tigers' lead to 18-14 with the Mason McCombs point-after.

The series was not without drama as Union County appeared to convert a previous third and goal from the seven when Logan Helcher found his 6-foot, 5-inch target, Kaston Hemphill, on a fade route in the back of the endzone.

Instead, a holding penalty moved the Panthers back to the 20-yard line to replay third-and-goal. This time, Helcher rolled to his right, stopped, turned and tossed a perfectly-timed throw-back screen to Walker, who was immediately sprung by a block from left guard Aaron Helton and assisted by the downfield blocking of Hemphill. With one final



With a caravan of Panthers in tow, Elijah Helton (28) has clear sailing after scooping up a Commerce fumble in the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

defender standing in the way of his first career touchdown, Walker lowered his shoulder at the five and bulldozed his way across the goal line for six points.

The drive began with consecutive bubble screens to Hemphill for 16 and 12 yards. Another quick screen, this time to McCombs on the opposite side of the field, picked up 10 yards on first down.

As Commerce remained in soft coverage, the Panthers continued attacking the edges with

screen passes. After a dropped pass, Union's fifth-straight bubble screen moved the chains with Chitwood's 11-yard catch-and-run.

On second-and-10, the Panthers turned to the tunnel screen and found success. From just outside the Commerce red zone, McCombs took the short throw over the middle and weaved his way through traffic for 13-yards. A fumbled snap cost Union 5 yards on first-and-goal, but Helcher used his legs to get

8 yards back, setting up the third-and-goal holding penalty and the eventual Walker touchdown.

Momentum was clearly on the visitor's side with Union County set to receive the second-half kickoff. Through the game's first 22 minutes, the Tigers had yet to attempt a pass. And after running up the middle on first down and choosing to forego the hurry-up offense, Commerce appeared content to take an 18-14 lead to the locker room.

As the clock neared the

1-minute mark, the Tigers caught Union napping, dropping back to pass for the first time and connecting on a 72-yard wheel-route down the far sideline to take a 25-14 halftime advantage.

"That touchdown was my fault," Allison said. "I should've had us in better position and that's my fault."

"For sure, that was a big play and a momentum killer. If we stop them right there, we go into halftime down 18-14, feeling good about ourselves and getting

the ball to start the third. Like I said, it was just a poor job on my part."

On the third quarter's opening drive, the Panthers continued to lean on the passing attack, advancing into Commerce territory before turning it over.

Following a touchback on the kickoff, Helcher found Keyton Chitwood for 15 yards on second down, then consecutive 6-yard strikes to McCombs and Noah Underwood moved the sticks once more.

A handoff to Walker resulted in a loss of six due to a fumble on the exchange. Faced with third-and-16, Helcher and McCombs hooked up for 14 yards, then a quick screen to Hemphill gained five on fourth-and-2.

The Panthers began spinning their wheels, however. On second-and-10, the Tigers dropped Walker for a loss of five. Following a delay of game penalty, resulting in third-and-20, Helcher was picked off at the 23-yard line.

After the defense got a three-and-out, Commerce forced Helcher into another third-down interception with 5:22 left in the third.

Starting from their own 47, the Tigers moved inside the Union County 9-yard line, where the defense stiffened and kept

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