

Sports

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Panthers overcome shaky start to pull away at Monticello

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The Panthers got off on the right foot in region play, 38-22 over Monticello but win No. 4 wasn't without a few hiccups on both sides of the ball.

Pierson Allison put up career high yardage totals with his legs and his arm but two early turnovers prevented the offense from getting off to another fast start. The junior quarterback connected on 19-of-28 for 284 yards and one interception. On the ground, he rushed for 135 yards and two scores on 13 carries.

Union County was without senior Chayton Schafer, the team's do-everything defensive leader, who was serving a suspension following his ejection for targeting during the second half of the Fannin County game.

But it was the offense that was shooting itself in the foot during the early going on Friday night.

"I had a little concern coming off the Fannin game where we were really jacked up," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "But we still came back (at Monticello) and had over 500 yards of offense and held them to 22 points with their last touchdown coming at one minute and forty-something left. The game was never in jeopardy but it also wasn't a stress-free situation by any means."

An interception on the second play of the game provided the Hurricanes with excellent starting field position at the Panther 31. A pair of false start penalties helped the defense force a quick three-and-out but the Panthers coughed up the football once again on the ensuing possession.

Two third-down conversions had Union on the move but faced with 2nd-and-1 near midfield, Pierson Allison put the ball on the turf and Monticello took over in Panther territory once again.

Starting from the 46, the Union County defense bailed out the offense one more time with another three-and-out.

"When you turn the ball over on your first two possessions it kind of shows you where you're at but thankfully our defense was still fresh and was able to step up," Coach Allison said.

With the miscues out of its system, the offense went 90 yards on seven plays with Pierson Allison polishing off the drive by rolling left then turning



Mason McCombs lays out for a 3rd quarter pass. Photo/Todd Forrest

up-field for the 10-yard score. Earlier in the drive, the Panther signal caller hooked up with senior Kanon Hemphill for 16 yards and junior Cayden Rich for 31. Chad Buzzard got in on the action with carries of 13 and 4 yards, while Allison added a 12-yard scamper, and the Canes were flagged once for 5 yards.

Monticello responded with a scoring drive of its own, going 66 yards on 11 plays while converting all three of its third down situations, including a 25-yard scoring strike on 3rd-and-15.

The point-after try was unsuccessful and Union held a 7-6 lead with 10:26 before halftime.

On the touchdown catch, Monticello was flagged for spiking the football, resulting in a 15-yard penalty that was assessed on the kickoff. Starting from the Canes' 43, Allison hit Hemphill for 15, ran it himself for 7 before a reverse to Kyle Morlock moved the sticks with a 4-yard pickup. A short gain by Buzzard and a 10-yard completion to Drake gave Union 1st-and-goal at the three. On the very next play, Buzzard powered his way into the end zone for a 14-6 advantage.

The ensuing Monticello offensive series saw the Panthers flagged five times, one coming on a third-down completion where they were hit with a pass interference flag. The Canes eventually stalled at the Union 37 and the punt rolled into the end zone for a touchback.

From the 20, Pierson Allison and the offense needed only five plays to stretch the lead to 21-6. Junior wide receiver Sawyer Drake was targeted twice, resulting in two grabs and one roughing the passer flag.

The junior receiver went on to record a team-high six

catches for 91 yards. Following a 3-yard hand-off to Buzzard, Pierson Allison found some real estate around the right edge behind the pulling left guard, Dylan Williams. The Union QB then showed some grit by lowering his shoulder and trucking a defensive back at the five to cap off the 32-yard scoring run.

With 4:10 left before halftime, it was important for the Canes to squash the Panther momentum and that's exactly what they did behind the senior-laden backfield of quarterback Jaymerious Fleetwood and running back Dylan Jackson.

On 2nd-and-9, Fleetwood took a read-option keeper 14 yards before a give to Jackson went for 15 more. Later, on 3rd-and-6, Fleetwood kept the drive alive with a 10-yard completion. Once more, facing 3rd-and-10 at the 22, Fleetwood picked up 18 on a quarterback draw play. On 2nd-and-goal from the four, Fleetwood went back to the read-option keeper and weaved his way through traffic for the score.

"They did some things with the quarterback that we hadn't seen them do," Coach Allison said. "Based on what we had seen of the quarterback, we knew we'd have issues tackling him in the open field. Watching (their previous games this year) they hadn't thrown the ball very well, but give them credit, the kid came out and threw it really well."

The 2-point conversion was successful on a handoff up-the-middle against a winded Panther defense, making it a one-score game at 21-14.

"They definitely took us by surprise with their physicality and athleticism, it was unlike anything we've seen so far and they're just a really solid team,"



Jackson Colwell pushes a receiver out of bounds. Photo/Todd Forrest



Brian Smith hit 5 PATs and one field goal on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County senior linebacker Jackson Colwell said when asked how Monticello's offense stacked up to what he'd seen from Union's previous three opponents.

With 56 seconds left until halftime and no timeouts to work with, the Union County offense was able to respond to Monticello's 13-play scoring drive while also returning a favor by picking up the defense.

Starting at the 40, Allison went to Morlock for 14, Buzzard for 11 then back to Morlock for 10 more. The Panthers dodged a bullet when they recovered their own fumble on another completion to Morlock, however, they were forced to kill the clock with a spike at the 18-yard line.

Senior placekicker Brian Smith delivered a clutch kick from 35-yards away, and with the Canes receiving the second half kickoff, the field goal provided Union with some much-needed breathing room, up 24-14 at the break.

"We were getting tired (in the second quarter), it was

89-degrees and humid at kickoff and we were on the field too long defensively," Coach Allison said. "The crazy thing is, we kept committing penalties that kept drives going on several different occasions. They weren't stupid penalties but aggressive penalties, for the most part."

Monticello opened up its passing attack on the third quarter's opening drive as Fleetwood connected on passes of 11, 15, and 19 yards. With a 3rd-and-short inside the Panther red zone, Fleetwood dropped back to pass but was bumped by Jackson, resulting in a fumble that was recovered by Coleson Daniel.

The lucky break gave the ball to the Panthers at their own 20, still leading by 10. Runs by Pierson Allison and Buzzard moved the chains before a 16-yard catch-and-run by Rich moved Union across the 50. The Panthers would go back to Rich for 15 yards before a diving catch by sophomore Mason McCombs was good for eight. On 2nd-and-2 from the four, Buzzard found pay-dirt for the

second time, opening up a 31-14 advantage.

With 5:45 left in the third, the Canes were still rushing the Union defense with gains of 25, 11, and 26 yards, setting up a 1st-and-goal at the six. A first down give to Jackson resulted in a fumble as the senior running back was stripped by John Mancuso just shy of the goal line then recovered by the Panthers inside the one.

"Our defense was on the field way too long," Coach Allison said. "We've got to do a better job of putting our kids in position to make plays."

A penalty on Monticello moved Union out across the 15 but the drive eventually stalled, resulting in the Panthers' only punt of the night. The defense would tighten, bringing up a Canes punt following a three-and-out. Union dodged another bullet when Hemphill muffed the punt but managed to pounce on the loose ball at his own 30.

Completions to Drake and Rich had Union driving, then a late hit on Monticello advanced the ball inside the Canes' 30. Unfortunately, the Panthers were forced to settle for an unsuccessful 48-yard field goal attempt due to a bobble on the hold.

Still clinging to life, Monticello pipped up 24 on first down but the drive sputtered when a 6-yard loss on third down brought up another punting situation from midfield.

At its own 14 with 7:58 remaining, Union County put the game away with a 12-play, 86-yard scoring drive that saw sophomore Jonah Daniel score for the second straight game.

Pierson Allison and Buzzard moved the sticks early in the drive before Daniel provided Buzzard with a breather and picked up 9 on his first carry. A third-and-short pass to McCombs went for 14, followed by a 6-yard completion to Drake on 3rd-and-4.

Union went back to Daniel for three straight carries but the third time was the charm. An 18-yard touchdown run put the finishing touches on the Panthers' first Region 8-AA contest in three years.

"We just slowed the game down and really keyed on the quarterback," Colwell said when asked about defensive adjustments in the second half. "He was moving the ball on us really good so we (made an effort) to stop him."

Monticello added a late touchdown during mop-up duty to trim the Union advantage to 38-22 inside of 2 minutes.

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Meet your 2018-19 Union County High School Homecoming Court



Aladriel Arnold - senior



Brianna Hemphill - senior



Carolyne Stone - senior



Maddie Sutton - senior



Madeline Tanner - senior



Emily DiMartino - junior



Brooke Dockrey - junior



Brittany Pendley - junior



Cydney Rich - junior



Katie Baumeister - sophomore



Braydi Burnett - sophomore



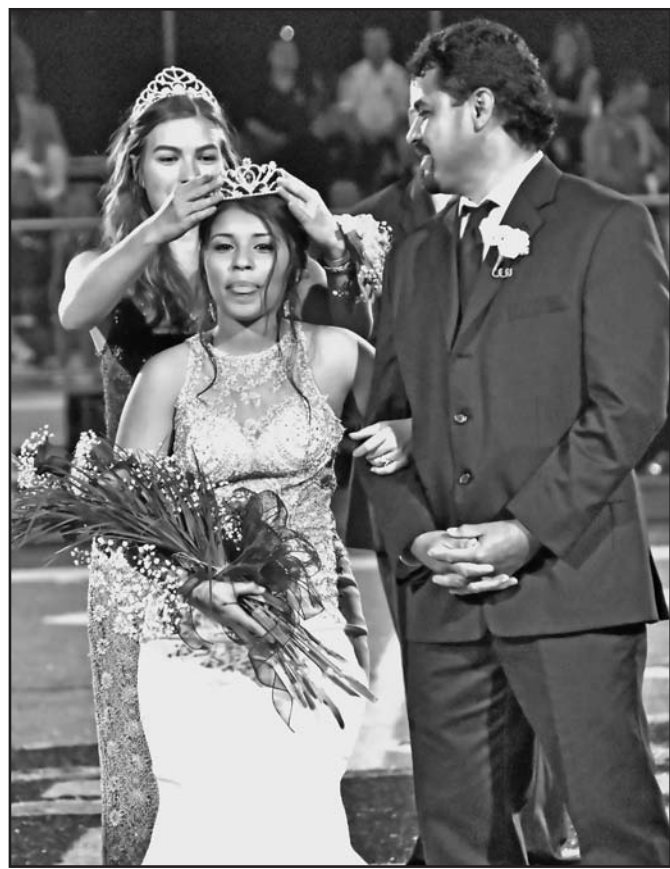
Hannah Todd - sophomore



Allie Brey - freshman



Mia McCombs - freshman



The 2017-18 Union County High School Homecoming Queen Jessica Palomo is crowned by the 2016-17 queen Joanna Irvin. This Friday night, Palomo will pass her crown to one of 14 members of the 2018-19 court. Current and past homecoming photos by Todd Forrest