

Sports

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Football: Peugh, Walker spark first win of 2020

Friday's contest at GWA cancelled over COVID concerns; UCHS expects to add replacement game

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After an Eli Peugh pick-6 set the tone on the first play from scrimmage, junior running back Carson Walker took over from there -- rushing for 158 yards and two touchdowns while adding another score on an 85-yard kickoff return as Union County downed Chestatee 39-19 on Senior Night.

Looking to avoid their first 0-3 start in 25 years, the Panthers overcame three turnovers, eight penalties and a pair of costly special teams miscues to pull away from the Class AAAA War Eagles.

Meanwhile, both Peugh and Walker personally overcame a different brand of adversity, battling back from serious leg injuries to lead the way for Union County.

Peugh experienced the lowest of lows in December when he broke two bones in his lower leg during the basketball season. Nine months later, the junior defensive back scored the first touchdown of his varsity career when he jumped in front of a Chestatee screen pass less than 8 seconds into the contest.

"He had a bad injury during a JV basketball game and he worked very hard to get himself back and we're happy to have him back," Union County head coach Brian Allison said.

Walker, Union County's offensive star in the win over Chestatee, is coming off a severe knee injury that resulted in ACL surgery, forcing him to miss the entire 2019 season. Making his second start on Friday, Walker posted career highs for yards rushing, touchdowns, total carries and longest carry. He also notched his first kick return touchdown and his first rushing score.

"About a year ago, Carson had ACL surgery and he has



Eli Peugh and the Panthers draw first blood with an interception return TD in the game's opening seconds. Photo/Todd Forrest

given us a lift coming in [for the injured Jonah Daniel]," Allison said. "I'm pleased with what he's been able to do because we just moved him from receiver to running back in mid-August, so he hasn't had a lot of work [in the backfield]. He's only going to get better as the season goes on with all the reps in practice and games. He's a rare talent, that's for sure."

Chestatee, playing without star quarterback Christian Charles, refused to go away despite catching two haymakers from the Panthers squarely on the chin at the start of each half.

Trailing 32-13 in the final minute of the third, the War Eagles took advantage of Union's second special teams blunder when a high punt snapped towards the endzone before getting recovered at the 10-yard line. Three plays later, Chestatee found paydirt on third and goal at the 14, trimming the deficit to 12 at 32-19 -- the 2-point conversion was

unsuccessful. Both offenses would trade punts in the fourth quarter before the Panthers put the finishing touches on the win via a 17-yard scoring strike to senior Noah Underwood -- spotting Union County a 39-19 advantage with 3:23 to play.

The score capped a 42-yard scoring drive coming on the heels of a fourth-down Panthers' defensive stop with 4:41 remaining. Following a pair of 5-yard quarterback keepers and a War Eagles' penalty, Helcher found the H-back Underwood in the flat, and the senior made three defenders miss en route to the game-sealing touchdown.

The Union County defense limited Chestatee to just 141 yards of total offense despite forcing only one turnover.

But the Peugh interception proved more than enough.

"It was something we talked about all week if [Chestatee lined up in] trips, so I saw



Running back Carson Walker punches it in for the first of his two rushing scores and one kick return TD. Photo/Todd Forrest

it coming," Peugh said. "I got a good read on the quarterback and it was a great feeling to do that on the first play of the game."

"Coach (Robby) Roxbury made a great defensive call and Eli executed it," Coach Allison said. "[Peugh] saw what [Chestatee] wanted to do and made the right decision and it worked out great for us on the first play of the game. You can't start any better than that."

Peugh's 16-yard interception return awarded the Panthers a 7-0 lead right off the bat. Moments later, Union was on the verge of making it 14-0, but slip-ups on both sides of the ball allowed Chestatee to even the score.

Following the pick-6, the Panthers' defense forced a quick three and out and the offense took over at the War Eagles' 39-yard line. Leaning heavily on Walker, Union needed just seven plays to set up first and goal from the 9-yard line. Things went south from there

with consecutive penalties -- the second negating a 14-yard scoring strike to junior receiver Keyton Chitwood.

With first and goal from the 27, the Panthers put the ball on the turf and Chestatee dodged a bullet, taking over at the 30-yard line. After moving into Union territory, the War Eagles' punt was downed inside the 5-yard line and the Panthers' offense sputtered to a three and out.

Chestatee blocked the ensuing punt and recovered at the 2-yard line. On fourth and goal at the 7-yard line, the War Eagles' roll-out pass was hauled in by a sliding receiver on the far sideline.

Two possessions later, Union County took the lead for good at 14-7 with 10:30 left in the second frame. Starting at the Chestatee 36, a pair of offsides penalties and a 15-yard scamper by Helcher gave the Panthers first and goal from the 3-yard line where Walker scored untouched thanks to a

gaping hole created by the offensive line.

But Walker was just getting started as Union forced a punt and set up shop at its own 25. After tearing off a 26-yarder to begin the drive, Walker closed the possession in style two plays later, turning the corner and making a house call from 40 yards out.

"We cleaned some things up in practice," Walker said, explaining his improvement over the previous week. "We worked on finding holes, hitting holes and which way I would go after I hit the hole. And it really helped me out tonight, all the way around."

But the Panthers would leave the door open for Chestatee, who capitalized on an interception at the Union 24-yard line. On the second play of the series, the War Eagles connected on a 25-yard touchdown pass to pull within one possession at 21-13.

The Panthers added a 27-yard field goal by Mason McCombs in the closing seconds of the half for a 24-13 lead. The 3-points came thanks to a 23-yard third-down completion to senior Kaston Hemphill and a 24-yard screen pass to Walker on fourth down.

Walker had more fireworks in store for the Senior Night crowd as he returned the opening kick of the third quarter up the gut for 86-yards and the score. The Panthers snuck in a 2-point conversion on the stunned War Eagles special teams, opening up a 32-13 advantage.

"I had all of my blockers on my right, so I decided to follow them and next thing I know, I see a big hole open up in front of me and just busted through it," Walker said, describing the electrifying kick return.

Helcher finished 13-of-25 through the air with 158 yards, one score and two picks.

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Softball: Union remains atop Region 8-AA; two wins shy of clinching

Lady Panthers suffer non-region losses to top-ranked Heard County, Class 7A Cherokee

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Sixth-ranked Union County sits at 2-0 in Region 8-AA and 9-3 overall following last week's action that was highlighted by a 13-4 victory at Elbert County on Tuesday, Sept. 15.

Elbert would turnaround and upset Banks County on Thursday, moving the Lady Panthers in position to clinch the regular season region title by week's end with victories at Banks County on Tuesday and at home vs. Elbert County on Thursday.

With Union's trip to Rabun County resulting in a rain-out last Thursday, the Lady Panthers' lone 8-AA action of the week was a six-inning rout in Elberton. Union County scored the first 13 runs before the Lady Devils added four in the sixth. But it wasn't enough to extend the game.

Junior Lexi Sisum picked up where she left off following her game-winner vs. Banks County, going 2-for-4 with 5 RBIs, two runs and her third homer of the year.

Senior Trinity Queen improved to 8-0 in the year, allowing six hits, two walks and two earned runs while striking out



The Lady Panthers celebrate following their come-from-behind victory over defending state champion Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

five. At the dish, she finished 2-for-4 with a double and a pair of ribbies.

Junior Emma Roxbury turned in the second 3-hit game of her career, and the first of 2020, going 3-for-4 with two runs and an RBI.

Union County didn't get the offense rolling until the third when they struck for two runs on a two-run blast by Sisum.

They opened up a 6-0

advantage in the fifth, thanks to some two-out damage by the middle of the order. Singles by Ansley Collins and Hannah Patton put runners on the corners with one down. A sacrifice fly by Sisum scored Collins, and a Roxbury single brought home the courtesy runner Jewell Massey.

Leading 4-0, Queen's double plated Roxbury, and an error off the bat of Aubrie

Banton scored courtesy runner Caroline Karnes for a 6-0 lead.

The flood gates opened in the sixth as Union poured out seven runs to take a 13-0 advantage.

After junior Caley Davis led off with a base hit, Chloe Potts and Patton quickly reached to load the bases for Sisum, who brought in Davis with an RBI single. Five straight singles followed for the Lady Panthers as

Roxbury, Queen, Banton, Jaycee Seabolt and Davis opened up a 12-0 lead.

A one-out hit from Tori Tracy scored Seabolt for a 13-0 score.

Elbert continued to battle in the bottom half of the inning, starting the frame with three singles and a walk. Three more singles followed a Union error before Queen ended the contest with a strikeout.

The Lady Panthers visit Banks County on Tuesday in a rematch from the Sept. 10 extra-inning thriller. On Thursday, Union County welcomes Elbert County. Both games start at 5:30 p.m.

Elbert is fresh off a stunning 12-8 win over Banks County, dropping the Leopards to 1-2 in Region 8-AA. With a pair of wins this week (and assuming last-place Rabun, who is winless in region, doesn't win out), Union County can clinch the No. 1 seed in next month's region tournament.

The Rabun County makeup game is scheduled for Wednesday, Sept. 30, the day after the Wildcats visit Union County.

Over the weekend, Union County traveled to Woodstock to take part in a doubleheader vs. Class AA No. 1 Heard County and host Cherokee -- a Sweet 16 squad from the state's largest classification (7A), currently sporting an 11-6 record.

In the opener, the Lady Panthers fell 6-2 to Heard County before getting blanked 10-0 by Cherokee.

The Union County coaching staff was shorthanded over the weekend and were unable to compile statistics for the two losses. *Elbert game box score on Page 3B*