

Sports

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Football: Shorthanded Panthers survive upset bid at Banks

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Homer - Playing without the services of three suspended offensive starters, the Union County defense turned away Banks County three times in the final 8:51 to hang on to the 14-7 victory.

Celebrating his 18th birthday, senior safety John Mancuso scored both Panther touchdowns as he filled in for a depleted receiving corps that was down three starters for most of the game.

"This is a really special win for me because I just love doing whatever I can to help the team," Mancuso said. "Banks was a very physical team so just being able to match that physicality makes this a huge win."

With No. 8 Union County (7-0, 4-0) limited in its passing game, stopping junior running back Jonah Daniel was a priority for the Leopards' defense. And for the most part, they kept him bottled up, allowing just one carry of 12-plus yards. Daniel kept chipping away, however, and the holes began to open up for 91 rushing yards in the second half.

"Coming out of halftime, (Coach Brian Allison) told me to keep running hard, keep my legs moving and take care of the football," Daniel said. "It was a tough situation tonight with everything that happened, but I knew I would have to pick my teammates up and do whatever I needed to do."

"(Banks was) a physical team and we knew we would have to overcome some adversity if we wanted to go home with a win."

Daniel finished with a game-high 126 yards on 20 carries to give him 996 yards on the season. With four more yards, he will become the first Panthers' running back to reach 1,000 yards in at least 16 years.

It's believed that the late Matthew West was the last Union County running back to go over 1,000 yards in a single season (2003).

"Jonah (Daniel) ran very well and I think he was a major catalyst for our offense being able to move the football," Coach Allison said. "He ran hard for us all night. He got a big cut on his knee, early in the game, but he fought through that for over 120 yards."

"Cayden (Rich) went down at the end of the first quarter and John Mancuso played 125-plus snaps, so overall, I thought it was great team win and I thought all of those



L-R: Senior John Mancuso is off to the races for a 47-yard touchdown reception - the first of two scoring grabs at Banks County. In his first varsity start, sophomore Logan Helcher completed 68% of his passes despite staring down an aggressive Leopards' pass rush all night. Photos/Todd Forrest

guys did a great job of filling in."

Without the services of senior quarterback Pierson Allison, sophomore Logan Helcher made his first varsity start.

And in the early-going, it appeared to be business as usual for the Union County offense.

On the opening drive, Helcher needed just four plays to spot his team a 7-0 advantage, hitting Mancuso on a quick-strike RPO for a 47-yard catch-and-run at the 11:19 mark of the first.

"I thought Logan (Helcher) played great," Coach Allison said. "He did a good job with his RPO reads and I thought his composure was really good for being thrown in there the way he was."

Following a Leopards' punt, the Panthers were on the doorstep once again when a pass attempt slipped out of Helcher's hand and was picked off inside the five and returned out to the 20-yard line.

The defense forced a three-and-out off the turnover and sent the Union offense back on the field. Starting at their own 43, Helcher drove the Panthers back inside the red zone where they faced a 4th-and-6 from the 18. With kicker Mason McCombs unavailable, Union elected to go for it and an incompletion gave the ball back to the Leopards with 18 seconds left in the first quarter.

Both teams swapped punts before Banks took over at its own 43 with 6:37 left in the half. From there, the Leopards would drive 46 yards on seven plays, moving the sticks on a

3rd-and-8, early in the series. With a first down from the Union 13, a mishandled snap put the ball on the deck where it was recovered at the 11-yard line by Aaron Helton and Hunter Young.

Helcher immediately went to work with 3:27 on the clock, connecting on 5-of-6 passes to move the Panthers inside the Banks County 10-yard line.

Faced with 2nd-and-6 from the nine, the Leopards dialed up a blitz that got to Helcher for an 8-yard loss. On third down, Banks came after Helcher again, this time dropping him for a 4-yard loss with time running out in the second quarter.

The final play of the half would fall incomplete as the Panthers took a 7-0 advantage into the locker room.

A Leopard punt to start the third quarter led to an 80-yard scoring drive that opened up a 14-0 Union County advantage.

Starting from the 20, Helcher found Mancuso for eight yards on 3rd-and-4. Following a 12-yard run by Daniel, a screen pass to Sawyer Drake went for 16 yards on 3rd-and-7.

Helcher would keep it himself for 11 then consecutive gives to Daniel picked up six and five yards, respectively.

With a 3rd-and-3 from the three, another RPO led to Helcher's second touchdown pass when Banks County bit hard on the play fake to Daniel, leaving Mancuso alone in the end zone for an easy catch.



Sophomore kicker Dalton Allen connected on both of his point-after attempts while filling in for McCombs.

The Panthers missed an excellent opportunity to put the game away when Sloan Sutton came up with a Leopards' fumble with 2:27 left in the third.

After a run by Daniel moved Union inside the Banks 33, a sack and a penalty derailed the drive, resulting in a punt that was downed at the Leopards' 5-yard line with 57 seconds to play in the third.

Faced with a 4th-and-1 from its own 14, Banks rolled the dice and picked up the first down. After converting a 3rd-and-1, the Leopards caught Union off-guard, connecting on a deep pass down the middle of the field. Two missed tackles later and Banks County was on the board at 14-7 with 8:53 to play.

Banks gambled again, this time recovering an onside kick at midfield. Two plays later their luck would run out when sophomore JJ Little intercepted a third-down pass attempt at the 21-yard line.

"I think our defense has been very good in six of our seven games," Coach Allison said. "If you eliminate the Putnam game, we're only allowing 11 points a game."

"We were able to force a few turnovers vs Elbert but Banks just put two (fumbles) on the ground for us. We've been working on (forcing) turnovers all year long so maybe it's finally starting to pay off for us."

With 7:21 remaining, Union drove out to midfield where they were stuffed on 3rd-and-2 from the 50. Electing to punt back to the Leopards, Helcher booted another excellent kick, this one downed at the 12 with 2:25 to play.

Forced to abandon its bread-and-butter rushing attack for a two-minute offense, Banks County converted on one fourth down before the Panthers forced an incompletion on 4th-and-5 with 1:01 remaining.

With two timeouts remaining, Banks was able to get the ball back at its own 47 with 6 seconds left but a hook-and-lateral pass attempt on first down went through the hands of the receiver.

On the final play of the game, the Leopards' quarterback kept it himself, then tossed a lateral to a teammate before Daniel stopped him in his tracks just shy of the 30.

Helcher finished 17-for-25 with 212 yards, two scores and one pick. He also rushed for 14 yards.

More importantly he gained valuable experience that only comes from getting thrust into the fire.

"The speed of the game at (the varsity) level was the toughest adjustment I had to make," Helcher said after the win. "But the one thing I learned tonight is to keep working and hard work will pay off."

"We knew it was going to be a fight and (Coach Allison) told us to keep working and fighting until the very end and it will finally pay off."

Drake caught nine passes for 91 yards while Mancuso had career highs with six grabs, 81 yards and two scores.

Defensively, Mancuso had 8 solo tackles and two assisted tackles on the heels of a huge performance vs Elbert County, where he recorded 11 solo stops, 10 assists and one tackle for loss.

Up next - Union County will host Oglethorpe County for Homecoming on Friday.

The Patriots enter with a 2-5 overall and 1-3 in region play after falling 28-13 to Monticello a week ago.

Their lone region win was a 27-7 victory at Social Circle. They also suffered two ugly losses: 63-0 to Elbert County and 49-14 to Banks County.

"(Oglethorpe) has a running back, a quarterback and a receiver that are very athletic," Coach Allison said. "The running back gave us fits last year. We had some problems tackling him."

Defensively, they are sound in what they like to do, we just need to execute and take care of the ball."

As for the three suspended players, they are all expected to return for Friday's Homecoming game, but how much playing time they will see has yet to be determined.

Another concern for Coach Allison is the injuries to Rich (hip) and Clayton Lester (shoulder). Neither is serious but could potentially keep them out for a week or two.

Friday's night's homecoming festivities begin at 7 p.m. with kickoff at 7:30 p.m.

Around the Region - Rabun defeated Elbert, 52-14; Putnam beat Social Circle, 49-14 and Monticello knocked off Oglethorpe, 28-13.

This week will feature a pair of potential elimination games in Region 8-AA as Putnam County (2-2) visits Banks County (2-2) where the winner remains alive for the No. 3 seed and the loser could find itself outside the top four.

Elsewhere, Monticello (1-3) looks to stay alive in the playoff race when they host slumping Elbert County (2-2). A loss by the Hurricanes will deal a serious blow to their postseason chances. As for the Blue Devils, they're also looking to position themselves for the No. 3 seed with major hurdles vs Putnam and Banks looming down the stretch.

Finally, Rabun and Union continue on their collision course as the Wildcats host last place Social Circle in what should be another easy victory for the No. 5 team in Class AA.

Softball: Lady Panthers unable to keep pace at Vidalia in Sweet 16

Union primed to take the next step with seven starters returning in 2020

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Vidalia - The Lady Panthers fell one game short of advancing to Columbus for the Class AA Elite 8, falling in three games at No. 7 Vidalia last week.

Union County would bounce back from a 9-1 loss in the opener to take Game Two, 5-4 behind a complete game, four-hitter from senior Megan Bright.

Unfortunately, the rubber match would be all Vidalia as the Lady Indians jumped out to a 4-1 lead after one and never looked back, eventually cruising to a 10-2 victory.

Union would strike first in Game Three with a leadoff homer from senior Mary Wischmeyer, but Vidalia answered with five hits and four runs off junior Trinity Queen in the bottom half of the inning, bringing Bright to the circle.

"I had a really good feeling after (Wischmeyer's) homer but Vidalia is a top-notch program and they didn't flinch," Union coach Stephen Mitchell said. "I went with (Trinity Queen at pitcher) but she just didn't have her A-game so I brought in Megan (Bright). She did a good job but we just made too many mistakes."

Vidalia would take advantage of a one-out error to make it a 5-1 game in the second, then use a leadoff single to push the margin to 6-1 in



Union County's four seniors (L-R): Megan Bright, Mary Wischmeyer, Miranda Lockaby and Krysten Hodges have laid a solid foundation for the future of Union County softball. Photo/Todd Forrest

the third.

Sophomore Lexi Sisum reached on a one-out walk in the sixth and later scored to trim the deficit to 6-2, but the Lady Indians ended the game with four runs in the bottom of the sixth -- bringing the mercy rule into effect at 10-2.

During the Game Two victory, the Lady Panthers trailed 4-3 in the bottom of the fifth when a one-out triple by junior Hannah Patton, a fielder's choice by Lockaby and an RBI single by Queen put Union

County ahead to stay at 5-4.

In the first, Sisum walked and scored for an early 1-0 lead. They would make it 3-0 in the second when Queen reached on an error and sophomores Rebekah Kelley and Caley Davis each singled to load the bases.

A sacrifice fly by Wischmeyer scored Queen and a two-out single by sophomore Emma Roxbury gave the Lady Panthers a 3-0 advantage.

Vidalia stormed back with two in the third and two in the fourth before Union County

regained the lead in the fifth.

Game One was scoreless until the bottom of the third when the Indians exploded for five runs off Queen. They would one in the fourth and three in the sixth to end the game via the mercy rule at 9-1.

The Lady Panthers' lone run came in the sixth when Sisum scored on an inside-the-park home run.

Roxbury singled and stole a base in the first to put runners on second and third

with one out but Union was unable to capitalize.

Lockaby reached on an error but was stranded at second in the second inning. That would be the Lady Panthers' final scoring threat until Sisum's round-tripper.

It's too early to tell but Union County could be the favorites to win Region 8-AA next season with seven starters returning.

One could also say that the Lady Panthers exceeded expectations this year by finish-

ing second in a very difficult region.

"Our expectations are always very high so I don't think we exceeded our own expectations," Coach Mitchell said. "We did some good things against a very difficult schedule. Seven teams we played this year are still playing in Columbus and we're going to continue to schedule that way."

Next year, Union should open as one of the top 10 teams in Class AA and will go from the hunter to the hunted.

With that said, Coach Mitchell still has some big shoes to fill with the few seniors that will be departing.

"I feel like our program has made a lot of progress and we do have a lot of people returning," he said. "We also lose some really valuable people so it will be very interesting."

"One of our goals is to always win the region and I feel like we'll have a good shot at it, honestly. The main thing is, we'll just have to continue working and getting better."

With his second season at UCHS in the books, Coach Mitchell is pleased with the direction of the program, as well as the backing they've received from the community and the school system.

"I'm very appreciative of the community support and the support from our administration, the athletic directors, the parents, players and the coaches," he said. "We've got a good thing going here and I'm extremely excited."