

Sports

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10th ranked Panthers hit the road for first Region victory

Game Six: Union looking for fourth straight winning season, Mancuso nears record

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Social Circle - It wasn't pretty but the Union County Panthers went on the road in Region-play and got the job done.

And that's all that matters.

The Panthers now improve to 5-0 for the second straight year, and prior to the 42-21 win at Social Circle, they broke into the Top 10 of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's high school football poll for the first time in 30 years.

Union also sits one win away from its fourth consecutive winning season - something that hasn't been accomplished by the football program since 1977.

As for senior quarterback Joseph Mancuso, his 331 passing yards on Friday brings his career mark to 6,997 yards through the air.

Why is that significant? That puts the University of Richmond commit within 50 yards of Kolt Owenby's school record of 7,046 career passing yards.

At Social Circle, the Mancuso to Sam Gilbert connection was clicking all night long for Head Coach Brian Allison's offense.

Gilbert hauled in 5 passes with a career-high 225 yards, to go along with a pair of scores. With milestones galore for the Panthers, Gilbert is nearing one himself. No. 82 is 113 yards away from 2,000 receiving yards for his career - something that hasn't been achieved since Blake Gowder rewrote the receiving record books at UCHS from 2006-2009.

For the majority of the game, the Union County coaching staff discovered a soft spot in the Redskins' secondary and attacked with a steady dose of Gilbert deep-post routes, allowing Mancuso and his favorite target to play pitch-and-catch all night.

The first deep post route went for 90 yards when Gilbert beat single coverage over the middle to put Union on top at 7-0 with 7:04 to play in the first quarter.

The Redskins would reach the Panthers' 16-yard line on the ensuing possession thanks in large part to a 36-yard completion on second down.

The drive would stall and on 4th-and-6, they elected to attempt a 33-yard field goal but the kick sailed wide left.

Union would be forced to punt and Social Circle kept their drive alive with a pass interference on the Panthers then a 31-yard gain on a fake punt.

The drive would sputter at the 26-yard line and this time, a 43-yard field goal sailed wide right.

When the Panthers took over, they were on the move, but in the wrong direction. A holding flag and false start put the Panthers in a 2nd-and-25 from the shadow of their own endzone.

That was until Mancuso



Senior captains Joseph Mancuso (9), Sam Gilbert (82), and Chris Drost (54). Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior running back Bo Lynch cuts back inside during a first half carry. He finished with 64 yards rushing. Photo/Todd Forrest



The rainy weather and damp conditions didn't deter the UCHS Cheerleading squad from making the trip. Photo/Todd Forrest

went back to Gilbert over the middle and the senior wide out beat the corner and was able to slip past the safety for a gain of 33.

Unfortunately the Panthers were forced to punt once again and as the second quarter opened, the Redskins were forced to boot it back to the visitors.

On 2nd-and-five, Social Circle sent the house after Mancuso but the senior quarterback threw it up to an open Knox Kiernan, who came out of the backfield and found an opening behind the secondary in the middle of the field (again). A perfectly placed pass allowed Kiernan to catch the ball moving forward and race 57 yards to paydirt, with 10:32 until halftime.

After a Redskins' fake punt was unsuccessful, Union was forced to punt, and following another Social Circle

punt, the Panthers offense set up shop at midfield at the 6:18 mark of the second frame.

A second down pass to sophomore Cole Wright was good for 8 yards. That was followed by gains of 8 and 6 yards on handoffs to Lynch.

A short completion to Kiernan and a pass interference call against the home team gave Union a first down on the 13-yard line. On the very next play, Mancuso used his legs to put 6 more points on the board.

Kiernan's kick made it a 21-0 game with 3:49 left in the half.

However, the Redskins would quickly make it a game once again with an 11-play 67-yard drive. With 1:27 before halftime, Social Circle was back in the running.

From their own 20, Mancuso was sacked for a 10-yard loss on first down



The Panthers take the field on a damp, muggy evening in Social Circle. Union overcame a sluggish start and a few mental mistakes to blow open a 7-0 game after the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior defensive back Eddie Kemp (30) brings the pressure on a third down blitz, chasing the QB down from behind, forcing a Redskins incompletion. Photo/Todd Forrest



Coach Allison fires up his troops during the second half, trying to maintain a solid effort despite holding a significant advantage since the second quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

and from there, Coach Allison seemed content to play it safe and take a two-touchdown lead into halftime and let the offense set the tone when they received the opening kick of the second half.

On second down, Mancuso kept it himself for 4 yards and the Redskins' coaching staff decided to burn a timeout to have some time left on the clock when they got the ball back.

That move would come back to bite the boys in red. On 3rd-and-16, Mancuso tore off a 28-yard gain to move the chains.

On first down, Mancuso and Gilbert hunked up once again on another deep post - beating the same cornerback for the third time and picking

up 53 yards before Gilbert was dragged down at the 7-yard line.

An incompletion and a delay of game pushed Union back to the 12. On second down, Mancuso ran for 2 yards and with 7 seconds left, Coach Allison called a timeout.

Instead of kicking the field goal, he sent the offense back on the field for one more play and the gamble paid off.

On 3rd-and-goal from the 10, Mancuso connected with Wright on a slant and the sophomore receiver had to climb the ladder to haul in the high pass as the buzzer sounded.

Going into the locker rooms, Union was in complete control at 28-7.

At the break, Mancuso had almost 300 passing yards to go with three scoring tosses and one rushing TD.

Meanwhile, Gilbert was responsible for 176 of his quarterback's yardage with one score.

The third quarter opened with three offensive possessions and three punts. After Social Circle fielded the third punt, the offense coughed up the football and senior Tyler McCoy corralled the loose football.

On the second play, Gilbert beat the same corner for the fourth time on a hitch-and-go. After being torched on the post route all night, the DB bit on a stutter-step and the senior WR ratted past the secondary down the sideline for an easy catch-and-score.

The 35-yard scoring strike made it a 35-7 game with 7:36 left in the third.

On the ensuing kickoff, the Redskins would put the ball on the turf once again and the Panthers began their drive on the Social Circle 24-

yard line.

A pair of 10-yard runs by Lynch and Mancuso moved Union inside the 5-yard line until a bad snap derailed the drive.

The Panthers were forced to settle for a 27-yard field goal, and like the Redskins, the kicking game was unkind as the kick went wide right.

The teams exchanged punts and Union reached the Social Circle redzone once again with the help of an unsportsmanlike penalty against the defense.

On the 15-yard line, the Panthers' offense gave up a sack, bringing on another field goal attempt, and this time, a 37-yard kick went left.

On the final play of the third quarter, Union allowed a 63-yard scoring run by the Redskins' QB to make it a 35-14 game.

Although Mancuso answered right back with a quarterback keeper that went for 31 yards and a score - making it 42-14 with 10:03 to play.

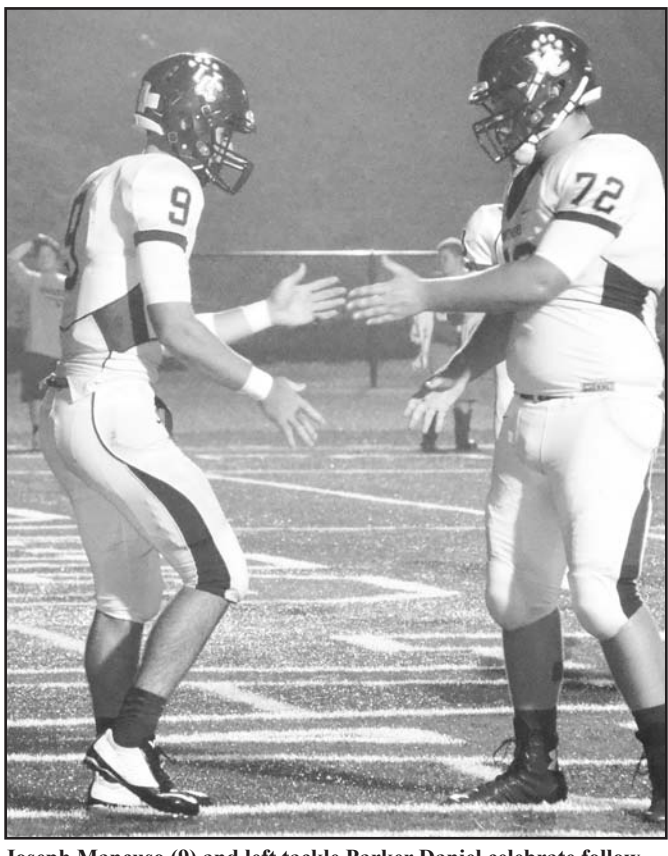
The final score of the game came during mop up duty in the final minutes when Social Circle's varsity put another score on the board against Union's JV to make the score a bit more respectable at 42-21.

This week Union hosts Oglethorpe County, who they blasted 46-0 in Lexington last year. The Panthers currently own a three-game win streak against the 0-5 Patriots who lost 42-20 to Greene County last week.

During the game, the middle school football team and the Union County recreation department youth teams will be honored, as the Panthers look to improve to 6-0 heading into next week's battle with Greene.



Senior flanker Knox Kiernan is forced out-of-bounds. Photo/Todd Forrest



Joseph Mancuso (9) and left tackle Parker Daniel celebrate following the senior QB's first of two rushing scores. Photo/Todd Forrest