

Sports

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Mancuso's 6 TDs lead the way as Union rolls Oglethorpe 46-0

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

Lexington - Union County (6-0, 2-0) is rarely scheduled as a homecoming opponent anymore and obviously Oglethorpe County didn't receive that memo.

But they quickly got the message.

Union Head Coach Brian Allison and the 60 rabid Panthers got off the bus in Lexington and meant business from the get go, scoring four touchdowns right out of the gates on their way to a 46-0 romp.

A long bus ride and a wet field did very little to hinder the Panthers' spread offense. With junior quarterback Joseph Mancuso orchestrating the early onslaught, Union's first four possessions of the game resulted in touchdowns.

The Panthers' signal caller accounted for all four scores with three coming through the air and the fourth on a keeper from inside the 1-yard line.

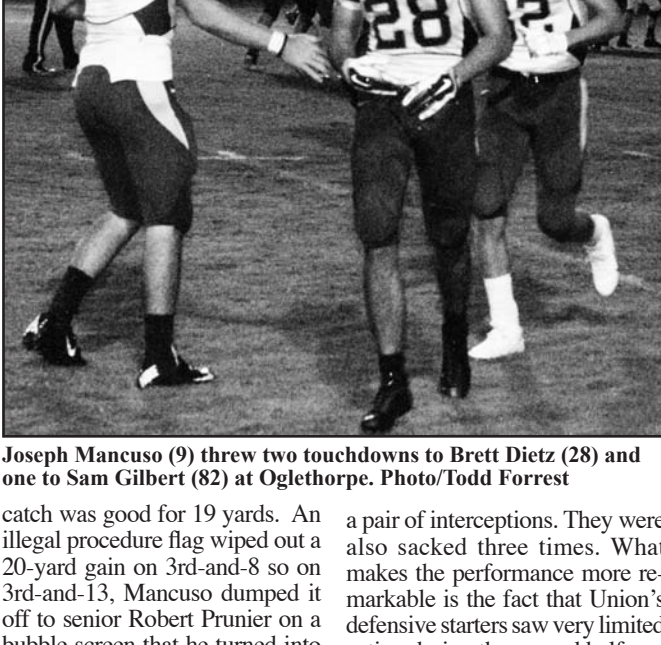
"I wasn't worried about our guys looking ahead to Greene County but we were a little concerned about how wet the field was going to be," Coach Allison said.

For the second time this year and third time in his career Mancuso finished with a 5 touchdown pass outing. In just three quarters of action at Oglethorpe he wound up with 6 touchdowns. Five came through the air during a 16-of-23 passing performance with 370 yards with no interceptions.

Meanwhile Union senior safety Will Stone accounted for both of his team's takeaways, highlighted by his second interception of the night, a 70-yard pick-six early in the third to make it a 34-0 game. In the second quarter, with Oglethorpe threatening at the Union 11-yard line, Stone swiped a third down pass at the goal line and went 35 yards in the other direction, ending Oglethorpe's most promising scoring opportunity of the contest.

Mancuso wrapped up his six-touchdown night with a 15-yard hook up to junior Sam Gilbert and a quick screen pass to Rogers where the senior wide out did all the work, racing 59 yards after the catch for his second score of the game.

Rogers first touchdown grab came on the Panthers' first series of the game after a Gilbert



Joseph Mancuso (9) threw two touchdowns to Brett Dietz (28) and one to Sam Gilbert (82) at Oglethorpe. Photo/Todd Forrest

catch was good for 19 yards. An illegal procedure flag wiped out a 20-yard gain on 3rd-and-8 so on 3rd-and-13, Mancuso dumped it off to senior Robert Prunier on a bubble screen that he turned into 20-yard gain and a first down. Senior Chase Barnett had two carries for 6 yards during the drive that ended with Mancuso scrambling to his right on 2nd-and-6 and finding Rogers, who got open behind the Oglethorpe zone defense for 24 yards and six points.

On the Patriots' first offensive series, an excellent kick return allowed them to set up shop near midfield. On 4th-and-1 inside Union territory, the Panthers defense smacked the Oglethorpe rushing attack right in the mouth and knocked the Patriots backwards, forcing the turnover on downs.

Last year when these same two teams met in Blairsville, Oglethorpe, led by its relentless ground attack, held a 26-18 lead entering the fourth quarter in a game where the Patriots carved up the Purple Swarm defense for 305 rushing yards. However, 6 fumbles eventually opened the door for Union to score 28 unanswered points and avoid the upset.

Fast forward to this year's contest and the Panthers' defense was flat-out punishing. At the end of the day, the Oglethorpe ground game amassed just 66 yards and 2-of-13 on third down. Their fortunes were no better through the air, going 4-of-16 for 60 yards and

a pair of interceptions. They were also sacked three times. What makes the performance more remarkable is the fact that Union's defensive starters saw very limited action during the second half.

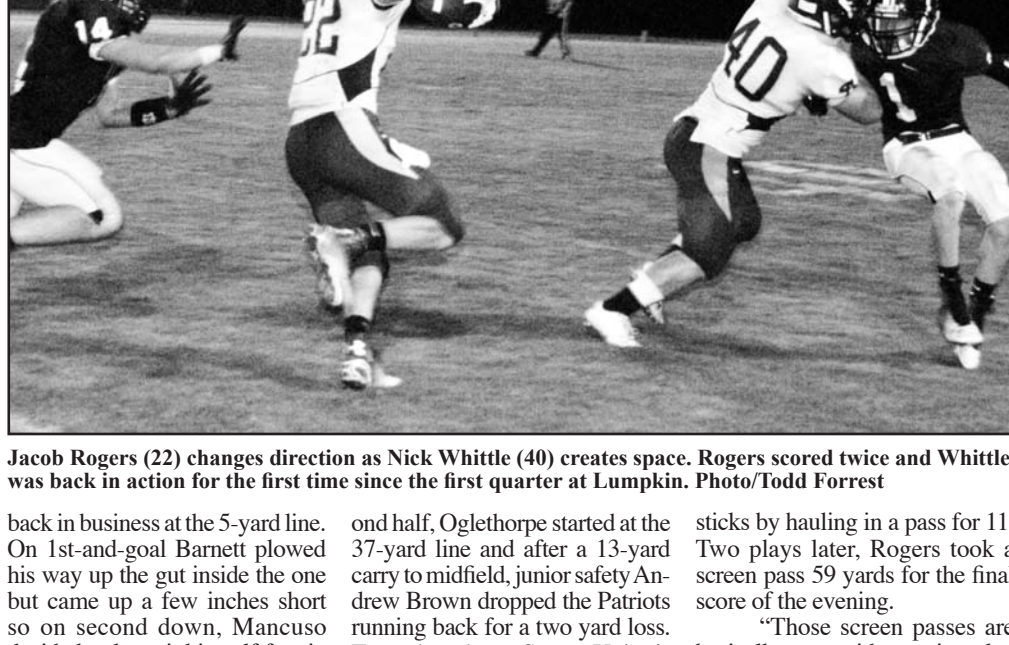
"I think we played pretty good on defense and made a good game plan for them," Coach Allison said. "The thing is, I just think our kids are getting better every week."

After the defense awarded the offense with the ball just shy of midfield, the Panthers needed only three plays to make it 13-0. On first down, Prunier took a short reception and broke free down the near sideline before being pushed out inside the 10-yard line, but not before he gained 46 yards. Two plays later Mancuso found Dietz for an 11-yard scoring strike.

Junior Knox Kiernan, along with the rest of Union's special teams, had a few hiccups and went 4-of-7 on extra point tries.

After the Panthers were whistled for consecutive offsides on the kickoff, sophomore Chris Thompson denied a big gain with a solo tackle in space to bring up third-and-long and eventually a mishandled punt snap gave Union some prime real estate - 31 yards away from pay dirt.

In the early going, the drive didn't appear to promising for the Purple and Gold after a fumbled handoff put Union in a 3rd-and-13. But redemption came in the form of a 29-yard Mancuso-to-Gilbert completion that put the offense



Jacob Rogers (22) changes direction as Nick Whittle (40) creates space. Rogers scored twice and Whittle was back in action for the first time since the first quarter at Lumpkin. Photo/Todd Forrest

back in business at the 5-yard line. On 1st-and-goal Barnett plowed his way up the gut inside the one but came up a few inches short so on second down, Mancuso decided to keep it himself for six points.

Kiernan's extra point made it 20-0.

The Oglethorpe offense continued to spin its wheels and went three-and-out as time expired in the first quarter. As quarter number two opened, Union was on its 36-yard line where its only kink in the armor showed. A pair of false starts made it 1st-and-20, however, on this night vs an outmatched opponent, the penalties allowed the Panthers to pad the stat sheet a little more. Mancuso went to work and hit Prunier for 10 yards. On 2nd-and-10, Mancuso looked downfield and found Dietz who streaked down the home sideline for a 64-yard score. With 10:48 to play before the half, it was all Union County, 27-0.

The remainder of the half went by without any offensive fireworks. Oglethorpe went three-and-out and punted twice, Union fumbled then punted from its own 5-yard line where the Patriots were able to get some pressure on the punter, and the kick was downed at the Union 11-yard line.

With 8:05 left in the second, the Union defense stepped up once more and crushed any momentum the home team had acquired. A 1-yard run up the middle and a bad snap brought up a 3rd-and-goal at the 16 that turned into a Stone interception.

After Union's eighth flag of the half derailed the ensuing drive and the Patriots went three-and-out, the half ended with very little drama. A 27-0 Union lead at half-time left a large segment of the Patriots' fan base feeling a bit unpatriotic, and after the homecoming festivities concluded, many called it a night.

And those who stayed probably wished they hadn't. Instead of shifting into cruise control and nurse a four-touchdown lead for two quarters, the Panthers put their foot back on the accelerator and finished strong.

After deferring to the sec-

ond half, Oglethorpe started at the 37-yard line and after a 13-yard carry to midfield, junior safety Andrew Brown dropped the Patriots running back for a two yard loss.

Two plays later, Stone, Union's other safety jumped a sideline pass and went 70 yards for the Panthers' second defensive touchdown in as many weeks. Once again, the purple swarm refused to bend in short yardage situations. Thompson blew up a 3rd-and-1 to force a punt and Prunier took the fair catch at the Union 30.

From there it took Mancuso four throws to reach the endzone. On first down Rogers was the target for a 36-yard completion. Prunier reeled in a 15-yard reception and senior Clay Wallis, who has battled injury in recent weeks, had a 4-yard grab, and the drive was capped off with a 15-yard touchdown catch by Gilbert.

"We're spreading the ball around pretty well on offense," Coach Allison said. "When you have different receivers getting the ball it makes the defense spread out and cover the entire field."

Despite trailing 40-0, the Patriots continued to battle and drove into Union territory, moving the chains twice, but the drive stalled and two very busy punt teams took the field again.

Taking over from his own 21, the sophomore Bo Lynch took the handoff and barreled ahead for 9-yards but Gilbert moved the

sticks by hauling in a pass for 11. Two plays later, Rogers took a screen pass 59 yards for the final score of the evening.

"Those screen passes are basically an outside running play for us," Coach Allison said. "If teams are going to stack the box those passes will be open and it's almost like running a sweep."

As the fourth quarter opened, the running clock was in play and the Patriots punted for the eighth time and Union took over at the 38 with Prunier at quarterback.

Lynch carried three times for 14, 5, and 4 yards before Prunier punted back to Oglethorpe.

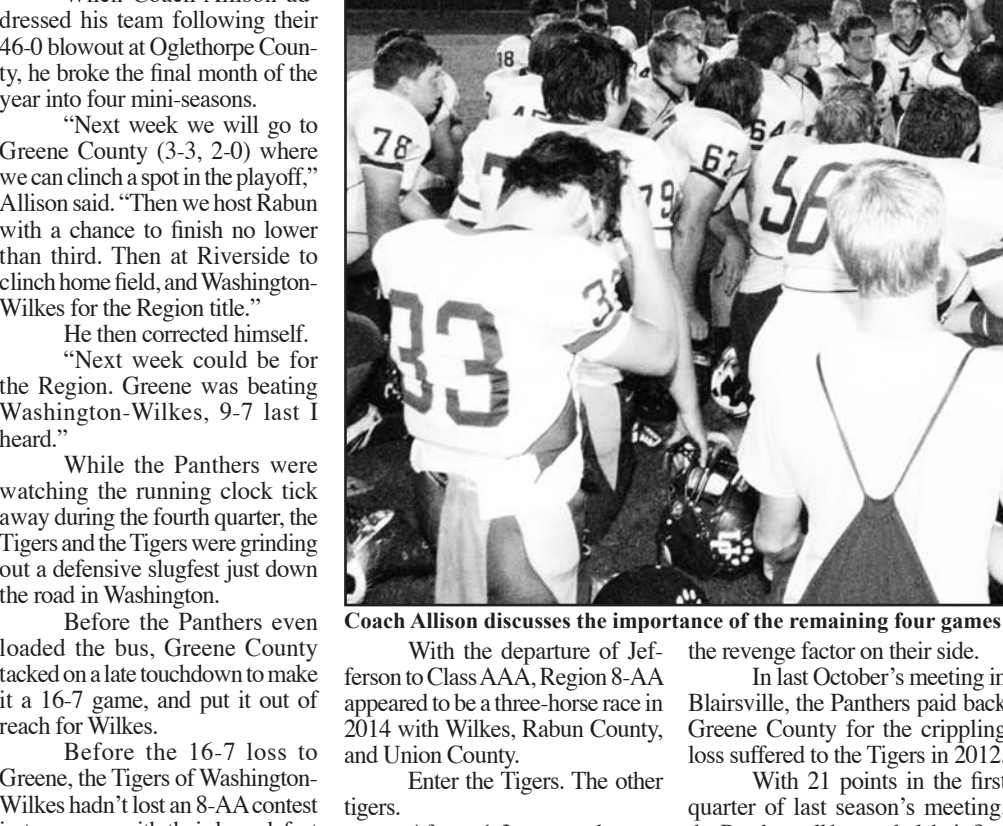
A 31-yard pass completion by the Patriots and a 15-yard personal foul on Union gave the home team a first down at the Panthers 15-yard line. A 5-yard carry and three incompletions gave the ball back to Union and kept the shutout intact.

Union County stats:

PASSING - Mancuso 16-23, 370 yards, 5 TD's, 0 INT's.

RUSHING - Lynch 6 carries, 30 yds, Barnett 3 carries, 10 yds, Kiernan 1 carry, 6 yds, Mancuso 3 carries, 5 yards.

RECEIVING - Rogers 3 catches, 120 yds, 2 TDs, Prunier 4 catches, 93 yards, Dietz 3 catches, 82 yards, 2 TDs, Gilbert 5 catches, 70 yds, 1 TD, Wallis 1 catch, 5 yds.



The Pride of the Mountains Band may have been small in number at Oglethorpe but had plenty of volume as they played the Panthers' fight song after seven Union touchdowns. Photo/Todd Forrest



Coach Setzer (far right) and the Panthers offensive line during a break at Oglethorpe. Photo/Todd Forrest

Coach Allison: our guys will be ready to play at Greene County

Red hot Greene, coming off a win over Washington-Wilkes awaits 6-0 Union in battle for top spot in 8-AA

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

When Coach Allison addressed his team following their 46-0 blowout at Oglethorpe County, he broke the final month of the year into four mini-seasons.

"Next week we will go to Greene County (3-3, 2-0) where we can clinch a spot in the playoff," Allison said. "Then we host Rabun with a chance to finish no lower than third. Then at Riverside to clinch home field, and Washington-Wilkes for the Region title."

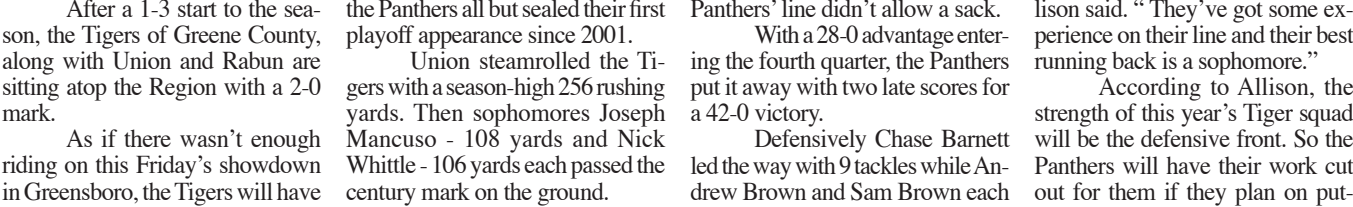
He then corrected himself. "Next week could be for the Region. Greene was beating Washington-Wilkes, 9-7 last I heard."

While the Panthers were watching the running clock tick away during the fourth quarter, the Tigers and the Tigers were grinding out a defensive slugfest just down the road in Washington.

Before the Panthers even loaded the bus, Greene County tackled on a late touchdown to make it a 16-7 game, and put it out of reach for Wilkes.

Before the 16-7 loss to Greene, the Tigers of Washington-Wilkes hadn't lost an 8-AA contest in two years with their lone defeat coming at the hands of the eventual State Champion Jefferson in October 2012.

"They (Greene County) were just a better team that Washington-Wilkes. It's as simple as that," Coach Allison said.



Coach Allison discusses the importance of the remaining four games following the 46-0 whitewashing of Oglethorpe. Photo/Todd Forrest

With the departure of Jefferson to Class AAA, Region 8-AA appeared to be a three-horse race in 2014 with Wilkes, Rabun County, and Union County.

Enter the Tigers. The other tigers.

After a 1-3 start to the season, the Tigers of Greene County, along with Union and Rabun are sitting atop the Region with a 2-0 mark.

As if there wasn't enough riding on this Friday's showdown in Greensboro, the Tigers will have

the revenge factor on their side.

In last October's meeting in Blairsville, the Panthers paid back Greene County for the crippling loss suffered to the Tigers in 2012.

With 21 points in the first quarter of last season's meeting, the Panthers all but sealed their first playoff appearance since 2001.

Union steamrolled the Tigers with a season-high 256 rushing yards. Then sophomores Joseph Mancuso - 108 yards and Nick Whittle - 106 yards each passed the century mark on the ground.

Through the air, Mancuso

was 13-of-24 for 226 yards and 2 touchdowns. Jacob Rogers caught 7 passes for 165 yards and a score and Robert Prunier had 4 grabs for 63 yards and a score. Meanwhile, Mancuso was never touched as the Panthers' line didn't allow a sack.

With a 28-0 advantage entering the fourth quarter, the Panthers put it away with two late scores for a 42-0 victory.

Defensively Chase Barnett led the way with 9 tackles while Andrew Brown and Sam Brown each

picked off a pass. The Tigers rushing game was held to an anemic 26 yards while barely completing 35 percent of its passes (12-of-34).

"This year Greene County's offense will have more speed than any team we'll see this year," Allison said. "They've got some experience on their line and their best running back is a sophomore."

According to Allison, the strength of this year's Tiger squad will be the defensive front. So the Panthers will have their work cut out for them if they plan on put-

ting up another 200-yard rushing performance.

"I'm a little concerned about their defensive line," Coach Allison said. "They have a couple of guys with some size who can move. I think we can take care of them, but we'll have to pay special attention to them. If we have some issues offensively that will be the reason."

Union's embarrassment of Greene County will serve as plenty of motivation for the Tigers on Friday, but don't expect the Panthers to roll over and play dead the same way Greene did 12 months ago.

"Our guys will be fired up and ready to play," Coach Allison said. "I have no doubt that our guys will be pumped up at Greene County. You don't ever have to worry about this team getting fired up. There is too much on the line for them. They will be ready to play."

Union enters the game with the No. 1 scoring offense in all of Class AA at 45 points-per-game. It's scoring defense is fifth in AA and tops in 8-AA, allowing just 11 a game.

Greene County is scoring 22 and allowing 22 a game.

This Friday will mark the third meeting between Union and Greene. In 2012 Greene dominated the second half in a 37-19 victory in Greensboro. Last year, Union won 42-0 on Homecoming.

In their 8-AA action, Rabun (4-2, 2-0) defeated Social Circle (0-5, 0-2) 49-21 and the Wildcats will host Oglethorpe (0-5, 0-2) on Friday. Washington-Wilkes (3-2, 0-1) will host Riverside (1-4, 0-1).