

# Sports

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## Union's defense saves the day during wild shootout with East Hall Panthers and Tigers to reignite rivalry on Friday night in Dawson County

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For 47 minutes and 40 seconds of Friday night's Homecoming clash, both offenses marched up and down the field at will. During the final 20 seconds, the Panthers finally had enough.

The Union County defense was able to make a play when it mattered most and preserve a 51-46 shootout victory over the East Hall Vikings for the Panthers' first win as members of Region 7-AAA.

After torching the home team for 40 points and going 5-for-5 on 2-point conversion attempts in the second half, East Hall appeared poised to add to those totals as they found themselves inside the Union County five-yard line with less than 20 seconds to play in the game.

Facing a 4th-and-2 from the four, Vikings quarterback Austin Parker, who was already responsible for five touchdowns, tossed a quick swing pass to star-receiver Markese Jackson but linebackers RJ Banton and Zach Gilliam were well prepared.

Banton beat his blocker around the edge and forced Jackson wide, unable to cutback due to a trailing Gilliam. Jackson was able to pickup a block on Banton but as he tried to turn the corner, defensive backs Kanon Hemphill and Zach Stone were able to force Jackson out-of-bounds at the 3-yard line – one yard short of a first down.

"Every time they put (Jackson) in the backfield, they've gotten him the ball," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "We talked all week about knowing where (Jackson) is at all times, and luckily, RJ (Banton) was able to get wide, and Zach (Gilliam) had him in (man-to-man) and was chasing him from behind, then Kanon Hemphill ended up knocking him out of bounds."

Offensively, the Panthers rolled for four quarters and the only thing capable of slowing them down were self-inflicted wounds, coming in the form of a dozen penalties and three turnovers.

"The penalties were mostly for holding and some of them were a little picky," Coach Allison said. "As for the turnovers, on the first one, Bo (Lynch) just dropped the ball. The second was a trick play that went wrong and the interception was just a great play by their cornerback. We had gone three games without a turnover so we've done pretty good."

"The penalties: it's your own to explain how one guy won't have hardly any, and the next game, you have 12."

Junior quarterback Cole Wright lit up the Vikings' secondary with a career-high in passing yards with 300 and two scores while rushing for 175 yards and a score.

"I think (Wright) has gotten better every week," Coach Allison said. "He's throwing the football better. He's starting to get the ball out on time. He's reading what the defense is giving him and he's really made a lot of improvements."

Meanwhile, senior running back Bo Lynch posted career-highs with four rushing touchdowns and 35 carries. He would also top the century-mark



Union County Team Captains for the East Hall game (L-R): Dawson Groves, Zach Stone, Nic Rodriguez, and Chris Thompson Photo/Todd Forrest

for the second time in three games with 103 yards and hauled in two passes for 43 yards.

Junior wide out Erik Strayer went over 100 receiving yards for the first time on Friday night when he finished with 8 grabs and 113 yards.

"Not only has (Wright) gotten better, the receivers have gotten better, the offensive line has gotten better, and the running backs have gotten better. Offensively, we've made some strides," Allison continued.

Union County would open the contest with 21-unanswered points and appeared to be headed for another one-sided homecoming victory.

Even after East Hall cut the lead to 21-6 and the Panthers shot themselves in the foot – preventing them from going up 28-6 at the half – Union managed to take a 31-14 lead with less than two minutes remaining in the third quarter.

A 75-yard Vikings touchdown pass and a two-point conversion made it 31-22 until the Panthers appeared to have regained control once more on a Lynch touchdown run to extend their lead to 38-22 with 10:18 left in the game.

On the ensuing East Hall possession, the Panthers were flagged for pass interference, and one play later, surrendered a 64-yard scoring strike. After the 2-point attempt was successful, Union County found themselves in a one-score game at 38-30.

"I believe that overall, (East Hall) is the fastest team we've seen this year," Coach Allison said. "They are faster than GAC, overall. GAC's receivers were really good but these guys, you could see how their speed hurt us."

For the second straight week, the Panthers were caught off guard on the kickoff and the Vikings pounced on a perfectly executed onside kick at the Union 42-yard line. Luckily for the Panthers, a high snap over the head of the quarterback resulted in a 24-yard loss on first down and East Hall was forced to punt and Union took over at the 12 with 8:53 remaining.

On 3rd-and-13, Wright was picked off at the 15-yard line and three plays and a 2-point conversion later, the game was all even at 38-38.



Union County junior receiver Sean Dobbins. Photo/Todd Forrest

A nice return by Lynch on the ensuing kick allowed the Panthers to open their drive just shy of midfield and Wright went back to work, hitting Hemphill on consecutive plays for 19 and 6 yards.

Later, a 13-yard pickup by Lynch moved the chains on 3rd-and-2 before Wright added seven more yards with his legs – moving Union inside the 10-yard line. From there, Lynch did what he does best and found the endzone from seven yards out to put his team back on top at 45-38 with 6:37 showing on the clock.

The lead was short-lived as East Hall responded once again with an 80-yard drive despite allowing a third down sack to Tyler McConnell, resulting in a 4th-and-11 from their own 19. With the game on the line, the Vikings connected on an 18-yard completion to keep the drive alive. A penalty on the Panthers moved the ball to midfield where East Hall picked up 32 on 3rd-and-10. An offside on Union awarded the Vikings another five yards, then a 9-yard completion and 4-yard run made it a 1-point game with 3:26 remaining.

Playing for the win, East Hall elected to go for two once more, and for the fifth time, the conversion was good and the Vikings held their first lead of the game at 46-45.

"We played a good first half (defensively)," Coach Allison said. "In the second half, I'm not sure if we were tired but we missed a bunch of tackles. We've also got to get better at stopping the 2-point conversions. They're just another play from the 3-yard line. Overall, the kids played hard, we just didn't play very well in the second half."

A Zach Stone kick return to the East Hall 37-yard line was aided by a 15-yard penalty against the Vikings. As one of the officials raced down the visitors' sideline on Stone's return, someone stepped off the East Hall sideline and collided with the referee, resulting in a sideline interference penalty and injuring the official.

After a lengthy delay, the referee was able to walk to an ambulance where he was taken to Union General Hospital.

When play resumed, the Panthers were 22-yards away from regaining the lead. From there, Lynch carried three times and Union held a 51-46 advantage with 2:29 to play.

"In hindsight, that penalty actually hurt us," Coach Allison explained. "If not for that penalty, we would have taken some clock off. We scored too quick. They didn't give us any resistance and were trying to run the clock."

The Vikings answered with a nice kickoff return of their own and the offense set-up shop at the 48. Runs of 7, 4, and 6 yards had East Hall on the move into Union territory. A 24-yard completion gave the Vikings a first down at the 12-yard line.

A pair of 2-yard runs brought up a 3rd-and-6 from the eight and a 4-yard gain set up the fourth down play that will be talked about for many years around Blairsville and Rabbitown.

Not only did Stone and Hemphill make the stop that preserved the victory during the final seconds, they played an integral role on the offensive side of the ball and were key contributors in Union County's early 21-0 advantage.

On the Panthers' opening series, Stone took a shovel-pass from Wright and weaved his way through the Vikings defense for 21 yards and a score.

After a 10-yard touch-

down run by Lynch made it 14-0, Wright found a wide-open Hemphill on a corner route in the endzone. The scoring strike covered 20 yards and opened up a 21-0 lead with 10:16 to play before the intermission.

Stone made his presence known on special teams, as well. Following East Hall's first score of the night, Stone came around the edge and got his mitts on the point-after attempt keep the score at 21-6.

With 3:42 to play in the first half, Union wasted an opportunity to potentially put the Vikings away with a momentum-swiping score, but penalties and a fumble almost allowed East Hall to tack on another score before halftime.

Leading by 15 points and starting from the 44, the Panthers kept their foot on the gas and were one yard away from making it a 22-point game.

On first down, Wright tracked Lynch, who was running a wheel-route out of the backfield, for a 21-yard completion down the far sideline. Then a handoff to Lynch went for 6 yards and a Wright keeper was good for 16 yards.

The very next play saw Lynch take it to the house until a holding penalty brought it back. Two plays later, a false start put the Panthers in a 3rd-and-10 but a 9-yard completion to Sean Dobbins and a 2-yard run by Lynch gave the offense 1st-and-goal at the three.

A give to Lynch was stopped inside the 1-yard line – bringing up 2nd-and-goal. Before Union could get off another play, they were flagged for a false start – pushing them back 5 yards.

Wright made them pay with a 6-yard quarterback keeper for the score but that was also penalized.

Despite the miscues, the Panthers remained well within sophomore kicker Brian Smith's field goal range at the 16, if Allison were forced to settle for 3 points. However, on 3rd-and-goal, a safe handoff to the running back turned into trickery when Lynch, the former quarterback attempted to throw a lateral back to Wright, the former wide receiver, and the ball was nearly snatched out of the air by a defender. Nevertheless, the Vikings jumped on the fumble and denied Union a scoring opportunity.

With under 40 seconds left in the half, East Hall completed a pass for 36 yards to move into Union territory but time expired and the Vikings went into the locker rooms with new life breathed into their comeback hopes.

"If we were able to go up 28-6 at halftime, I think that would have made a pretty big difference and might have put them away," Coach Allison said.

Early in the third quarter, Wright was dealing with cramps and was forced from the game on two occasions. The second time came after he tried to hurdle a defender near the goal line and was knocked out-of-bounds inside the two.

A loss on third down brought Smith onto the field for a 24-yard field goal to make it 24-14 with 4:51 left in the third.

Less than 90 seconds later, East Hall turned it over on downs at their own 35 and Wright made them pay with two completions to Hemphill and a 3-yard keeper for the score – giving the Panthers a 31-14 lead with under 14 minutes to play.

**Game notes:** Union's 565 yards of offense is a season-high.

The senior class is one win away from matching the career



Receiver Erik Strayer records a big gain vs East Hall. He finishes with career highs in catches (8) and yards (113). Photo/Todd Forrest



Once again the offensive line kept Wright's jersey clean and opened holes for the running game all game long. Photo/Todd Forrest

win total of last year's senior class who is currently winningest class in program history with 30.

The next win will also give Coach Allison 90 coaching wins at UCHS and 115 overall.

Lynch's four touchdowns on Friday give him 20 rushing scores for his career and 22 overall (2 receiving). He needs 259 rushing yards to reach 2,000 for his career. If he can get 114 total yards (rushing and receiving), he will eclipse 2,000 total yards.

**Stat of the week:** Union County breaks a 72-game losing streak.

Prior to last Friday night's win over East Hall, the Panthers' all-time record was 0-72 in games where they allowed at least 40 points to the opposition. As of now, Union County's all-time record when giving up 40-or-more is 1-72.

The previous high for most points allowed in a win came back in 2001 when the Panthers defeated Lumpkin County 36-35. The game went into overtime tied at 35-35 but neither team was able to score during the extra 12-minute quarter. As a result, the game was decided on total yards in OT (aka "penetration"), which Union County won, so they were awarded one point to break the 35-35 tie.

**Injury report:** senior cornerback Micah Gilbert injured his ankle on Friday and is doubtful for this week's game at Dawson County.

**Looking ahead...** Union County and Dawson County (3-1, 1-0) renew a rivalry that went dormant following the 2011 season. Since then, both teams have become regulars in the State playoffs while featuring a pair of offenses that are as explosive as anyone in Northeast Georgia.

The Tigers are led by junior dual-threat quarterback Coey Watson (14 total touchdowns in four games), who stormed onto the scene last fall when he led Dawson County to the Elite 8 as a sophomore.

Defensively, senior middle linebacker Luke Martin has been hosting a clinic every Friday night. At 6-2, 225 pounds, and the reigning 7-AAA Defensive Player of the Year has been unblockable all season. In four games, he has tallied 81 tackles, 12 tackles-for-loss, and an interception.

However, the Tigers are more than just a two-man show. Senior defensive backs Jeremy Whalen and Colin Glover are also averaging more than 10 tackles per-game.

Senior running backs Payton Myers, Taylor Cronan, and Devan King join Watson in a backfield that averages close to 180 yards-per-game on the ground and 5 yards per-carry.

Senior receivers Austin Young, Kolton Brumbelow, and Nick Murphy each average 15-plus yards per catch.

With 86 players on the roster, Dawson County returns a very experienced, senior-laden squad that reached the third round of State last season. With the exception of Watson, the Tigers' skill position players are chock-full of seniors. Nine of their 11 receivers are 12th graders, along with 8-of-10 running backs.

On the other side of the ball, eight of their top 10 tacklers are seniors and they feature a senior punter and place kicker.

The last two times Union and Dawson met, the combined score was 32-29 in favor of Union. But it's a safe bet that more than 61 points will be scored this Friday night.

Maybe before halftime. Union leads the all-time series 18-11 and have won twice in the last three meetings. Prior to winning in 2009 and 2010, Union lost six straight in the series from 2003-to-2008.

**Team stats:** Union County: 565 yards of total offense. RUSHING: 59 carries, 265 yards. PASSING: 23-of-31, 200 yards.

(No East Hall stats were available at deadline)  
**Individual stats:** (OFFENSE)Wright: 23-for-31, 300 yards, 2 TD, 1 Int, 22 carries, 175 yards, 1 TD. Lynch: 35 carries, 103 yards, 4 TD, 2 receptions, 43 yards. Strayer: 8 receptions, 113 yards.

Hemphill: 5 receptions, 72 yards, 1 TD. Slade Thompson: 3 receptions, 14 yards. Stone: 1 reception, 21 yards. Logan Beyer: 2 receptions, 8 yards. Danton: 1 reception, 22 yards. Dobbins: 1 reception, 7 yards.

(DEFENSE) Cole Dockrey and Chris Thompson: 7 tackles. Banton: 7 tackles, 1 sack. Stone: 6 tackles, Gilliam: 5 tackles, 2 sacks. Winkler and Gilbert: 4 tackles. Dobbins: 3 tackles. McConnell: 3 tackles, 1 sack. Nic Rodriguez: 2 tackles, 1 sack. Matthew Beise and Chandler Day: 2 tackles. Hemphill and Strayer: 1 tackle.

(KICKING): Smith: 1-1 FG, Long 25 yards. 6-for-6 PATs.