

Sports

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Football: Union County defense slams the door at Model

By Todd Forrest
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Rome - Union County answered Model's opening-drive touchdown with three consecutive scores to build a 21-7 advantage before leaning on an opportunistic defense the rest of the way in a 28-14 playoff victory.

Three years removed from their first-ever postseason win, the Panthers recorded the program's first road playoff victory at Model. Last Friday's win sets up a rematch at Region 6-AA champion and second-ranked South Atlanta, who came out on the wrong end of Union County's first playoff victory in 2019.

The Panthers' trip to Model got off to a rocky start, going three-and-out to begin the game, then surrendering a seven-play, 65-yard drive to fall into a quick 7-0 hole.

"We knew [after that drive] we had to start doing our job and taking care of our assignments," senior linebacker Gage Barnes said. "We weren't doing our jobs and once we realized that we knew we would be okay."

On the ensuing Union County drive, the offense converted a pair of third downs and one critical fourth down at midfield en route to an 8-yard scoring strike from Caiden Tanner to Jensen Goble.

Early in the drive, the Panthers were on the verge of a second-straight three-and-out when Connor Schuknecht moved the chains on third-and-2. Four plays later, Schuknecht blasted his way up the middle for two yards on fourth-and-1 at the Union County 46.

A keeper by Tanner went for 14 yards and a screen pass to Goble netted 17 more as the offense started to settle in. A third-and-4 run by Schuknecht picked up seven, then a second-and-goal catch completion to Goble evened the score at 7-7 at the 2:38 mark of the first.

After forcing a Model punt, Union County went on top 14-7 when a second down completion to Zack Taylor gained 63 yards when the junior slipped a tackle at midfield and raced inside the 5-yard line. Tanner capped the drive by calling his own number from the 2-yard line on third-and-goal.

The Blue Devils marched inside the Union County 35 when Barnes dropped into coverage to pick off a pass at the 21-yard line when the Model quarterback



Senior wide receiver Griff Young hauls in a fourth-and-goal jump ball during the third quarter to extend the Union County margin to 28-14. Photo/Todd Forrest

tried forcing his third-and-9 throw into a tight window over the middle.

"I think the defense settled down and started pressuring the quarterback and he wasn't able to get comfortable the entire night," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "I think when [Model] fell behind, they knew they would have to do something besides run the ball, and fortunately for us, they weren't comfortable playing that style of football."

The Panthers quickly turned the Blue Devils' miscue into a 21-7 lead after Tanner hit Taylor for 17 yards on third down, then Braylen Rader slipped unnoticed out of the backfield and ran under a 35-yard touchdown pass with 10:49 before halftime.

Model caught Union County off guard with a fake punt that went for 44 yards. However, the Panthers caught a break on third and goal when a Blue Devils' mistimed toss sweep fell to the turf, allowing Kooper Ashcraft to pounce on the loose football.

With just over a minute left before the break, Model took advantage of its final opportunity of the half, going 67 yards on seven plays to move within seven at 21-14. The scoring drive was aided by a head-scratching 24-yard penalty when the Blue Devils connected on a 10-yard completion near the Union 28 as a flag flew for defensive holding. With the penalty

somehow tacked onto the end of the completion, Model moved inside the 15-yard line, where they scored two plays later via a 9-yard quarterback scramble.

Ashcraft started the third period with an interception on the half's second play from scrimmage, drawing a personal foul penalty on the tackle that awarded possession to Union at the Model 25. But the Panthers went backward and failed to convert a fourth-and-21 from the 36.

After both offenses traded punts, Model took over at its own 44 and advanced inside the Union County 30 when Seth Rutan's third-down sack and fourth-down pass break-up halted the Blue Devils' drive.

Starting at the 37, the Panthers benefited from a pass interference call that wiped away a Model interception. On the next play, Ethan McBride pulled down a leaping grab for a first down at the 18-yard line, where the offense managed just one yard over the next three plays. Looking at fourth and 9 from the 17, senior Griff Young snagged a one-on-one jump ball in the endzone to widen the Panthers' margin to 28-14 with 65 seconds left in the third.

Both teams went scoreless in the fourth quarter, but the final 12 minutes still featured plenty of scoring opportunities. Union County's defense forced a quick three-and-out, but the Blue Devils picked off Tanner



Junior running back Braylen Rader celebrates his 35-yard touchdown catch to give Union County a 21-7 lead during the second quarter at Model. Photo/Todd Forrest

at the Model 15-yard line to keep hope alive.

The Panthers regained possession at the 17 on the heels of another Blue Devils' punt. Union melted some valuable time off the clock with four additional plays after a screen pass to Goble went for 9 yards on third and 4. The second third down try proved unsuccessful and the Panthers punted back to the home team with 3:57 to play.

Model, starting from its own 47, immediately moved inside the red zone with three completions covering 35 yards. The final 18 yards, however, proved a bit more difficult as the Union defense forced four straight incompletions.

Two throws out of the endzone and a costly drop brought up a critical fourth down, where Union brought pressure up the middle that forced an early throw before the receiver could turn around for the ball.

Model's final drive ended with the defense's third interception when Braden Plott came down with a third-and-15 deep ball inside the 5-yard line.

Tanner finished the game 23 of 31 for 255 yards and three touchdowns. He added 38 yards and a score on the ground.

"I thought Caiden Tanner played exceptionally well, he just refused to lose," Perry said. "He threw some beautiful passes and made some great decisions."

Goble was the recipient of 10 of Tanner's completions, end-

ing the night with 67 yards and one touchdown. Rader caught four passes for 44 yards and a score; Young had three grabs for 29 yards and a touchdown.

Taylor had a team-high 82 yards on two receptions, McBride had one catch for 18 and Schuknecht had two grabs for 14 yards. Tyler Grasty added one catch for the Panthers.

The Union running game was limited to only 76 yards, but it was enough on Friday night. Schuknecht picked up 27 yards on 12 carries, while Rader added 11 yards rushing on eight touches.

"That (No. 0 for Model) really showed up in the second half and we had a hard time running the ball," Perry said. "Thankfully our tempo wore them down during the first half and forced them to use guys during the second half that hadn't seen much playing time all year. So they were clearly gassed."

After the game, Barnes reflected on his time as a Panther and discussed the program's turnaround since last year, when Union's 0-4 start marked one of the low points of his career.

"It's such a great feeling to get this win tonight, and it's definitely a better feeling than some of the things we went through last year," he said. "Now we're getting to go back to the second round of the playoffs and that's something that's only been done once before in our history."

Barnes added that he

won't get to cherish the win very long since he'll have to get back to business and begin preparation for South Atlanta.

"We're going to have to start over on Monday," Barnes said, as his voice took a more serious tone. "We'll enjoy this win for a little bit, but then we have to start getting our minds ready for [the next opponent]."

Union County will visit undefeated South Atlanta on Friday night. The two schools have no common opponents, but South Atlanta defeated its Region 6-AA runner-up, No. 10 North Cobb Christian, 30-12. Meanwhile, North Cobb defeated Region 7-AAA's Wesleyan 19-15.

As a member of 7-AAA, Wesleyan knocked off Lumpkin County 28-14, West Hall 45-0 and White County 22-17. However, Wesleyan fell 35-20 at Gilmer, 20-13 at Pickens and 31-24 to Dawson County.

South Atlanta is led by senior running back Keyjuan Brown. The Purdue commit has amassed an other-worldly 2,504 rushing yards and 29 touchdowns in 10 games. Including his three receiving scores, Brown has accounted for 32 of his team's 62 total touchdowns.

Along with Purdue, the three-star recruit has 14 FBS scholarship offers, with Cincinnati, Georgia Tech, Kansas State, NC State, Pitt and Wake Forest among the most notable programs.

As a freshman in 2019, Brown carried the ball 19 times for 69 yards and a touchdown in South Atlanta's first round loss at Union County.

Another Hornet to keep an eye on is LB/SS Taye Seymore - a three-star recruit committed to East Carolina. Ranked by *247Sports* as the nation's 68th best linebacker in the Class of 2023, Seymore chose ECU over Georgia Tech. His other notable offers include Charlotte, Georgia State, Liberty, Middle Tennessee and Toledo.

On special teams, Seymore averages 41.3 yards per kick return.

"This will definitely be the fastest and most athletic team we've seen all year," Perry said. "I think they are better than Fellowship [Christian]."

"I know we beat them in 2019, but this is going to be a much better South Atlanta team," he added.

Kickoff is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Friday at Atlanta's Lakewood Stadium.



Sophomore defensive back Braden Plott secures the game-sealing interception at Model. Photo/Todd Forrest



David Heredia (40) and Cade Dockrey (1) drop the Model quarterback in the backfield. Photo/Todd Forrest

Basketball: Union County notches two scrimmage wins at East Hall

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Rabbittown - Union County picked up a pair of scrimmage victories at East Hall on Tuesday, Nov. 8, in preparation for this Wednesday's tip-off to the 2022-23 campaign.

The Panthers will open the new season by hosting North Hall at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 16. Originally slated for Friday the 18th, Wednesday's matchup has been bumped ahead by two days after the Union County football team earned a berth in the Class AA Sweet 16.

Last week, Union County traveled to East Hall for a pre-season scrimmage and left with a pair of wins, using late-game marksmanship at the free-throw line to pull away during the fourth quarter of both contests.

Union and East Hall combined to shoot 112 free throws over two tightly-called games at Valhalla.

Lady Panthers 65, East Hall 56 - Sophomore Ariel McCarter sank all 11 of her fourth-quarter free throw attempts to put the finishing touches on Union County's 40-23 second-half onslaught.

McCarter scored 14 of her 19 points after the break, and junior Lara Turner scored 11 of her game-high 23 points during the third frame to help Union erase a 27-25 halftime deficit.

In similar fashion to their late-game run, the Lady Panthers raced in front 12-2 to start the contest before the Vikings stormed back via a 13-2 run to close the first. East Hall led by as many as a half-dozen during the second period, holding margins of 22-16 and 24-18. Trailing 24-19 with 43 seconds before halftime, McCarter rattled off six consecutive Union points to knot the contest at 25-25, but East Hall connected in the final seconds for a 27-25 score.

Two baskets by Turner and a McCarter free throw put the Lady Panthers back in front 30-27 less than 75 seconds into the third. The Vikings pushed



Junior Lara Turner pushes the ball up the floor during the first half of Union County's scrimmage victory at East Hall. Photo/Todd Forrest

in front 34-32 with five straight points, but Turner scored two buckets, then sophomore Katelyn Brown added a coast-to-coast layup for a 38-34 Union advantage.

East Hall refused to go away, tying things up at 38-38 until a Hensley Adams put back awarded the Panthers a 40-38 edge after three.

Tied 40-40 at the 6:35 mark, McCarter hit the first four free throws of her perfect quarter, providing Union a 44-40 cushion. Starting center Morgan Warren collected her fifth personal foul and departed with 6:05 remaining, ahead of two Vikings free throws that trimmed their deficit to 44-42.

In the fourth period of a two-point game, freshman Paula

Robertson delivered on consecutive possessions, knocking down a jumper, then putting back an offensive board to supply the Lady Panthers a 48-42 advantage.

McCarter answered an East Hall trey with a traditional 3-point play, followed by four-straight Turner points that extended the Union County lead to 55-47 at the 3-minute mark.

On the heels of another East Hall 3-pointer, McCarter was hacked on a put back, sending her to the line for two more free throws with 2:35 on the clock. McCarter went 2 for 2 at the line 30 seconds later and Turner dropped in a fast-break layup at the 1:35 mark.

Brown split two free throws with 59 seconds left to build a 62-56 advantage, then



Jude Ellis knocks down a jumper at East Hall. The sophomore finished with a game-high 28 points despite battling foul trouble. Photo/Todd Forrest

McCarter sank two at the charity stripe at the 45-second mark. Turner knocked down 1 of 2 to conclude the scoring with 16 seconds remaining.

Brown finished with 7 points, Robertson and Adams had four each, Mady Adams and Kamryn Mull added 3 points apiece. Ivie Chapman scored two. Others seeing action for Union County were senior starter Corinne Hill and sophomore post Aubrie Akins.

Panthers 77, East Hall 62 - Sophomores Jude Ellis and Houston Henry combined for 52 points as Union County battled foul trouble all night against the Vikings.

On a night that saw the return of legendary coach Joe Dix to East Hall, it was the Union

youngsters that stole the show. Ellis scored 15 of his game-high 28 points in the first half before picking up his fourth foul during the third. Ellis joined four Panther starters on the bench with four fouls, putting the game in Henry's hands with Union clinging to a 40-35 lead.

Playing with three fouls against three whistle-happy officials and a Vikings defense prone to drawing charges, Henry proved he was up to the challenge, scoring or assisting on Union's final 10 points of the quarter to build a 50-41 advantage entering the fourth.

Henry would score 17 points over the final 10:32, welcoming back his reinforcements when the remaining four starters returned near the 5-minute

mark. With Union clinging to a 54-52 lead, Henry scored five straight points, followed by a Hayden Hughes trey that capped an 8-0 run to spot the Panthers a 62-52 advantage with 3:02 left. Two free throws apiece by Henry and Maddox Young, along with an Ellis basket, allowed Union to weather one final Vikings' surge and maintain a 68-57 lead with 95 seconds to play.

A transition 3-pointer by freshman Gunner Akins made it a 75-59 game with 43 seconds remaining. Henry finished 9-of-10 at the line during the final frame.

Ellis and senior Eli Underwood led the way early as Union County jumped ahead 12-2. East Hall used a second-quarter put back to climb within a point at 14-13 until the Panthers' 9-2 run opened up some breathing room at 23-15.

Ahead 29-23 at the break, Ellis and Underwood began the third quarter like the first, doing all their team's damage during a 7-0 run that built a 36-23 Union County lead with 6:30 left in the frame. But the score quickly tightened as foul trouble mounted for Union County.

After Young collected his fourth personal just 57 seconds into the half, Underwood drew his fourth foul at the 5:45 mark, followed by the fourth on Hughes and Ellis.

Ellis went to the bench with his team ahead 40-32 as East Hall split two free throws, then put back the miss to slice the deficit to five points with 3:18 left in the quarter.

Van Marevka led the Union supporting cast with 8 points. Underwood finished with seven in limited minutes. Akins and Hughes scored 3 points each; Anderson Cruse and Young added two apiece.

The Union men will be without the services of its football players this week. Among returning varsity players, junior Braylen Rader -- a likely starter -- will be unavailable for Wednesday's North Hall contest.

Swimming: UCMS boys take home third at Tallulah; UCMS, UCHS girls place fifth



UCMS TOP 10 FINISHES

HAWAIIAN LUAU MEET, TALLULAH FALLS, GA

200 Medley Relay-Boys: 2nd

**100 IM-Andrew Nushtayev: 1st
Wyatt Chandler: 4th
Clara Kazmierzak: 3rd**

**50 Freestyle-Ian Lander: 2nd
John Tippens: 6th
Logan Tercero: 8th
Rylie Allison: 9th**

50 Butterfly-Ava Wheeler: 2nd

**100 Freestyle-Andrew Nushtayev: 2nd
Clara Kazmierzak: 1st
Isabel Hoover: 5th
Kimberly Simpson: 6th**

200 Freestyle Relay-Girls: 2nd

**50 Backstroke-Logan Tercero: 5th
John Tippens: 7th
Grayson Shadden: 10th
Rylie Allison: 8th**

**50 Breaststroke-Wyatt Chandler: 5th
Kimberly Simpson: 3rd
Ava Wheeler: 5th**

**OVERALL SCORES-
GIRLS: 5TH
BOYS: 3RD**

UCHS TOP 10 FINISHES

HAWAIIAN LUAU MEET, TALLULAH FALLS, GA

200 Medley Relay-Girls: 7th

100 Freestyle-Reese Jones: 4th

500 Freestyle-Lily Helton: 2nd

200 Freestyle Relay-Girls: 6th

100 Backstroke-Reese Jones: 8th

100 Breaststroke-Lily Helton: 3rd

**OVERALL SCORES-
GIRLS: 5TH**