

Sports

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Panthers set new scoring record in 57-14 romp at Towns

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Hiwassee - Entering the 29th meeting between Union County and Towns County, a gameplan was in place to keep the Panther offense off the field, and when they had the ball, force them into third down and long situations.

The Towns County defense had a plan too.

However, the guys wearing zebra stripes, armed with yellow hankies were slightly more effective than the boys in blue and their first year head coach, Billy Barnhart.

Penalized for close to 150 yards, the Panthers were still able to score at will on the Indians in their home opener at Frank McClue Stadium. The end result was one-sided blowout that saw the Panthers set a new single-game scoring record with 57 points. The previous scoring record of 54 was reached three times, all against Towns County, and took place in 1984, 1985, and most recently, 1988.

Union reached the 50-point mark one other time in 1976 when they defeated Towns 50-0.

The Indians were able to keep things interesting well into the second quarter until the Panthers' offense roared to life with a pair of touchdowns in a span of just over three minutes to take a 29-7 lead at the half.

Leading 14-0 with possession, Union coughed up the football deep in its own territory and the Indians struck with a 4-play, 25-yard scoring drive capped off by a 6-yard carry for the touchdown.

On the ensuing kickoff, the Panthers suffered from another hiccup and put the ball on the ground for Towns to pounce on.

With momentum on its side, the Indians took over on the Union 35 but the Panther defense made a stand and forced an incompleting on 4th and 16 to take over on its 42-yard line with 6:26 left until halftime.

"Even when they made it 14-7, I still thought we had the game in hand because our offense was playing well, we just had to eliminate the turnovers" Union Head Coach Brian Allison said.

Allison wasn't just confident in the passing game, he was confident in a rushing attack that has been suspect in recent years.

Sophomore running back Bo Lynch broke off a pair of



Help is on the way. Junior defensive back Andrew Brown refuses to let Towns County senior Zach Sewell out of his grasp as he awaits for the calvary led by seniors Chase Barnett (44), Luke Chatham (32), and sophomore Chris Thompson (38). Photo/Todd Forrest

runs that totaled 35 yards. Chase Barnett carried for 7 yards and on second down, Joseph Mancuso hit running back Nick Whittle on a quick pass that went for 8 yards - moving the chains. On first-and-goal from the 10, Barnett hauled in an 11 yard pass at the Indians' 4-yard line. Two plays later, Whittle punched it in for a 36-7 lead at the 8:54 mark of the third.

Following a 13-yard gain on first down, the Indians' offense sputtered and on 4th-and-1, the Panthers smothered the Indian ball carrier in the backfield and Union took over at the Towns 22-yard line.

Gilbert reeled in another reception at the 11-yard line and Lynch's scoring run was brought back due to holding. Looking at 1st-and-20 from the 21, Mancuso fired a laser beam to Prunier for the pair's second touchdown connection of the night. Sporting a 43-7 lead just past the midway point of the quarter, Coach Allison closed the book on Mancuso for the evening.

Prunier entered at quarterback for a series and led the offense on a 4-play, 64-yard

Indians into a three-and-out.

Mancuso continued to pick apart an overmatched Towns County secondary, finding Rogers for 11 yards on first down. Lynch carried for 19 yards and junior Sam Gilbert hauled in an 11 yard pass at the Indians' 4-yard line. Two plays later, Whittle punched it in for a 36-7 lead at the 8:54 mark of the third.

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scoring drive.

The drive started on the Union 36 but Rodriguez quickly swung the field position with a 31-yard carry on first down. On the second play of the series, Prunier kept it himself for 12 yards, Rodriguez followed with a 4-yard pickup, and junior Knox Kiernan scored on a 13-yard reception. With 3:10 left in the third, Panther football had broken 50 points for the first time in 26 years and the fifth time in team history.

"We came out and did what we prepared all week to do," Prunier said about his final game against rival Towns County. "We want to run the ball this year and have a more balanced offense. I think that showed tonight."

The Indians mounted a scoring drive in the final seconds of the third to make it a 50-14 game with 37 ticks left in the quarter.

Freshman Cole Wright entered the game for the Panthers and played entire fourth quarter. Fellow freshman Cole Dockery assisted Wright and the duo effectively moved the offense.

With the final seconds

winding down, Wright scored his first high school touchdown with 11 seconds to play.

Despite nearly one-and-a-half football fields worth of penalties, the Panthers were able to do whatever they wanted on the offensive side.

"We played hard but we didn't play smart," Coach Allison said after the game.

The Union offense amassed 481 yards of total offense with 214 coming through the air and an impressive 267 yards on the ground, one of the highest rushing totals since Allison returned in 2008.

"I thought we run blocked as well as we have in seven years," Coach Allison said. "We were able to run the football the way we wanted to run it."

Barnett scored two touchdowns on the ground including Union's opening touchdown of the game that was set up by an excellent kick return from senior Dalton Moose.

Mancuso completed 12-of-20 passes for 201 yards and three scores. His first scoring toss of the contest came with 2:59 to play

in the first quarter when he hit Gilbert on a 12-yard touchdown pass to make it 14-0.

The Panthers turned the ball over three times with two coming in the first half while the game was still up for grabs.

"We've got to be more efficient and can't turn the ball over," Coach Allison said. "The first one was just a misread on a read-option and then we fumbled the ensuing kickoff return. We have to eliminate that and we also had way to many penalties. Some we deserved and some I thought were bogus calls."

The Panthers' defense allowed 179 yards of total offense with 161 yards coming on the ground. The Indians were held to an average of 3.2 yards a carry, but Coach Allison still sees room for improvement with the run defense, especially with a trip to Lumpkin County on deck.

"We're going to work on it but sometimes we were just outflanked," Coach Allison said. "We didn't have the kids in the spots that they needed to be in and Towns County's guys did a good job of seeing that and taking advantage of it. But we've simply got to do a better job of putting our guys into better positions."

As for Lumpkin County, the Indians are welcoming the return back to Class AAA after spending two years in Class AAAA and finishing 2-8 a year ago.

Last week, Lumpkin fell 15-8 to Class AA's Model. The Panthers still lead the all-time series with Lumpkin at 20 wins, 15 losses, and one tie. However, Lumpkin has won the last six meetings to close the gap on Union. The teams last met in 2011 with the Indians taking a 28-13 victory in Dahlonega.

The Panthers' last win over Lumpkin came in 2001 in one of the most dramatic endings in recent history. Union claimed a 36-35 overtime victory in Dahlonega on a 4th-and-36 conversion to win the game via penetration, when the teams were still tied following one 12-minute overtime period.

The game was played under the old overtime rules and since it was a Region 8-AA contest, there could be no tie. The penetration rule was used to break a tie by determining which team gained more yardage during the overtime period.

Kickoff is set for 7:30 p.m. on Friday in Dahlonega.

Coach Stewart reaches 200 wins as Lady Panthers improve to 13-0

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Greensboro - Following a pair of one-sided victories in a doubleheader at Greene County, Union County Head Softball Coach Jessica Stewart recorded her 200th career coaching victory - all at Union County.

Last month Stewart began her ninth season at the helm of the Union County softball program and has steered her Lady Panthers to a 13-0 record to open the 2014 season, marking the longest win streak to begin a season in team history.

Coach Stewart took the Union County gig in July 2006, following an impressive playing career at Northwest Whitfield High School in Dalton and the University of West Georgia in Carrollton. As a member of the West Georgia Wolves softball team she started 190 of 195 games in four years and was voted a Team Captain by her teammates. After graduating with a BS Degree in Physical Education and Health, Coach Stewart came to Blairsville looking for a job and a chance to coach.

"I was right out of college and had never coached before," she said. "I remember sitting in (Principal) Ed Rohrbaugh's office with (Athletic Director) Jim (Hughes) hoping they would give me the opportunity to coach and teach."

When she was handed the reigns of a burgeoning softball program at Union County, one of her first tasks made her feel more like a college coach as she was immediately sent out on the recruiting trail.

"I remember everyone telling me about April Harper and that I needed to get her to play because she hadn't played during her first two years in high school," Coach Stewart said. "I remember visiting with



Coach Stewart (third from right) along with Coach Dyer and Union's senior softball players are making noise after wins over Dawson Co. and Greene Co. moved them to 13-0.

her dad and when we were finally able to get her on board it was huge."

With the addition of Harper to the pitching staff, Stewart immediately had an ace that would help lay the foundation of the program. Coming off consecutive losing seasons, Stewart guided her Lady Panthers to 25 wins and the fast-pitch program's first Elite 8 appearance during her inaugural season as skipper.

"One game I will always remember from that season is when we beat Dawson County 1-0 in extra innings off Lauren Dyer's suicide squeeze," Coach Stewart said.

Dyer is currently in her first year as an assistant coach under Coach Stewart after playing two years at Young Harris College.

In 2007, Coach Stewart proved Union County softball's staying power when the Lady Panthers won 24 games and returned to the State Tournament. Following that 2007 season, Harper graduated and

took every school pitching record with her to Kennesaw State University.

Without an ace to open the 2008 season, Coach Stewart turned to a freshman named Angie Hughes. Both Hughes and the Lady Panthers had plenty of ups and downs during that season as Union won 21 games but were bumped from the postseason without reaching the State Tournament.

That was the last time a Stewart-led squad would miss State.

"Another win that I will never forget is when we beat Greater Atlanta Christian in 2009," Coach Stewart said. "At the time, they were right there with Buford as one of the elite programs in Class AA. We beat them in extra innings of the final game of a best two-out-of-three series. That win sent us to the Elite 8 after a 12-win regular season and we ended up with 19 wins."

In 2010, the Lady Panthers were in a class among

themselves with a 32-4 record, a Region 8-AA title, and a State Runner Up finish to Buford, who won their fourth consecutive Class AA State Championship. Union also won a team record 23 straight games and finished unbeaten in region play.

Union County would repeat as Region Champions in 2011 with a 28-win season. Unfortunately, the Lady Panthers and senior pitcher Angie Hughes were upset in the opening round of the Class AA State Tournament.

Since the departure of Angie Hughes, who took every school pitching record and many Region 8-AA records with her, Coach Stewart's squad has fallen just short of an 8-AA title in 2012 when they were one run shy of a three-peat, and again in 2013 when they placed third in region.

In both instances Union reached State but was unable to get past the first round.

However, things appear

to be turning around in 2014 with loads of talent coming up through the recreation department and Union County Middle School. With a cupboard full of talented youngsters, Stewart is no longer happy with just getting to state.

"The coaches and parents do a great job with the younger girls and they work really hard, all year long," Coach Stewart said. "Our future is bright due to the work ethic and dedication of those girls. The goal going into every season is a State Championship and this year is no different."

Awards and accolades that Stewart has received include: GADC All State Coach, GADC AA Coach of the Year, two Region Coach of the Year Awards, and GACA North Senior All Start Game Coordinator.

Players who have been selected All-State under Stewart are: Hannah Hughes, Angie Hughes, Callie Dyer, Courtney Busbee, Kaitlyn Seabolt, and

April Harper.

Players who have gone on to play at the college level: Jess Seabolt, Dana Seabolt, Lauren Dyer, April Harper, Kaley Sullivan, Tori Dyer, Kaitlyn Seabolt, Kristen Hamby, Callie Dyer, Angie Hughes, Hannah Hughes, Amber Seeba, and Carly Adams.

Entering Wednesday's home contest with Class AAA's East Hall, Coach Stewart's record as a coach is 200 wins and 98 losses.

On Thursday, Union visits Rabun, who just a week ago played Union dead-even for 5 innings before the Lady Panthers got a run in the sixth for a 1-0 win. Over the weekend, Union faces its fiercest competition of the season at the Veterans Tournament in Oconee County.

Standing in the way of Union is ELCA (No. 2 in A), Oconee County (No. 3 in AAA), Brookwood (No. 4 in AAAAA), and North Oconee.