

Sports

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Defense, special teams spark penalty-plagued Panthers at Andrews

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The Union County Panthers moved to 3-0 with a not-so-pretty 38-6 victory at Andrews, NC.

On consecutive Wildcat possessions during the first quarter, the Panthers turned two Andrews interceptions into touchdowns for a 21-0 advantage.

During the third quarter, senior Josh Daniel, who was on the verge of taking a kick to the house all night, broke off a 64-yard punt return to give Union a 35-6 lead.

Meanwhile, the Panthers offense was spinning its wheels most of the night, thanks in large part to the yellow hankies that seemed to fly every time the offense gained momentum.

"We had three touchdowns called back and we just got out of rhythm, when that happened we couldn't get that rhythm back," Coach Allison said. "Sometimes you don't always play well and sometimes you're off a little bit."

Union County opened with prime field position at the Andrews' 24-yard line thanks to a 66-yard kickoff return by Daniel, and on the first play from scrimmage, Sam Gilbert took a shovel pass from Richmond University commit Joseph Mancuso into the endzone for six points.

The celebration was short-lived as a holding penalty took the points off the board and the Panthers would turn the ball over on downs.

Union's first scoring drive came midway through the first when they took over at the Andrews 35-yard line.

Mancuso went to the air and connected on a pair of passes to senior Knox Kiernan that put the Panthers inside the 10-yard line. Two plays later, Mancuso hit junior Bo Lynch on a swing pass that he cashed in for a 9-yard score.

On the ensuing Andrews possession, junior linebacker Nic Rodriguez jumped the passing route, stepping in front of the receiver and deflecting the pass into the waiting arms of Daniel, who went 23 yards in the other direction for a Union County score.

Leading 14-0, the Panthers defense smelled blood in the water, and junior linebacker Luke Winkler joined the feeding frenzy.

Starting at their own 20-yard line, Andrews picked up a pair of first downs until sophomore defensive lineman RJ Banton got his mitts up and tipped a pass attempt in the direction of Winkler, who stretched out to snag the live ball, then raced 41 yards to pay dirt for Union's second defensive touchdown of the evening.

When the stunned Wildcats got the ball back, trailing 21-0, the Panthers' defense forced the home team into another punt.

With 9:56 until halftime, Union took over and Mancuso and Gilbert hooked up for 7 yards, then the senior QB used his legs for 15 more.

Two plays later the Panthers were victimized by another holding call, bringing back another score.

Facing a 3rd-and-10 from the Andrews 44-yard line, Mancuso fired a quick strike to Kiernan, who found some real estate down the far sideline and used his legs for the touchdown that wasn't meant to be.

This time Union was unsuccessful on a fake punt attempt, when a Mancuso pass fell incomplete.

Fortunately for the Panthers, the defense gave Mancuso and company another shot when Banton recovered a fumble on the second play of the series.

"I think we're improved on the defensive front," Coach Allison said. "Having experience in the secondary helps us out, and right now, our linebackers are probably playing as well as they can play."

On the first play, Mancuso kept it himself and trucked an Andrews defensive back as he turned the corner around the left edge. He would finally be knocked out of bounds at the 1-yard line, but a handoff to Rodriguez on 1st-and-Goal made it a 28-0 game.

Following a Kiernan touchback on the ensuing kick-



The Panther cheerleaders proudly representing UCHS on the road at Andrews, NC. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Andrew Brown and junior Nic Rodriguez combine for the tackle on an Andrews running back. Photo/Todd Forrest



Joseph Mancuso



Junior Dawson Groves is fired up as he and his Panther teammates take the field at Andrews. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Luke Winkler (51) is off to the races for a score following an interception that was set up by sophomore RJ Banton's deflection of a Wildcat pass attempt. Photo/Todd Forrest



Parker Daniel

off, the Wildcats needed just three minutes, six plays, and a late hit penalty on the Panthers to get on the scoreboard.

On the score-after, Daniel, Union's Mr. Do-it-All, came around the right end like he was shot out of a cannon, then laid out to block the extra-point.

With 3:11 left in the half, Andrews decided to kick away from Daniel and into the hands of Zach Stone and the junior safety reeled off a big return by taking the kick out to mid-field.

Mancuso picked the Wildcat defense apart, twice going to his favorite target Gilbert for 8 and 13 yards.

With 18 seconds on the clock, Mancuso was sacked near the Andrews 20-yard line and coughed up the football and the Panthers went into the break with a 28-6 advantage.

"We were penalized eight times in the first half and only had one penalty for the entire game against Lumpkin," Coach Allison pointed out.

The second half opened with each team exchanging punts. After the Panthers were forced to punt to the Wildcats, just inside the 10-minute mark of the third, the defense forced Andrews into another punting situation, and this time, Daniel made them pay. The senior cornerback started left, then found a seam down the middle of the field, made a cut to the right, and with only the punter to beat, Daniel juked him off his feet.

With the only defender between him and the endzone flat on his back with legs in the air at the 15-yard line, Daniel waltzed across the goal line.

With a commanding 35-6 lead, Union's defense was able to overcome a personal foul and an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty to force a turnover-on-downs at their own 18-yard line.

Starting deep in their own territory, Mancuso went to Gilbert three times, then a facemask penalty went their way and the Panthers were on the Wildcats' 22-yard line.

That's where Mancuso hit junior Slade Thompson in the endzone for a 22-yard scoring strike - until another flag took another six points off the



Senior receiver/kicker Knox Kiernan (4) battles for extra yardage during the first half after hauling in a Mancuso pass. Photo/Todd Forrest



Seniors Tyler McCoy and Eddie Kemp (30) bring down an Andrews ball carrier while juniors Chris Thompson and Zach Stone give chase. Photo/Todd Forrest

board and Union settled for a 32-yard field goal from Kiernan with 9:41 to play.

Sophomore Cole Wright entered the game for Mancuso behind center and orchestrated a pair of impressive drives with passes to sophomore Austin Pattee and freshman Kanon Hemphill. Freshman running back Chad Buzzard carried the load on the ground.

His first drive would end with a turnover at the Andrews' 1-yard line and the second drive came to a halt with a 1st-and-Goal at the 4-yard line when the lightning that had been in the distance for the better part of the fourth quarter got a little too close for comfort.

With 3:14 left in the contest, the game was called off with Union taking the 38-6 win.

The Panthers' defense limited the Wildcats to just 181 yards of total offense with 111 coming on the ground.

Meanwhile, Union put up 343 yards of total offense with Mancuso going 15-of-27

for 178 yards. He churned out 100 yards on the ground with 9 carries.

Gilbert caught 8 passes for 110 yards while surpassing 1,500 receiving yards for his career.

With all due respect to the Andrews football program, next week the level of competition takes a tremendous leap when the Panthers take on rival Fannin County in Blue Ridge.

The much improved Rebels, who were one play away from reaching the Class AAA State playoffs last year, return a plethora of talent on both sides of the ball, and with the King of the Mountain Jug (that currently resides in Union County) on the line, Coach Allison knows that this will be his team's toughest test to date.

Despite laying 28 points on Fannin in the first quarter of last year's contest, en route to a 35-8 victory, the Rebels have come a long way since the fourth game of 2014, under a new head coach.

They are led by returning



Senior Josh Daniel eludes a would-be tackler during the opening kickoff that he returned 66 yards to the AHS 24. Photo/Todd Forrest



Bryan English

First Team All Region 7-AAA quarterback Brad Davis, who leads a spread offense with a rock solid offensive line protecting him and plenty of weapons at his disposal, including a couple of All Region wide outs.

"They are huge on the offensive line, their quarterback is much, much, much improved since we faced him last year.

On the other side of the ball, the Rebels return All-Region selections at each level of their 3-4 defense.

"They're the best team that we've faced so far, I don't have any doubt," Coach Allison said. "They're a little different than Lumpkin but they're still going to be the best team we've played."

"They are much more skilled at the linebacker and in the secondary since we played them last year. It'll be a great challenge."

It will also be a challenge for Mancuso, whose first loss as a starter came at Fannin County two years ago when he threw for nearly 400 yards but the defense was unable to get off the field in a 43-35 loss.

Both teams have greatly improved since his sophomore year, and the last thing Mancuso wants is to graduate with a losing record to the Rebels.

"This will be one of the bigger games of the year, and it will take a complete team effort to get the W," said Mancuso.

Fannin County info



Location: Blue Ridge
Nickname: Rebels
Colors: Blue & Grey

Head Coach: Jim Pavao (2nd yr)
Region: 7-AAA
2014 record: 4-6
2015 record: 4-6

Last game: Armuchee
Last Region title: 2007 (8-AAA)
Last State appearance: 2010 (Loss 1st Rd - GAC)

2014 result vs UC: L 35-8
Series record vs UC: 23-24
Last win vs UC: 2013 (43-35)
Players to watch: #5 QB Brad Davis Jr (First Team All Region), #17 WR Cooper Earls Jr (Second Team All Region), OL Tyler Jones Sr (Second Team All Region), #34 RB Tyler Collis Jr, #21 WR Adam Ingram Jr, TE Cody Jacobs So, OL River Dixon Jr, OL Dillon Breedlove Jr, OL Hunter Davis Jr, LB Jerod Petty Sr (First Team All Region), DB Jack Roper Sr (First Team All Region) DB Dylan Frank Sr, DL Daniel Kinser Sr (Second Team All Region), DL Logan Ledford Jr, LB Andrew Pavao Jr, LB Christian Sauls Jr, S Dominik Leben Sr

Key losses: RB Tyler Beaver (1,000 yard rusher, First Team All Region), OL Cody McPeck (First Team All Region), WR Daniel Lange (First Team All Region), WR Hunter O'Neal (Second Team All Region)

Offensive Style: Spread (6 returning starters) 203 Passing YPG, 193 Rushing YPG
Defensive Style: 3-4 (8 returning starters)