

Sports

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Union rallies past Rebels with three TDs in final 8 minutes

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Blue Ridge - With the offense struggling to find a rhythm for three quarters and the defense keeping the Panthers in the game, Union roared back to life with three touchdowns in the final quarter to take a 37-31 victory over Fannin County, keeping the King of the Mountain Jug in Blairsville for another year.

"I don't know what it was (that caused the sudden turnaround in the fourth quarter), but our kids played their hind ends off and they never gave up," Panthers' Head Coach Brian Allison said.

In a series that's been brutal to the visitors, the Purple and Gold found themselves trailing 24-16 after three quarters. A missed, chip shot field goal in the first quarter and in the second half, a mishandled snap on an extra point handicapped the Panthers, and until the final 7-plus minutes, it appeared that Union would be the victim of being the road team in a border battle that becomes more intense each time these two teams meet.

In a recent interview with AccessWDUN.com (formerly Access North Georgia) Fannin County's second year Head Coach Jim Pavao discussed how much the Union rivalry has grown.

"It probably gets more talk around the school and around town this week than for any of the games during the season," Pavao said. "It means a lot to the folks and the players."

To say the Panthers have had their struggles in Blue Ridge is a bit of an understatement. In the seven meetings at Fannin since 1991, the Rebels have won six times - averaging more than 38 points-per-game in those victories.

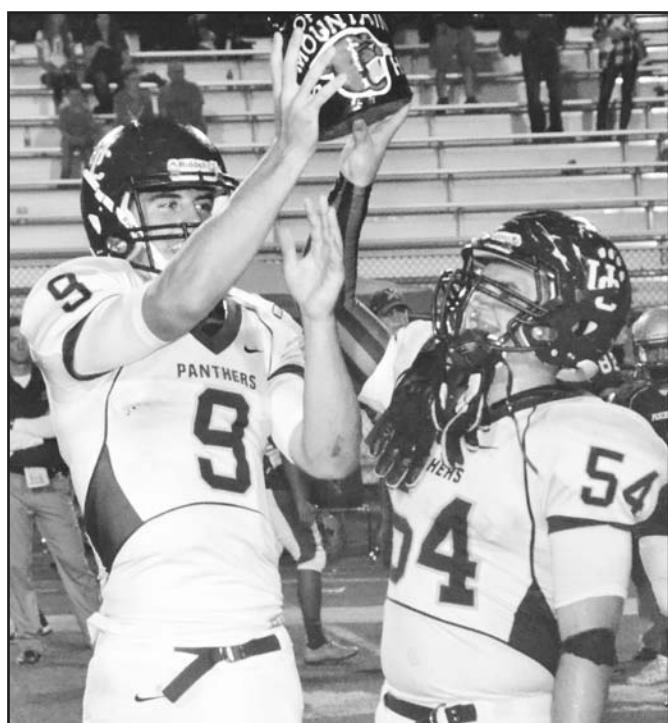
In the Panthers' last trip to Blue Ridge, then-sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso tossed three picks in his first road contest as Union's signal caller - a 43-35 loss that turned out to be the Rebels only victory of the year.

Two years later, with two interceptions and trailing by eight early in the fourth, Mancuso and the Panthers seemed destined to a similar fate.

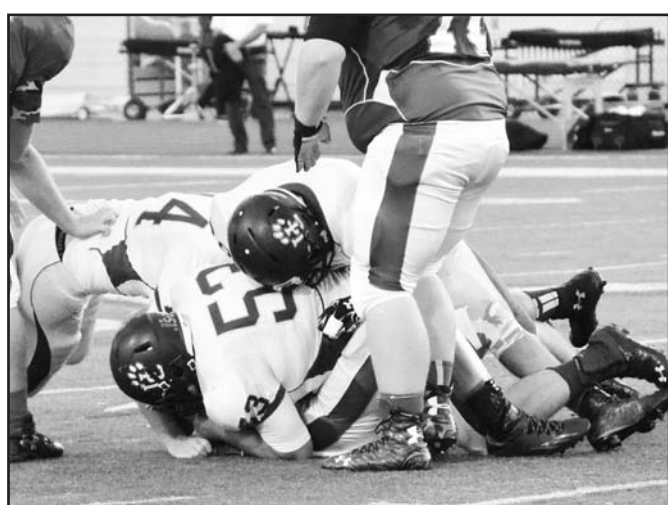
With 7:21 to play, the Panthers orchestrated a 7-play, 73-yard drive in just over two minutes that brought Union within two at 24-22 after the 2-point conversion was unsuccessful.

The defense forced the Rebels into a quick three-and-out aided by a holding call and a second down sack by junior linebacker Nic Rodriguez, and the Panthers got the ball back with great field position.

"We just started tackling, I believe," said Coach Allison when asked what was the difference in the Panthers' D late in the fourth quarter, where they continually made stops and handed the ball back to an of-



Seniors Joseph Mancuso (9) and Chris Drost (54) reclaim the King of the Mountain jug for UCHS. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Matthew Beise (53) drops Fannin QB Brad Davis for a 3-yard loss in the first half with help from an unlikely source.

With Coach Allison pulling out all the stops, Gilbert and Mancuso joined the Panthers' secondary and the QB delivered an interception with 46 ticks on the clock.

On the ensuing play, Mancuso took a quarterback keeper 61 yards to extend the lead to 37-24 with 30 seconds to play.

Despite their extremely vocal home crowd silenced and heading for the exits, the Rebels refused to go away. Needing only three plays and 24 seconds to cover 45 yards and Fannin trimmed the Union lead to 37-31 with 6 seconds remaining.

With their hopes resting on recovering an onside kick and then junior QB Brad Davis channeling his inner-Doug Flutie and winning with a miraculous heave to the endzone, Rodriguez smashed their hail Mary-dreams when he fielded the kick and took a quick knee to preserve the victory.

Following the Lumpkin County game, Coach Allison praised his teams toughness after dominating in the trenches against a squad that was supposed to be the more-physical team.

Friday night, Coach Allison talked about his team's

With the Fannin student section chanting "who's Mancuso?" the Panthers' quarterback fired a deep ball that Gilbert reeled in for a 47 yard gain. But once again, the drive stalled and a 22-yard field goal sailed wide.

Following a pair of Rebel first downs, senior Josh Daniel recovered a fumble and sent the offense back on the field, only 31 yards from payday.

This time the Panthers cashed in when Mancuso hit senior Knox Kiernan out of the backfield for a 8-yard touchdown pass.

The home team would answer with an 11-play, 80-yard scoring drive, capped off by a 3-yard scoring run between the tackles. With 1:41 left in the first, the game was tied at 7-7.

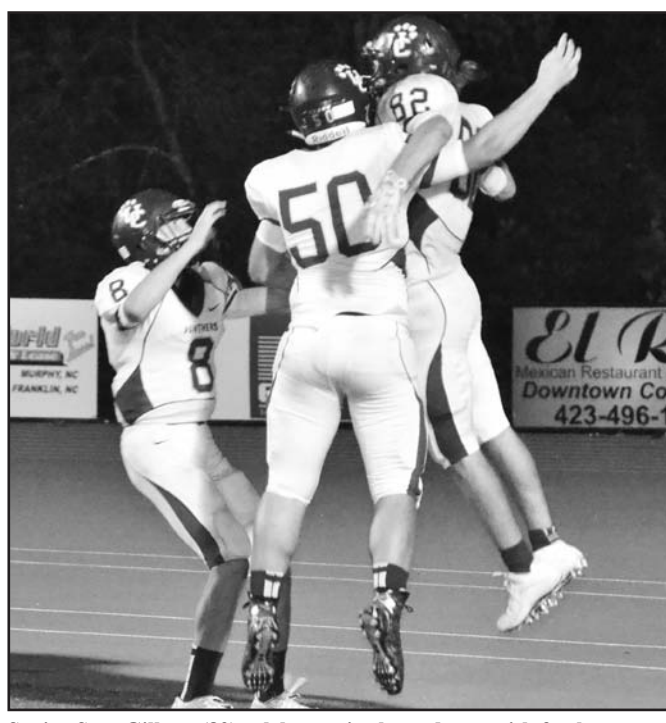
The Panthers were forced to punt on the final play of the quarter and Fannin opened the second frame with the ball at their own 7-yard line.

A pair of long runs moved the Rebels out of the shadow of their own endzone, but they fumbled once more, and it was recovered by junior linebacker Luke Winkler, who would miss the entire second half with a leg injury.

A Mancuso interception didn't hurt due to another defensive stand from the Purple Swarm thanks to juniors Chris Thompson and Chandler Day teaming up for another sack of Davis.

As was the case for most of the quarter, Union punted once again and Fannin coughed up the football again. This time senior Tyler McCoy pounced on the loose ball - giving the Panthers the football on the Fannin 29-yard line with just under 4 minutes left in the half.

Runs of nine and 18 yards by Mancuso had Union on the move, then Lynch picked up eight on a 4th-and-2. Mancuso



Senior Sam Gilbert (82) celebrates in the endzone with freshman Coleson Daniel (50) and sophomore Cole Wright following Gilbert's go-ahead touchdown reception with 1:23 left. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior linebacker Chris Thompson was named the Defensive Player of the Game and senior wide out Josh Daniel was selected as the Offensive Player of the Game at Fannin. Photo/Todd Forrest

ran for 11 more yards before the drive stalled but Kiernan connected on 30-yard field goal to make it a 10-7, defensive struggle at halftime.

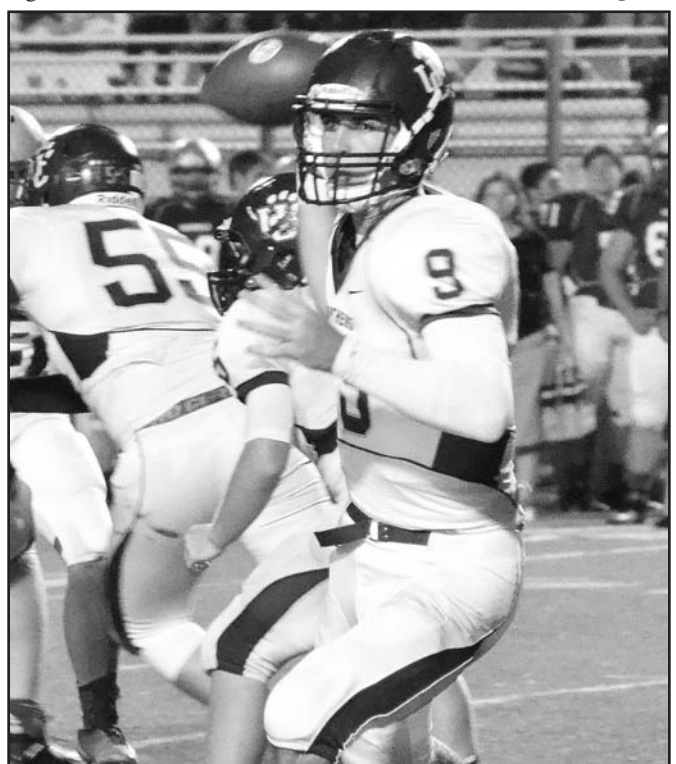
Davis opened the second half with the ball on Union's side of the field, thanks to a kick return to the 45-yard line. From there, the Rebels needed only six plays to take a 14-10 lead and put the Panthers behind in the second half for the first time all season.

Both teams would exchange punts before they each turned it over on downs. Starting from their own 17, Mancuso went to Daniel for 38 yards, then sophomore wide out Cole Wright picked up 20 on another Mancuso completion. He went back to Daniel for 15 more yards and Lynch punched it in the endzone from 6 yards out to make it a 16-14 game in favor of the visitors.

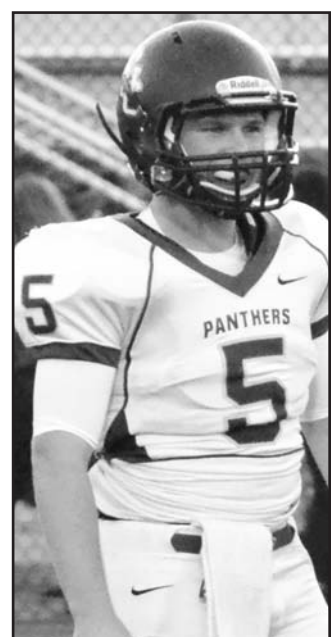
The snap was dropped on the extra point attempt, preventing the Panthers from extending the lead to three points. The special teams snafu came back to bite Union County when Fannin kicked a 25-yard field goal on the first play of the fourth quarter to go back on top at 17-16.

The ensuing drive showed early signs of life with a 5-yard carry by Lynch, and a 10-yard pickup by Mancuso. Unfortunately, a sack dropped the Panthers back 8 yards. Mancuso rushed for five on second down but facing a 3rd-and-13, he threw his second pick of the contest and the Rebels took over at their own 30 with 9:14 remaining.

After stuffing a Fannin run for one yard and blowing up a screen pass for no gain, Davis went to the air where he moved the chains with a pickup of 29. With 1st-and-Goal at the one, the Rebels easily found the endzone and stretched their lead to a touchdown and 2-point



QB Joseph Mancuso fakes the read option keep and fires a screen pass to the boundry. Photo/Todd Forrest



Bo Lynch

poked in the eye and returned to action one play later.

Fannin senior wide out Adam Ingram was Davis' most productive target as the duo connected eight times for 132 yards and a score. Junior Cooper Earls also caught eight balls but they were only good for 60 total yards.

This week Union goes on the road for the third consecutive Friday when they visit Social Circle to face a much-improved Redskins team.

Following a winless 2014 campaign under first year coach Chad Estes, Social Circle came out on top in its first two games of this season. Last week, they fell 40-10 at Putnam County but return home to open region play - looking to make a statement with a win over the Panthers.

"They are greatly improved and a much better team than we've seen from them over the last four years," Coach Allison said. "They are more athletic than any team we've seen this year, their coaches do a good job, so once again, it will be a challenge."

With two sub par offensive performances in the last two games, consistency on offense is one of Allison's keys to victory this Friday night.

"We've got to make sure we get points in the redzone and not turn the ball over," Coach Allison said. On defense, we've got to do a better job of tackling, we've got to be a little bit more physical than what we've been, and it will be a challenge."

In the season opener, the Redskins knocked off Strong Rock Christian (31-23) a Class A school from Locust Grove. In the second week they went to Temple, a Region 5-AA school and held on 29-27 against a team that is currently 2-2. Last week, they struggled in a 40-10 loss at Putnam County, who hails from Region 4-AA. Putnam is currently 2-1 with the lone loss coming to Region 8-AA's Greene County by a score of 38-33.

The injury report for Social Circle game has Banton and Winkler listed as doubtful for the contest and questionable for the Oglethorpe contest a week later. Starting wide receiver, Slade Thompson missed the Fannin contest and is expected to miss the next 3-4 weeks after an emergency appendectomy on Friday.

Social Circle info



Location: Social Circle
Nickname: Redskins
Colors: Red & White
Head Coach: Chad Estes (2nd yr)
Region: 8-AA
2014 record: 0-10
2015 record: 2-1
Last game: L 40-10 Putnam Co
Last Region title: 2005 (8-A)
Last State appearance: 2009 (Loss 1st Rd - Holy Innocents)
2014 result vs UC: L 52-19
Series record vs UC: 2-3
Last win vs UC: 1995 (26-7)
Playoff watch: #11 QB Blake Brock Jr (All Region Honorable Mention), #3 WR/CB Dion Head Jr, #24 RB/CB Under Johnson Soph, #53 DL Rasheed Smith Soph, #5 P James Corasanti Sr (All Region Honorable Mention)
Offensive Style: Spread
Defensive Style: 4-2 / 3-4



Sam Gilbert after hauling in a 47-yard pass from Mancuso in the early going at Fannin. Photo/Todd Forrest

ense that started clicking during crunch time.

Facing a 3rd-and-10, Mancuso hit Sam Gilbert on a jailbreak screen and the senior receiver outran the Rebels for a 43-yard touchdown with 1:23 left. Mancuso and Gilbert hooked up again on the 2-point conversion to give the Panthers a 30-24 lead.

"We were dropping foot-balls and turning the ball over and missing tackles," Coach Allison said. "But we hung in there and fought and we ended up getting on top."

Starting at their own 34, Fannin picked up a first down and was close to midfield but the defense came through again,

toughness, and more importantly, their mental toughness.

"I think we showed (our mental toughness) more than anything else," he said. Size-wise we're not that big but we hung in there and did a nice job."

After taking the opening kick of the game, the Panthers offense showed promise when junior running back Bo Lynch broke free, then snagged his own fumble and picked up 32 yards on 2nd-and-10. The offense would turn it over on downs but the defense, with the help of a sack by sophomore Matthew Beise, forced a Rebel punt that was shanked and Union set up shop at midfield.