

Sports

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Panthers State bound after 12-year absence

Union County demolishes Social Circle 47-6 to cease 12 years of suffering and near misses

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Social Circle - When Union County Head Coach Brian Allison returned home in 2008, his job was to make Panther football relevant again.

Six years and three winning seasons later, they have taken the next step.

In his first stint as Panthers' coach (96-01), he took over a program that had won 15 games over its previous seven seasons. That time, it also took six years to get Union into State. But during the 2001 season the Panthers finished with a 9-2 record, a second place finish in Region 8-AA - Union's first post season berth since 1983 - when Allison was a senior defensive lineman.

Unfortunately, Allison left for Winder-Barrow in 2002 and the Panthers immediately sank back into mediocrity, and shortly thereafter, Union hit rock bottom again.

So last Friday, Social Circle was all that stood between the Panthers and ending a 12-year postseason hiatus. And Union County (6-3, 4-2) was in no mood to toy around with the Redskins, and scored on its first four possessions of the game.

The Panthers opened with 28 points in the game's first 24 minutes en route to a 47-6 rout of Social Circle (0-8, 0-6). With an early 28-point cushion, Coach Allison's squad could sense they were approaching history.

While the Redskins held its Senior Night ceremony, reflecting on memorable moments from their four years of high school, the Panthers weren't listening. In fact, Union and its five seniors were in the locker room, 24 minutes away from making their own memories, and accomplishing something that Panther football hasn't been able to do since 2001.

"I'm no math major, but it's been 12 or 13 years," Coach Allison told his team after the game regarding Union's drought from the postseason.

This week when Jonathan Floyd, Mekiah Martin, T.J. Smith, Chase Stancil, and Luther Jones are filling out the "Most Memorable Moment" segment of their "Senior Night Questionnaire," they won't have to hold the rewind button very long for inspiration. One of the biggest wins in school history will only be a week old.

"I'm so happy for all of these guys," Jones said. "I've never seen a team come together like this. Think about it, we are only graduating five guys, so the future is bright."

But unlike the 2001 Panther team, the 2013 edition didn't have anywhere near the flair for the dramatic. This season saw Union post 40-plus points in each of its four Region wins - winning by an average 30 points per game.

In its two losses, the Panthers were outscored 83-28.

However, Union's last two Region 8-AA wins were runaways, taking both contests by a total of 89-6.

Jones doesn't remember that 2001 season, and doubts that any of his teammates do either.

"I was pretty young and actually don't remember that season and I'm one of the oldest guys on the team, so I don't think anyone remembers," he said.

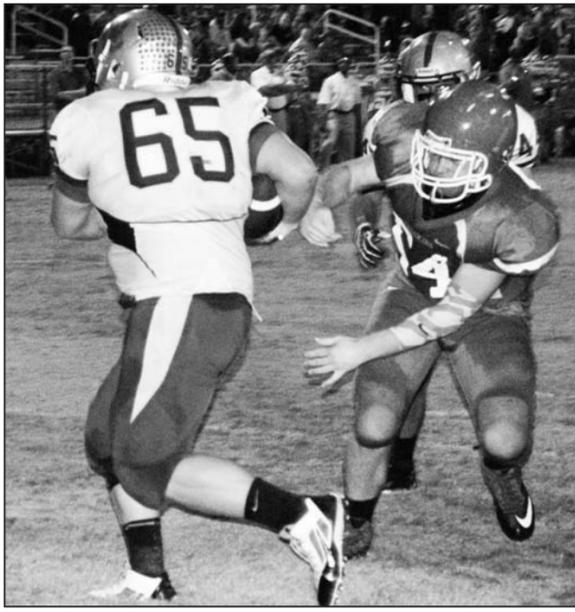
Social Circle was able to sneak a score by the Panther defense with 2:18 to play in the first half, making it a 28-6 game before Union stretched its advantage to 41-6 after three - resulting in a running clock during the fourth quarter.

Panther quarterback Joseph Mancuso had another near-perfect game through the air. The sophomore completed 24-of-32 (75 percent) passes for a career-high 353 yards and 3 touchdowns. He also chipped in two scores on the ground.

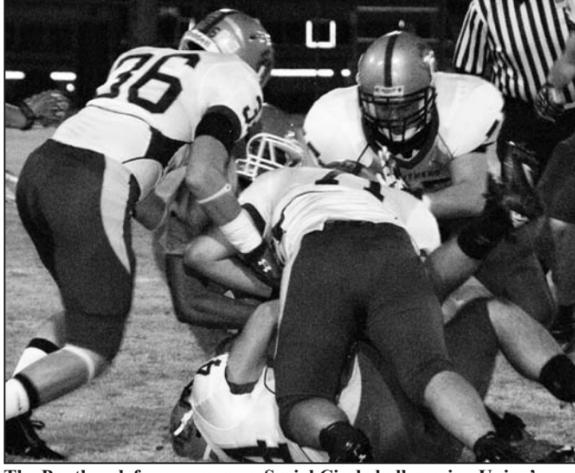
Jacob Rogers caught 9 passes for 75 yards and Sam Gilbert and Clay Wallis put up career-high numbers as well.

Gilbert had 7 grabs - a career high. Meanwhile, Wallis had 3 catches for 85 yards, and a touchdown - all career highs.

The Panthers rushed the ball just 12 times as a team, but one out of every four carries went for a score. The ground game totaled 103 yards with four scores. Yet Coach Allison feels that the running game will improve as his young offense



Senior Luther Jones powers his way into the end zone. The Panther lineman was finally rewarded for his blocking. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Panther defense swarms a Social Circle ball carrier. Union's defense forced two turnovers and five punts. Photo/Todd Forrest

out-of-bounds at the 11. And on the very next play, Mancuso kept it himself and maneuvered his way through the defense for an 11-yard rushing score. Leading 21-0, early in the second quarter, the Redskins were flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct, turning 4th-and-7 into 4th-and-22. Punting from their own endzone, Prunier took the kick and returned the ball to the Social Circle 26-yard line.

A second down screen pass to Whittle went for 24 yards, putting Union on the goal line. That's when Coach Allison, decided to channel his inner Mike Ditka. He put Jones, the Panthers' equivalent of William "The Refrigerator" Perry, in at running back and the 290-pound lineman plowed his way to pay dirt, giving Union a commanding 28-0 advantage with 8:44 to play in the first half.

"We've used Luther all over the place," Coach Allison said. "He's a four-year player who has had to block for Chase (Barnett) and block for Whittle and it was just a chance to do something special for a kid who has done a lot for our program."

"I just appreciate them giving me that opportunity," Jones said regarding his one carry. The Redskins, refusing to be shut out on Senior Night, retaliated with its only scoring drive of the evening.

A third down pass interference gave Social Circle a first down at midfield. Then they converted two fourth downs, including a 13-yard touchdown pass on 4th-and-6. The 2-point attempt was unsuccessful when the Panthers chased the Redskins' ball carrier out-of-bounds at the one yard line. Union would drive inside the Social Circle 35-yard line but eventually turned it over on downs.

With 35 seconds left in the half, the Redskins ran out of time with the ball near midfield. The Panthers took the second half kickoff and were on the move until a fumble gave the ball to Social Circle on their own 35-yard line. The defense forced a punt and Union took over at their 25 with 7:22 left in the third. Eight plays and 105 seconds later, the Panthers were leading 35-6.

The drive opened with a 17-yard pass to Wallis, a 5-yard completion to Rogers, along with a 5-yard and 12-yard hookup to Gilbert. Then Whittle steam rolled a Redskins' defensive back on his way to a 30-yard gain. With a first and goal, Mancuso took another designed run into the endzone from 10 yards out. The point after was blocked, resulting in a 41-6 score.

Union County sophomore safety Andrew Brown picked



Chase Barnett applies the pressure to the Social Circle quarterback, who got rid of the ball just in time. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Union County cheerleaders have traveled many miles in all types of weather to support Panther football. Photo/Todd Forrest

off the Redskins and returned it to midfield, setting up the Panthers' final score of the game.

With junior Ralston Drake in at quarterback and a running clock, the Panthers gave Social Circle a steady dose of Drake and Whittle on the ground.

At the 7:50 mark of the fourth quarter, Drake took a quarterback keeper up the middle for a 4-yard score. This time the extra point sailed wide left, making it a 47-6 game.

After another touchback by Smith, the Redskins took over at their 20 but freshman Zach Stone recovered a fumble to keep Union's 41-point lead safe.

Junior linebacker Chase Barnett led the defense with 15 tackles and Jones had 5 tackles-for-a-loss. Sophomore Billy Elder and junior Tulsa Queen combined for a sack, junior Nic Sparks had 5 tackles, sophomore Tyler McCoy had a tackle-for-a-loss. Juniors Kyle Oliver and Reid Watson recorded a tackle-for-a-loss, as did Floyd. Sophomore Chris Drost added 2 tackles and a quarterback hurry.

The Panthers can still improve their playoff positioning by defeating Jefferson and forcing a three-way tie for second. Since the tiebreaker is based on margin of victory, Rabun holds the edge unless Union can beat Jefferson by 13 points or more.

If Union defeats Jefferson, Rabun would get the No. 2 spot and to Union, the No. 3 seed. A loss to Jefferson locks Union into the fourth spot. Regardless, Union still gets a shot at the defending State Champion a week before the playoffs begin, the perfect measuring stick entering the State Tournament. A luxury that no other team in Class AA gets. But don't expect Union to roll over or try to save anything before State.

"I don't think we're good enough, or at the point yet where we can try to hide anything," Coach Allison said. "We're going to throw everything, including the kitchen sink at Jefferson to try and win that game. They are a big and physical team. They have over 100 players and we're overmatched in a lot of spots, but you never know. I feel pretty good about our chances."

Whatever the result on Friday, it's still a special season for Union and its seniors. Not only are they going to State, they've guaranteed back-to-back winning seasons for the first time since 2000 and 2001.

"We're definitely excited about these next two weeks," Coach Allison said. "We're going to see where we need to be. We're playing the defending State Champion, plus we're going to be facing a quality team in the first round of the playoffs."

And with only five seniors on the roster, it puts Union in position for three straight winning seasons when next year kicks off.

The last time Union won six or more games three years in a row was 1983-85. The



Ralston Drake scores a touchdown. Photo/Todd Forrest



Luke Chatham drags a Redskin to the turf. Photo/Todd Forrest



Clay Wallis after scoring his first touchdown. Photo/Todd Forrest

school record for consecutive winning seasons is four - from 1974-77. "This win tonight starts a legacy and we go to the playoffs this year, and we get to the first, maybe second round," Jones explained. "Next year, we get three or four games at State, and then we possibly become a (Georgia) Dome caliber team. You've got to start somewhere."

According to Jones, the future of Union County football doesn't necessarily begin when the State Tournament begins, but instead this Friday night, when the Panthers face the defending State Champions.

"It's Senior Night, and it's going to be a very big game," Jones said. "It's going to be a lot like the Rabun game. It's going to be about pride. We're going to the playoffs period, but we can make it a three-way tie for second. We're going out there to compete and the outcome is what it is. But the bottom line is we go into every game with intentions of winning. It doesn't matter if its Washington-Wilkes or Social Circle, we're going out there to win the game."

Kickoff for the Jefferson game is Friday at 7:30 p.m.

Passing Stats

| # | | CMP | ATT | % | YDS | YDS/ATT | LNG | TD | FUM | INT |
|---|-----------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 9 | Mancuso, Joseph | 24 | 32 | 75% | 353 | 11 | 44 | 3 | - | - |
| | Total | 24 | 32 | 75% | 353 | 11 | 44 | 3 | - | - |

Rushing Stats

| # | | ATT | YDS | AVG | LNG | TD |
|----|-----------------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| 5 | Lynch, Bo | 2 | -7 | -3.5 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 | Mancuso, Joseph | 3 | 26 | 8.7 | 11 | 2 |
| 11 | Drake, Rolston | 2 | 35 | 17.5 | 32 | 1 |
| 40 | Whittle, Nick | 3 | 53 | 17.7 | 30 | 0 |
| 43 | Prunier, Robert | 1 | -5 | -5 | 0 | 0 |
| 65 | Jones, Luther | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | Total | 12 | 103 | 8.6 | 32 | 4 |

Receiving Stats

| # | | REC | YDS | AVG | LNG | TD |
|----|-----------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| 22 | Rogers, Jacob | 9 | 75 | 8.3 | 20 | 0 |
| 40 | Whittle, Nick | 2 | 23 | 11.5 | 23 | 0 |
| 43 | Prunier, Robert | 3 | 74 | 24.7 | 36 | 2 |
| 45 | Wallis, Clay | 3 | 85 | 28.3 | 44 | 1 |
| 82 | Gilbert, Sam | 7 | 95 | 13.6 | 24 | 0 |
| | Total | 24 | 352 | 14.7 | 44 | 3 |