

Sports

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No. 1 Lovett uses 49 point outburst to put away Panthers

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Atlanta - The relaxing banks of the Chattahoochee were anything but and proved unkind to the Panthers, who were making their first State appearance since 2001.

With the river rolling in the background, and a November rain falling on the A-T-L, the Class AA top-ranked Lovett Lions used an explosive offense and an opportunistic defense to put Union County away with 49 straight points to open the game, en route to a 56-21 victory.

Unfortunately, earlier contests with Washington-Wilkes, Rabun, and Jefferson couldn't prepare the Panthers for what they saw on West Paces Ferry last Friday night.

"We were just over-matched," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "I thought we had a good week of practice; they're just a better football team."

With Chase Barnett and his school record 170 tackles changed up and seeing limited action, the Lions connected early and often. The first coming on a 69-yard scoring strike on its first play from scrimmage to take an early lead, just seconds into the game.

With 10:34 remaining in the quarter, Lovett did it again. Their first play covered 64 yards on the ground and just like that it was 14-0.

The Panthers were able to pick up three first downs in the early going but the Lovett quick-strike offense was too much to overcome.

A Robert Prunier punt was downed at the Lion 47-yard line which resulted in a 53-yard touchdown carry. Three plays, three scores, and 186 yards of offense before the Panthers could even blink.

On Union's next series, Joseph Mancuso was picked off and it took the Lovett offense four plays to cover 32 yards and tack another on touchdown.

With 5:36 remaining in the first: Lovett 28 Panthers 0.

Less than three minutes later it was 35-0 and with :55 to play in the first it was 42-0 and the Panthers were stunned.

Minutes into the second quarter, Lovett tacked on another and it was 49-0.

The Panthers went three-and-out but finally caught a break defensively when Lovett mishandled a snap and the Union defense smothered the Lion quarterback, resulting in a punt.

With 5:03 left in the second, the Panthers went on a nine-play, 62-yard scoring drive, to get on the board.

Mancuso carried for 6 yards, and Prunier for five, moving the Panthers to midfield.

Nick Whittle broke off a 30-yard run, giving Union its best scoring opportunity of the game. On 3rd-and-8, Mancuso was sacked for a three-yard loss bringing up 4th-and-11 but the sophomore quarterback hooked up with fel-



Union County football players, coaches, Head Coach Brian Allison, and others with one final postgame prayer of 2013 following the Lovett game. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Robert Prunier reels in Mancuso's pass for Union's final offensive touchdown of the season. Prunier caught two touchdown passes. Photo/Todd Forrest

low sophomore Sam Gilbert for 19 yards, putting the Panthers inside the opponents' 10-yard line for the first time since the Social Circle game. After a loss of two on 1st-and-goal, Lovett was whistled for offsides. On the ensuing play, Mancuso found Prunier wide open in the endzone for a score. T.J. Smith connected on the point after and with a minute to play before half, Union was on the board.

With a running clock in the second half, the Panthers took the kickoff and set up shop at their own 33. Lovett refused to kick it deep to Union's speedsters, Jacob Rogers and Prunier for most of the game and the Panthers settled for pooch kick after pooch kick.

Mancuso went back to work, finding Prunier for 12 yards on 3rd-and-14. The Panthers quarterback then scram-

bled for 11 yards and a first down on 4th-and-2. Following two incompletions, Mancuso took off again on 3rd-and-10, maneuvering his way for 16 yards. A 12-yard completion to Gilbert put Union back inside the Lion 25-yard line. On first down, Mancuso went back to Prunier again and the junior wide out hauled in a 23-yard score, slipping just inside the pylon. Smith's kick made it 49-14 with 5:54 left in the third.

On the ensuing Lion possession, a fumble led to junior Sam Brown's scoop-and-score making it 49-21. The Panther defensive back, scooped up the wet football and broke free, untouched for 80 yards. Knox Kiernan provided the point after, making it a 49-21 game in the final minute of the third.

The Lions added to the score with 2:09 to play, put-

ting an exclamation point on a 56-21 win, while looking to finish with some momentum as they attempt to reach the nearby Georgia Dome in three weeks.

"The Lovett program is what we hope to be," Coach Allison said "Next year we will be one step closer. That's what we're trying to be."

For the Panthers, some will join the basketball team, others will see Coach Michael Smith-Foot and take to the wrestling mat, the five seniors will get their diplomas and enter into adulthood, but most will begin preparing for the 2014 season, which will definitely come with high expectations. Perhaps greater than the buzz that circled Blairsville - circa 2001.

"The last two games were definitely a learning experience," Coach Allison said. "We played the defending State



Sophomore quarterback Joseph Mancuso uses his legs to pick up a first down. He also threw for two scores. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Luther Jones adds fuel to the fire during the Thursday evening bonfire for the Panther football team. Photo/Todd Forrest

Champions (Jefferson) and then Lovett, the No. 1 team in the state, who I feel have a great opportunity to become State Champions. Looking back on the history of Union County football, I don't know if we have ever faced teams as good as those two within our own classification, and in back-to-back weeks."

On the previous Thursday night, the Quarterback Club held a 'Playoff Bonfire.' Union County's cheerleaders, band, coaches, and fans were all in attendance.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris was also there to give some encouraging words and talk about his days as a Panther football player.

"This is the first time that I've been to a bonfire in a long time and this is really exciting," Commissioner Paris said.

"Back when I was a junior we played Lovett too. It's been a long time ago and it



No, it wasn't the 'Hunger Games' but Jessica Herr and the Pride of the Mountains Band were literally catching fire at Lovett. Photo/Todd Forrest

brings back a lot of memories. I'm proud of this team and what they've been able to do. Coach Allison and his assistants have done a remarkable job."

High Hopes: Panther football to take the next step in 2014

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Coach Brian Allison is giving his players the next two weeks off, and after Thanksgiving, they will be back in the weight room preparing for 2014.

With no senior starters on offense and one on defense, Coach Allison is expecting bigger things in 2014. Especially on the defensive side of the ball and the offensive line, where the biggest improvements must be made.

"We have 10 of 11 coming back on defense and they'll have another year in the weight room, a year of experience, and next year we will come out and we'll be better from the beginning," he said.

As far as what the Panthers are capable of, Coach Allison referenced the 42-0 win over Greene County, that all but sealed Union's playoff hopes.

"That win was huge," he said. "I don't think are any doubts or any arguments from anybody about that. It was the best game of the year, offensively, and defensively."

"That game proved that we are able to match up with some of those teams and I just think it was a huge win for our program."

Union County will lose five seniors: Luther Jones, Chase Stan-ocil, Mekiah Martin, Jonathan Floyd, and T.J. Smith. Although, Jones and Stancil were the only four-year players. Martin played for three years but was banged up for most of his high school career. Finally, Smith and Floyd were first year players but made an immediate impact.



Coach Allison and Quarterback Club President Gary Rogers addressed the players and fans at the Thursday bonfire. Photo/Todd Forrest

Floyd became a force on the defensive line and Smith did a remarkable job filling the giant shoes of the departed Eric Hougrand, and connected on 75 percent of his field goals this season.

"T.J. was new and Jonathan was new," Coach Allison said. "We had two that played four years and Mekiah played three years but was hurt and we really missed him at outside linebacker. Losing him hurt us. He brought experience to the linebacker spot and it hurt us more than I thought it would. I was hoping we would get him back before the end but we didn't."

As for the returners, junior Chase Barnett will join the wrestling squad, junior Ralston Drake

and sophomores Andrew Brown and Knox Kiernan will take to the hardwood, sophomore Joseph Mancuso will hit the pool to stay in shape before baseball starts.

"After playing 11 games (12 including the scrimmage) we'll take off this week and the week of Thanksgiving, then we will hit it hard." Coach Allison said.

As Coach Allison reflected on the 2013 season, he spoke of the heartbreaking loss to rival Fannin County in week two but Union turned it around at Andrews, NC and despite a 41-10 loss at Washington-Wilkes, he believes that's where his team began to peak. He also added that this is the first time since 2000-2001 that



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris gives a pep talk at the bonfire and talked about how Union met Lovett four times in eight years during the 1960's and 70's, including one for a Region Championship. He looks forward to Union becoming a staple in the playoffs and to use 2013 as a building block for future success. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panther football has had back-to-back winning seasons. Next year, Union will go for three consecutive winning seasons for the first time since 1983-1985.

"We should of won at Fannin County," he said. "There is no doubt we should have won that ball game. But we learned from it and continued to improve. We started playing well when we decided to start playing well. I thought we played decent at Washington Wilkes. They're a good team, they're still playing in the final 16 and should win this week too. I also think they have a shot at a State title as well."

"Injuries will always play a huge part in your season," he said. "Had we got some people hurt,

our success might not have been as good. But we were fortunate to keep most of our key players healthy. A lot of it just comes down to luck."

As for injuries and a defining moment of the season, the fourth quarter of the Oglethorpe County game showed that the young Panther squad was coming of age.

With sophomore receiver Sam Gilbert and Martin sidelined, Union lost defensive starters Lance Rich and Reid Watson at halftime due to concussions.

Playing shorthanded and trailing late, Union could have folded, but instead the Panthers exploded for 28-straight points, led by Mancuso and junior Jacob Rog-

ers, to put the Patriots away.

With the injury bug still nagging, Union routed Riverside Military and Greene County, clearing the path to the postseason.

With reclassification taking effect after this school year, Allison has no idea what the non-Region schedule will look in 2014 like due to the slight possibility of Fannin County coming back down to AA.

The Georgia High School Association met Monday and the early counts show Jefferson and Fannin both sharing the same enrollment of 862 - meaning as of now, Jefferson appears headed to Class AAA and Fannin is staying put.

Washington-Wilkes could have dropped to Class A but missed the cut by 27 students. What Region they will play in remains to be seen but they will most likely remain in 8-AA.

Union County High School is currently the 11th largest school in Class AA and the largest in 8-AA with 754 students according to the GHSA. The AA/AAA cut off line is 800 students.

Before the results were known, Coach Allison had a pretty good idea of what was coming down the pike for 2014-15.

"I would like to keep Towns on the schedule because of the rivalry but we'll have to see how the reclassification pans out with Fannin. There is a chance that we lose Jefferson and Washington-Wilkes, but I don't think we'll lose both of them."

The regions will be finalized on Tuesday, Dec. 3rd and final appeals will be heard on Jan. 14th