

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Panthers survive the Granite Bowl thanks to bold play call

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

ELBERTON - Late-game, two-point conversions have long been the Achilles heel of Union County Head Football Coach Brian Allison. And despite a heart-breaking history littered with defeats coming by way of allowing and/or failing to convert a 2-point try, Allison didn't flinch when faced with another make-or-break decision at Elbert County on Friday night.

Union County (6-0, 3-0) survived its first visit to the Elbert County Granite Bowl thanks to a go-ahead 2-point conversion run by Sawyer Drake with 1:25 remaining, and moments later, a John Mancuso interception that sealed the 29-28 victory.

"I feel like, we as coaches, were better prepared for this (2-point conversion) than we have been on previous calls in the past," Union County Head Coach Brian Allison said. "We knew that even if we didn't get (the 2-point attempt), we had two timeouts left and could have also tried an onside kick."

Pierson Allison recorded his first 400-yard passing performance with a lot of help from the men tasked with protecting the Union County quarterback and giving him time to throw.

"The offensive line rose to the occasion," Coach Allison said, contributing the offensive success to the big guys in the trenches. "They did a fantastic job against a very athletic defensive front-6."

The pass catching duo of Kanan Hemphill and Drake also played a huge role in Pierson Allison's career-high passing performance, combining for 235 yards on 12 catches. Hemphill led the way with a game-high 122 yards on six grabs while Drake tallied 113 yards on six receptions.

After hauling in two grabs for 42 yards on the final drive, Drake converted the game-winning 2-point attempt off a reverse from Morlock and a crushing block by his quarterback.

Trailing 28-27 and on the heels of back-to-back timeouts, play finally resumed and Brian Allison reached deep into his bag of tricks and pulled out a 'W'.

Pierson Allison took the shotgun snap and handed to Morlock, who came in motion from the right slot receiver position. Drake, who was spread out wide left, came from the opposite direction and took the toss from Morlock at the left hash and raced toward the right-front pylon with two defenders closing in.

As Drake began to turn upfield at the 7-yard line, he had the option to pass if the defenders bit on the run. But Pierson Allison, who was actually the intended receiver on the play, made Drake's decision a simple one when he



Union County Head Coach Brian Allison celebrates with the players following the dramatic 29-28 victory at Elbert County. Photo/Todd Forrest

stepped up and declassified an Elbert defensive back, who took out the other defender in the process, allowing Drake a clear path to the end zone.

"It was an option play where I had the choice to throw but I decided to run it in because Pierson (Allison) gave me one of the best blocks I've seen all season," Drake said after the game.

With an exhausted defense that would be at a clear disadvantage in an overtime session, Coach Allison knew he needed a better shot of converting the 2-point attempt, then sending his defense onto the field to stop a Blue Devil offense needing to drive the length of the field while forced out of its comfort zone.

In the event of overtime, Elbert would continue pounding the Union defense with a relentless rushing attack that had already piled up more than 300 yards on the ground.

"Their running game probably gives them the advantage if we go into overtime," Coach Allison said. "That particular play, the 2-point play, we had been working on all year long. It's something we work on every week."

Trailing with 85 seconds left, however, Coach Allison knew the Blue Devils would have no choice but to air it out with their shaky-at-best vertical passing game. Prior to the final drive, Elbert was only 4-for-8 through the air with one touchdown and one interception with half of its completions coming on short throws and screens. Of those 8 passing attempts, the Blue Devils were 0-for-4 on throws of at least 7-yards downfield. In fact, the only downfield pass that didn't end up on the turf was an Alec Scott interception late in the first half.

Elbert's lone touchdown pass was a 69-yard completion on a 6-yard comeback route to Metrius Fleming that pulled them within a point at 7-6 after the point-after bounced off the left upright. On the touchdown,

Fleming, a track-and-field State Champion, made one defender miss and it was off to the races for the score.

Following a feeling-out process in the first quarter, the Panthers struck first with a 22-yard hookup from Allison to Chayton Schafer on the second play of the second quarter. Later, Kyle Morlock extended Union's lead to 14-6 with a 22-yard touchdown grab with 6:09 left in the half.

That would be the final Panther touchdown until the 11:15 mark of the fourth quarter when a 2-yard Chad Buzzard run evened the score at 21-21, following the Brian Smith point-after.

Both offenses would exchange punts with Pierson Allison pinning the Blue Devils at the 1-yard line with a perfectly-placed 48-yard boot that was downed by Morlock and Schafer.

With 6:54 remaining and 99-yards away from regaining the lead, Elbert County marched the length of the field on just eight plays, highlighted by a 52-yard carry by All-Region 8-AA running back Shun Allen and a Panther offside penalty on 4th-and-3. The Blue Devils would eventually punch it in at the 2:42 mark to take a 28-21 lead.

Allison and the offense had one final drive left in the tank as Union County answered by going 68 yards in 69 seconds to set up the dramatic 2-point conversion to win it.

"We knew we had plenty of time so we just took our time driving down the field," Pierson Allison said. "We work the 2-minute offense (drill) every week so we're confident from practicing it so much."

Early in the final drive, Pierson Allison hit Drake for a 17-yard gain on 3rd-and-4. On the very next play, Drake struck again. This time a deep go-route produced a 35-yard pickup and put the Panthers in business with a 1st-and-goal at the Blue Devil 10-yard.



Coach Allison congratulates junior safety John Mancuso following his game-saving interception at Elbert County. Photo/Todd Forrest

"In the first and second quarter (Elbert's defense) was really getting after us," Coach Allison said. "They were blitzing and we were having a hard time blocking them. But on that final drive, they started dropping everyone into coverage with only three (down linemen) and the linemen weren't even rushing us that hard. I think that had something to do with (the offense driving down the field)."

Facing a 2nd-and-goal, Pierson Allison kept it himself for 9 yards, setting up Buzzard's second scoring run of the night.

Trailing 28-27, Coach Allison was left with the choice of kicking the extra point and potentially forcing overtime, or attempting the 2-point try and go for the win.

With momentum on the side of the Panther offense, Coach Allison kept the kicker on the sidelines and put the game in the hands of his offense.

"That's a play that we've practiced since the season started and we're really confident that we can run it," Pierson Allison said. "We practice that play so much that we all know it up-and-down."

According to Coach Allison, the decision to go for two first crossed his mind on the final drive when Drake beat the cornerback

remaining, they found themselves at the Union 43.

A spike to stop the clock on first down and a second down incompleteness brought up a 3rd-and-10 with 13 seconds left. With no choice but to attack the Panthers downfield, Mancuso and the defense was ready to pounce.

Defensive end William Lueckert immediately flushed the QB out of the pocket where Jackson Colwell was bearing down, ready to deliver the hit. With Colwell in the face of the passer, the off-balance throw was snagged by Mancuso when he jumped in-front of the Elbert receiver for the pick.

"We were in Cover 4 so we had both corners and safeties dropping but when the quarterback started to scramble, I just went with him," Mancuso said. "Me and Chayton (Schafer) had coverage on the receiver so either one of us could have got (the interception) but it just happened to be me."

"Jackson (Colwell) made a play earlier with a pass deflection where (Fleming) was open with a lot of field in front of him if he makes the catch," Mancuso added.

"The thing of it is, defensively, we didn't play as well as we're capable of playing," Coach Allison said. "So after six games, we're still looking to get better and there is still room for improvement."

Game Notes - Drake and Hemphill's 235 combined yards is the most by a WR duo since Drake and Austin Patee combined for 300 yards at North Hall last year.

In just his sixth start, Pierson Allison's 470 total yards of offense are the most since Cole Wright's 536 yards at the previously mentioned 2017 North Hall game.

Lucky Sixes: In 2016, in just his sixth start at QB, Wright posted his first 300-yard passing game. At Elbert, in start No. 6, Pierson Allison recorded his first 400-yard passing performance.

Up next - Union County is off this Friday before hosting Banks County on Oct. 12 in another pivotal Region 8-AA battle.

for a 35-yard reception to set up 1st-and-goal.

"As soon as Sawyer (Drake) caught that deep go-route the thought came to me: 'If we score, we're going for two.'"

With 85 seconds remaining and one timeout, Elbert was forced to abandon the running game and step out of its element. Unable to throw downfield all night, the Panther defense was able to drop into coverage and limit the Blue Devils to screens, dump-offs and check downs to the middle of the field.

As a result, Elbert was forced to burn its timeout early in the drive and with 18 seconds

Scoring Summary

Quarter	Time	Team	Player	Yards	TD	UCLS	ECLS
First Quarter							
Second Quarter							
		TD	Chayton Schafer 22 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick)	7	0		
		TD	69 Yd Pass (Kick No Good)	7	6		
		TD	Kyle Morlock 22 Yd Pass From Pierson Allison (Brian Smith Kick)	14	6		
Third Quarter							
		TD	27 Yd Run (Two-Point Conversion)	14	14		
		TD	9 Yd Run (Kick)	14	21		
Fourth Quarter							
		TD	Chad Buzzard 2 Yd Run (Brian Smith Kick)	21	21		
		TD	12 Yd Run (Kick)	21	28		
		TD	Chad Buzzard 1 Yd Run (Sawyer Drake Run For Two-Point Conversion)	29	28		

Defense

Player	Tk	Asst	Sck	TFL	Stfy
#9 J. Mancuso	6	-	-	-	-
#2 C. Schafer	4	-	-	-	-
#7 A. Scott	3	-	-	-	-
#10 E. Harkins	3	-	-	-	-
#3 K. Hemphill	1	-	-	-	-
Rest of team	-	-	-	-	-

Team Totals: Union Co. / Elbert Co.

Team Totals	Union Co.	Elbert Co.
Total Plays	74	63
Total Yards	503	454
Passing Yards	400	134
Rushing Yards	103	320
First Downs	26	17
Third Down Efficiency	8-14 (57%)	3-13 (23%)
Fourth Down Efficiency	2-3 (67%)	1-2 (50%)
Turnovers	1	1
Fumbles Lost	-	-
Interceptions Thrown	1	1
Penalties	8	5
Yards	47	34

Offense

Player	Comp/Att	Yds	TD	Int	Long	2PT
#17 P. Allison	26/41	400	2	1	40	-
Rushing						
Player	Att	Yds	TD	Long	Fum	2PT
#17 P. Allison	12	70	-	18	-	-
#24 C. Buzzard	13	35	2	12	-	-
#21 S. Drake	-	-	-	-	-	1
Rest of team	2	-2	-	-	-	-
Receiving						
Player	Rec	Yds	TD	Long	Fum	2PT
#4 K. Hemphill	6	122	-	35	-	-
#21 S. Drake	6	113	-	40	-	-
#84 K. Morlock	5	70	1	22	-	-
#2 C. Schafer	4	49	1	22	-	-
#20 C. Rich	5	46	-	14	-	-