

Sports

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Banged-up Union defense slams door on Trojans in the fourth

Dobbins delivers on both ends as Panthers improve playoff hopes with 35-32 win over North Hall

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A shorthanded Panthers defense came up with three critical stops in the game's final eight minutes to hang on 35-32 after watching a 21-10 halftime lead evaporate during the third quarter.

With leading tackler RJ Banton and three-year starter Zach Stone in street clothes on the sidelines, Union County's defense saved its best performance of the year for the North Hall Trojans, according to Head Coach Brian Allison.

"I thought defensively, we played as good as we have in a long time and it came against an offense that we don't see every week," he said. "The Wing-T (offense) is a tough deal to prepare for in three days and I thought our guys just played their hearts out for four quarters."

The Panthers offense also came to play as quarterback Cole Wright was responsible for four touchdowns while going over 200 yards passing and 100 yards rushing for the second time in three games — something only Kolt Owenby and Joseph Mancuso have accomplished in recent history.

The offense was also missing a key contributor with wide receiver Erik Strayer — the team leader in receptions and receiving yards — out with an injury that he suffered in the first quarter at Dawson County.

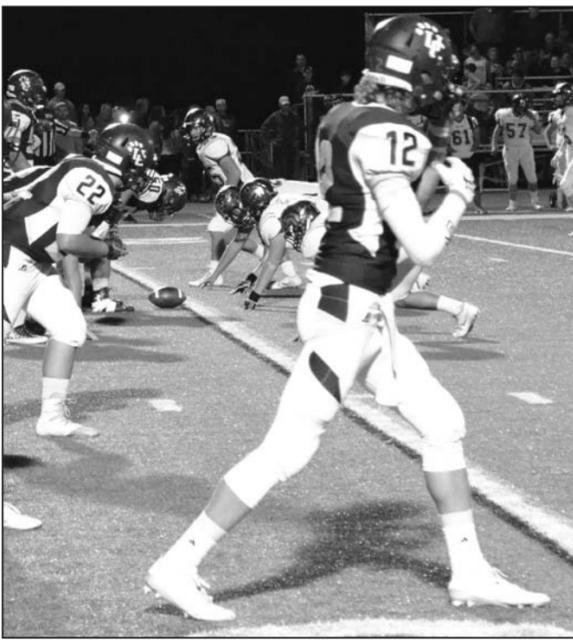
However, junior Sean Dobbins stepped up with career highs in receiving yards (162) and touchdowns (2). His first score came on 64-yard reception during Union's opening possession of the game. His second touchdown was a 71-yard catch-and-run in the third quarter to regain the lead at 28-25 after his team fell behind 25-21 on a 49-yard touchdown run.

North Hall received the second half kickoff and drove 80 yards on six plays to trim the Panthers' lead to 21-16. The scoring drive was sparked by a 56-yard run on the third play of the series. The Trojans' extra point try was blocked by junior Cole Dockrey.

Union's ensuing possession saw a first down completion to Austin Pattee wiped out due to an illegal formation — resulting in a three-and-out and punting situation.

With sophomore Ulises Montelongo filling in for Banton at punter, the snap sailed high and into the endzone, where it was recovered by Montelongo for a safety.

Trailing 21-18, the Trojans returned Brian Smith's free kick to the Union 49-yard line. Two plays later, North Hall senior Maddox Turner broke a



Sean Dobbins (12) during his career-night vs North Hall on Friday where he finished with 162 receiving yards. Photo/Todd Forrest

49-yard run to hand the Trojans their first lead of the game at 25-21 with 6:52 left in the third quarter.

The Panthers' offense was quickly faced with a 3rd-and-9 and was on the verge of its second-straight three-and-out until Wright rolled to his right and found a wide-open Dobbins, behind the North Hall secondary for a 71-yard scoring strike to reclaim the lead, 28-25.

The Trojans responded with a 12-play scoring drive that culminated with the offense cashing in with a 9-yard scoring run on 4th-and-1. With 11:55 to play, Union found themselves trailing 28-25.

Wright and the offense went to work at the 20 and on 3rd-and-2, the junior quarterback appeared to move the chains with a first down scramble but an illegal shift put the Panthers in a 3rd-and-7. From deep in their own territory, Wright hooked up with Pattee for 16 yards but a sack on the next play put Union behind the chains bringing up another punt by Montelongo.

This time, the snap was perfect and the kick gave the ball to North Hall at their own 40 with a chance to put the Panthers away with 9:08 remaining.

A 15-yard completion by senior quarterback Jackson Madonna moved the Trojans into Union territory but a block-in-the-back on first down moved North Hall behind the chains, then senior linebacker Zach Gilliam stepped in front of a Madonna pass at midfield and returned the pick to the 35-yard line with 7:35 to play.

On the first play following the change of possession, Bo Lynch took a handoff up-the-middle then bounced outside for a 35-yard touchdown

run to give Union the lead for good.

Up until that play, Lynch had been held in check but the senior running back delivered his second game-winning touchdown in three weeks.

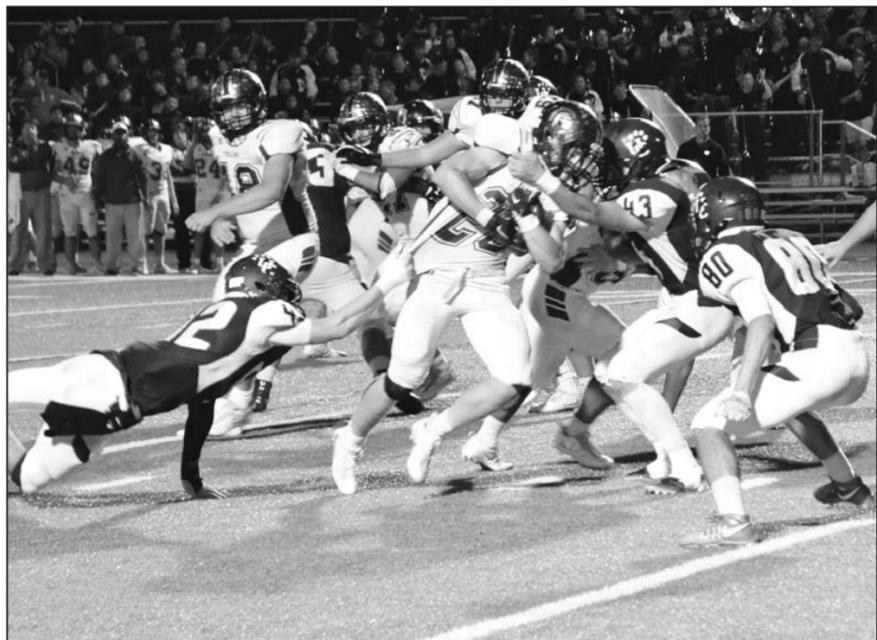
Prior to his score, Lynch was held to 42 rushing yards. He would finish with 76 yards and one touchdown on 11 carries.

The Trojans would take over at the 20 with 7:18 remaining and converted a 3rd-and-1 and a 4th-and-inches but the drive would stall at the Union 44-yard line when a 4th-and-6 pitch sweep was blown up by Dobbins and senior linebacker Chris Thompson for a 1-yard loss.

"That play was something different than what we had seen from them (on film) but they ran it a few times over the course of the game," Coach Allison said. "But Thompson and Dobbins just made a great play at a great time. Our coaches made some adjustments but those kids just made a great play. (Linebacker) Nic Rodriguez drew two blockers and that freed up Thompson and Dobbins."

The fourth down stop came after Union was forced to burn a timeout when a North Hall wide out was spotted uncovered along the far sideline. According to the Panthers' coaching staff, the player stepped off the Trojans' sideline onto the field. Coach Allison and company argued for a penalty, but none was given. However, when play resumed, the defense made the stop and handed the ball back to the Union offense with 2:15 to play.

"I haven't seen the wide copy (of the film) but I don't think (the receiver) came back inside (the numbers) like he



Bryan English (42) hangs on to the jersey as Zach Gilliam (43) and Micah Gilbert (80) are in position to bring down the ball carrier for a short gain. Photo/Todd Forrest

was supposed to do, so we didn't see him and I had to call a timeout."

The Panthers attempted three running plays and were stopped for a loss on each one, although they did force North Hall to use the rest of their timeouts. With just over a minute left, Montelongo got off the best punt of his short career, despite the Trojans sending 10 players after him to block the kick.

The kick coverage was just as solid as the returner was corralled at the 31-yard line with 58 seconds remaining.

Needing just a field goal to force overtime and with North Hall already connecting on a 36-yarder, a touchdown wasn't necessary. But it wouldn't matter as Dobbins came up with another huge play for the Panthers.

With a second down from their own 43, Madonna attempted a deep pass over the middle but Dobbins jumped in front of the would-be receiver and hauled in the interception at the 28-yard line with 18 seconds to play.

"I just got my depth and when I looked up, the (receiver) wasn't looking when the quarterback threw it, so I cut under him and got the pick," Dobbins said of the Panthers' final defensive play. "The receiver didn't look back so he didn't even know the ball was coming."

"The team finally put a four quarter game together and it just feels great," Dobbins added. "It was just a great win overall and I couldn't ask for anything better."

The win was Union's 10th straight regular season home victory — breaking the program record of nine, set back in 1983 and 1984.

In the early-going it appeared that Union County wouldn't need any late-game heroics as they surged ahead 14-3 and 21-10.

Dobbins opened the contest with 64-yard touchdown reception on the third play of the game. And after the Panthers forced a North Hall punt, they appeared poised to extend their lead but the punt was mishandled at the 19-yard line and the Trojans found new life — starting from inside the redzone.

The defense rose to the occasion once again and held North Hall to a 36-yard field goal that made it a 7-3 game, midway through the first quarter.

Union struck again minutes later when Wright capped off a scoring drive with a 20-yard touchdown scamper to take a 14-3 lead with 1:53 left in the first.

The drive was highlighted by a 19-yard run from Lynch, a 10-yard catch by Dobbins, and a 13-yard completion to Pattee.

The ensuing Trojans possession ended when senior defensive back Micah Gilbert recovered a fumble at the Union 35-yard line but the offense would stall near midfield after a second down sack put the Panthers in 3rd-and-long.

Following a Union punt, North Hall went 63-yards on nine plays with senior running back and the region's leading rusher, Kyle Bacus punching it in from the 1-yard line to pull his team within four at 14-10, with 2:21 left before the half.

Sophomore Kanon Hemphill would return the ensuing kick to the 21 and Wright would need only one play to stretch the Panthers' lead back to 11. On first down, Wright

took a quarterback draw up the middle before finding another gear and outrunning the entire Trojan defense down the far sideline. With one defender between himself and the endzone, Wright cut back to the middle of the field and blew past the North Hall defensive back, en route to a career-long 79-yard touchdown run that gave Union a 21-10 lead at the break.

Wright finished with 121 yards and two scores on 11 carries while completing 9-of-14 passes for 208 yards and two touchdowns.

Looking ahead... The Panthers will be off this Friday night before traveling to rival Fannin County on Oct. 28, where Union County can clinch at least a tie for fourth place with their third straight win over the Rebels.

A lot will depend on the results of this Friday's games but more than likely, the Panthers' postseason fate won't be determined until they host Lumpkin County in the season finale. But for starters, Union needs Fannin (0-3 in 7-AAA) to knock off Lumpkin (1-2 in 7-AAA) in Dahlonega this Friday night. That would force Lumpkin (with three region losses) into a must-win scenario when they visit red-hot Dawson County the following week.

Meanwhile, North Hall (2-2 in 7-AAA) plays host to No. 1 GAC this week, where they must pull-off the impossible to keep pace with the region's other two-loss teams, Union and Lumpkin.

For a preview of the Fannin game, an updated Region 7-AAA playoff breakdown, and the most recent injury report, which will include the statuses of Banton, Strayer, and Stone.

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Union Cross Country goes 3-for-4 at Meeks Park in final race before Region

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Lance Underwood came in first and Zoe Sanchez placed second to lead both Union County cross country squads to first place finishes at Meeks Park last week.

The victories were a positive conclusion to the regular season as the 7th ranked Panthers and 9th ranked Lady Panthers turn their attention to the Region 7-AAA meet at Unicoi State Park in Helen on Oct. 27.

Union County is coming off a dominating four-year stretch in Region 8-AA that saw them pull off a clean sweep at last year's region meet.

This year is a different story.

Not only did Union make the jump to Class AAA, they joined what is arguably, one of the toughest regions in the state, Region 7-AAA.

On the girls' side, Region 7-AAA currently holds three spots in the Georgia Mile Split Top 10 with No. 5 North Hall and No. 7 Dawson County joining 9th ranked Union County.

In the boys rankings, 7-AAA is also represented by the same three squads: No. 2 North Hall, No. 5 Dawson County, and No. 7 Union.

At the Runners Fit Mountain Invitational at Unicoi two weeks ago, the guys defeated the two teams ranked directly behind them.



16th, No. 8 Jackson County finished 17th, and No. 9 Hart County came in 18th.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers' 12th place finish at Unicoi was good enough to move them into the Top 10 after being unranked.

Another team to watch from 7-AAA is Greater Atlanta Christian, whose girls are currently unranked but began the season ranked ninth with their entire top seven returning from last year.

The GAC boys were 10th to begin the season and are currently unranked. But you can almost guarantee that the Spartans will play a role in next week's region competition.



Coach Paige Dyer, Union's first-year head cross country coach has one final discussion with her team before the final race of the regular season gets underway. Photos by Todd Forrest

