

Sports

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Panthers outlast Oglethorpe; match best start since 2001

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LEXINGTON - Union County is now 4-1 for the first time since 2008 with a chance to begin 5-1 - the best start since 2001.

The Panthers made the journey to Oglethorpe County (3-2) on Friday and escaped with a win thanks to a critical defensive stop on 4th-and-Goal with five minutes to play, and moments later, a gutsy play call from the coaching staff.

The perfect storm of offense, defense, and play calling in the final minutes gave the Panthers their first Region 8-AA victory of the year and keeps them in position for a berth in the post season.

With Union leading 21-14 late in the third quarter, the Patriots snuffed out a Panther fake-punt. Oglethorpe went to work from their own 46-yard line and drove 59-yards while chewing over seven-and-a-half minutes off the clock.

The drive was aided by a Union off sides penalty before a 14-yard run set Oglethorpe up at the Panther 6-yard line with 6:33 to play in the game.

After Union stuffed two Oglethorpe runs on first and second down, an injured Patriot had to be carried away by stretcher. While headed to the ambulance, the injured player continued encouraging his team mates, while they promised to dominate the final five minutes of the game for their fallen comrade. With emotion on their side, the Oglethorpe County faithful came to life to cheer on their Patriots.

On third-and-goal, Oglethorpe threw an incomplete pass. With the crowd still on its feet on fourth down, the Patriot quarterback rolled right and hit his receiver at the 5-yard line but Jonah Whitmer and Robert Prunier smothered the receiver as soon as the catch was made and gave the ball back to T Bentley and the Panther offense.

The senior quarterback had already thrown for two touchdowns and ran for another, but no throw was bigger than the one he made on 3rd-



Captains for the Oglethorpe game: Josh Kim, Clay Burnette, and Luther Jones. Photo/Todd Forrest



Lalo Rivera catches a screen pass from T Bentley and looks for some running room. Photo/Todd Forrest

and-18 with just over three minutes to play.

Starting in the shadow of his own end zone, Bentley carried the ball twice for a Union first down, forcing Oglethorpe to begin burning time outs.

On second down, Bentley's screen pass to Lalo Rivera resulted in a loss, putting Union into the third-and-long situation.

While everyone in the stadium expected the Panthers to run, burn clock, and punt, Offensive Coordinator Howard McCombs had something else in mind. The call was for Bentley to hit senior wide out Josh Kim on a post pattern and it worked to perfection. The play netted the Panthers a 23-yard gain and a fresh set of downs.

"It was a great call that Howard made," Coach Brian Allison said. "They slid over to cover our trips to the right and left all that field to the wide side and it was just a great call on his part. We were backed up and T threw a post route to Josh Kim and that sealed it."

Bentley, who accounted for all three Panther touchdowns, put the Panthers on the board with 33 seconds to play in the first quarter on a 4-yard scoring run to tie the game at 7-7. The score capped off a 64-yard scoring drive that took just under five minutes.

On the ensuing kickoff, Oglethorpe benefited from a penalty flag to set them up at their own 35-yard line.

The Patriots drove to the



The Panthers getting pumped up before last Friday night's game at Oglethorpe County. Union County will look to improve to 5-1 this Friday night at home. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union 24-yard line where the Panthers forced them into a 3rd-and-15.

The defense would cause an incompleteness but a personal foul penalty breathed new life into the Oglethorpe offense and they would score on the next play to take a 14-7 lead.

After a breakdown on special teams forced the Panthers to start from their own 11-yard line, Bentley hit Rivera on a quick pass that Rivera took all the way to the Patriot 26-yard line.

The Panther offense would sputter following a sack but Union was given a second chance when they benefited from a personal foul penalty. Jonathan Hughes immediately found the end zone but it was waived off due to a Panther holding penalty.

With first-and-goal from the 12-yard line, the Panthers dissected the Patriot defense. It began with a pass to Cody Davenport for a 4-yard completion, then a hand off to Hughes put Union back in business when the running back carried the ball inside the 1-yard line. A quick sneak by Bentley would result in a no-gain on third down bringing up fourth-and-goal. The final play of the drive saw senior wide out Clay Burnette go into motion where Bentley tossed him a shovel-pass that he took around the left end for a score.

"We wanted to freeze the ball to see what kind of defense they were in," Burnette said.

"But we told the coaches that we thought we could score so we went ahead and pushed it on in."

Burnette, who would later score Union's game winning touchdown on a similar play, didn't know if he would be able to play, and was in obvious discomfort at halftime.

"My shoulder popped out Tuesday during practice, and I had to get a shoulder brace that just made it 10 times hotter on me so I had to take the thing off," Burnette said.

Union County would take the opening kick off of the third quarter all the way to the Oglethorpe 27-yard line where Bentley's pass was picked off inside the 5-yard line and returned to the 18-yard line.

The Patriots only managed three yards on the possession and punted back to the Panthers. Two big runs by Hughes, allowed Burnette to catch another shovel pass for a score - this time from 9 yards out.

After Brett Dietz's interception ended Oglethorpe's scoring chances at the end of the second quarter, Prunier picked off a Patriot pass late in the third to help the Panthers cling to a one-touchdown lead.

The Panther defense pitched a shutout in the second half thanks to 15 tackles each by sophomore Chase Barnett and junior Matthew Spiwak.

Coach Allison wasn't sure if he would have the services of his defensive anchor

Luther Jones until moments before kickoff.

"Luther was sick before the game so we didn't play him a single down on offense, but he manned up and played some defense," Coach Allison said. "I didn't know if he was going to be able to play it was a big morale boost just for him to play."

Stepping up in Jones' place on offense was freshman Dylan Byers, and despite being shorthanded up front, Hughes still managed to rush for 110 yards on 12 carries.

"We played two freshman and a sophomore on the offensive line and scored 21 points but should have scored 28 and put this thing away," Coach Allison said. "It's still a good win for us. This is a lot of adversity to overcome that some people don't realize. It took us four hours to get down here, then had to find a way to get into a rhythm and still won the ball game."

Bentley finished 15-19 with 173 yards and two touchdowns. Rivera caught five passes for 56 yards while Burnette finished with five grabs for 48 yards.

On Friday night, Union County will play host to Riverside Military Academy for Homecoming.

The Homecoming Parade begins at 1:30 with a pep rally to follow.

Riverside enters the game winless after falling 42-20 to Rabun County last week.

Jefferson swipes 8-AA title; Union hosts Bremen in State Tourney

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The Union County Lady Panthers dropped a heart breaker 1-0 to Jefferson on Thursday in the 8-AA Region Championship Game.

Now Union hosts Bremen on Wednesday in the opening round of the State playoffs.

Against Jefferson, Union came up shy of its third consecutive region title due to a dismal performance at the plate, going 0-11 with runners on base. Six of the 11 outs came via strikeout.

Jefferson manufactured its lone run in the third inning thanks to three singles, sandwiched around a fielder's choice, and a Union throwing error.

Lady Panther slugger, Hannah Hughes was walked four times, Shawna Brown got one free pass, while Crystal Busbee and Carly Adams each finished 2-for-3 with a single and a double, respectively.

Senior Bailey Byers, solid all season, got the start and provided Union with another clutch performance from the circle, surrendering only four hits - three of which came in Jefferson's third inning.

Unfortunately, Union's offense didn't help its senior pitcher.

"I think Byers pitched an excellent game," Coach Jessica Stewart said. "She followed our game plan exactly how we asked her to do. We just did not capitalize on the opportunities we had with runners in scoring position."

It appeared for a moment that Union had another late-inning rally up their sleeves when Adams lined an opposite-field single to open the seventh.

Adams' hit was followed by a Madison Rich sacrifice bunt - advancing Adams into scoring position with one out.

Jefferson, again wanted no part of Hughes, and put the winning run on first via another



Lady Panthers finish 2nd in Region 8-AA (top). Summer League and former Assistant Coach Kevin Hughes gives the Lady Panthers a pep talk before the game (bottom). Photos by Todd Forrest.

intentional walk.

Brown would fly out to deep right - advancing Adams and Hughes, and putting the region clinching run on second with Courtney Busbee coming to the plate.

Busbee smacked a long fly ball to center but the Jefferson center fielder, already shading deep, made a running, one handed catch at the fence.

In the sixth, Union wasted another lead off single when Crystal Busbee reached, but the sophomore was left stranded following three Lady Panther

strikeouts.

During the fifth, Union loaded the bases for Courtney Busbee, but like in the seventh, the sophomore catcher flew out to deep center.

A one-out, Crystal Busbee double went to waste in the fourth when the two-bagger was followed by consecutive strikeouts.

Same as the latter innings, a one-out double by Adams in the third yielded no runs or hits - only another walk to Hughes. A lead off walk by Hughes in the first resulted in a

strikeout, and a line-out to the pitcher that doubled up Hughes at first.

"Jefferson came up with a big hit with a runner at third and we couldn't," Coach Stewart said. "They intentionally walked Hughes four times and no one else could come up with a big hit with runners on base. Adams and Crystal Busbee's hits were with no runners on."

The good news is, with the No. 2 Seed, Union will host the opening round of the State Tournament on Wednesday. Although, Coach Stewart



Sophomore Crystal Busbee lines a leadoff single in the sixth inning (top). Senior pitcher Bailey Byers kept Union County in the game for seven innings (bottom). Photos by Todd Forrest

knows that if her team wants to get back to Columbus and the Elite-8, some adjustments must be made at the plate.

"We will work on hitting with runners in scoring position, moving runners over, and putting the ball in play for the next three practices," Coach Stewart said. "We had 11 strikeouts and that is too many in a championship game."

Wednesday, Union will host Region 5-AA's No. 3 seed Bremen in a best two-of-three series at 4 and 6 p.m.

Game Three, if necessary

will be held on Thursday, also in Blairsville.

Bremen enters with a 19-6 record following last Saturday's 5-AA Region Tournament.

The winner of Bremen @ Union County will face the survivor of the GAC @ Calhoun series. If Union and GAC win, Union would host the second round.

A Union victory combined with a Cahoun victory will result in a road trip in Round Two for Union.