

Sports

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Cross Country: Union blisters the competition at Region Meet

Both Union County squads crowned Region 8-AA Champions at Riverside

By Todd Forrest
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Gainesville - Union County Head Cross Country Coach Jackie Hughes has seen a thing or two in her 16 years at the helm.

During a coaching career that spans three decades, Coach Hughes' cross country teams have produced three individual State Championships and 12 top 10 individual finishes for Union County High School. However, at last week's 2014 Region 8-AA Meet, Hughes witnessed a first when both teams captured the Region title.

Despite an up-and-down regular season, Union County Cross Country took care of business at last week's Region Meet. Both squads picked up an overall Region Championship with the ladies taking first and second place individually and the men taking home second, fourth, and sixth places.

Even Union's JV squads came in first place during the Junior Varsity race that followed the 8-AA men's race.

"This is the best Region Meet we have ever had," Coach Hughes said. "I have had both boy and girl individual Region Champions, and the girls teams have won two previous Region Championships, but this is the first one for the guys. Having both teams finish as Region Champions has been our goal since last summer. I would say these two teams rank among my five fastest over the last 16 years. I am hoping we can carry the same intensity into the State Meet that we ran with on Wednesday."

Senior Julia Lindsey, who also doubles as Drum Major for the Union County Pride of the Mountains Marching Band, took home first place with a time of 22:04.

"She is a very talented runner," Coach Hughes said. "She ran track last spring and decided to give cross country a try this year. She is an amazing competitor."

Junior Emma Garrison, the two-time defending Region and State champ, has battled shin splints for most of the season. After



The Lady Panthers finished first overall along with a first and second place individual finish. Photo/Todd Forrest



Julia Lindsey

sitting out a few races last month, Garrison gave it a go at Region and placed second, one tick behind Lindsey at 22:05.

"Emma's legs are getting better, but she isn't at 100 percent yet," Coach Hughes said. "She is a tough competitor though and I was very happy with the way she ran at the Region Meet."

The third place finisher, Hallie Reeves of Rabun County, checked in 25 seconds behind Garrison.

Junior Stephanie Busse finished 11th (23:43), Marissa Spaulding was 12th (23:45), Anna Danek came in 13th (23:47), Cora Bauman was 17th (24:06), and Raphaela Aleman placed 23rd (25:48). With five runners in the top 13, the Lady Panthers edged



Lance Underwood

defending Region 8-AA Champions Rabun County by four points, which could be considered a bit of an upset.

"The girls team had to make some adjustments this year," Coach Hughes said. "Of the team that finished 11th in State last year, we lost one runner to graduation, one to injury issues, and one to another sport. Then Emma got sidelined for awhile with severe shin splints, and that meant that the other girls had to really step up, and they did. We were also helped a great deal by the addition of Lindsey."

As for the men, Union freshman Lance Underwood and Greene County's Arthur Porter distanced themselves from the pack. Coming down the home



The Union County men placed three runners in the top six - good enough for an 8-AA Region title. Photo/Todd Forrest

stretch, they found themselves ahead of third place by more than 55 seconds.

Arwood battled Porter over each and every centimeter of the 5,000 meter race. Unfortunately, the junior from Greene County held off the Panther freshman by two seconds - with a time of 17:14 to Underwood's 17:16.

Union junior Cristian Garcia came in fourth with a time of 18:26 - thirteen seconds behind third and five second ahead of fifth place.

"Cristian has also been fighting through some injury issues that have slowed him down a little," Coach Hughes said. "With just the one race left I know he will give it everything he has."

Sixth place also belonged to the Panthers as junior Jacob Kelley gave his team three runners in the Top 10 with a time of 18:35 - four seconds behind fifth and seven seconds in front of seventh.

Timothy Murphy finished 12th (19:10), Adam Bachman was 14th (19:21), Jakob Brown was 16th (19:31), and Aaron Stafford placed 17th (19:38).

Unlike the Lady Panthers, the guys ran away from the field and left little doubt as to who was the cream of the crop in 8-AA. Union finished 32 points ahead of second place Social Circle, and 75 ahead of third place Riverside.

"The boys team has progressed very well during the season," Coach Hughes said. "The

quite well." Two-time defending State Champion Garrison continues get her legs back under her after missing some time due to injury.

"I'm feeling a lot better than I did early in the season. I just needed some rest," Garrison said. "I don't know how much it will bother me at State, so I'll just have to wait and see. But I'm hoping (Lindsey) and I can finish one-two at State. That would be amazing."

As for Lindsey, don't expect the Region Champ to be overwhelmed at State. The senior was one of the stars on Union's upstart track team last spring, placing second in the Region in the 3200M. She ran a personal best time at the Sectionals before placing 11th in the State Championships.

"I'm not going to change anything in my preparation for State," Lindsey said "Early in the season my times were around 27 minutes but I knew that wasn't good enough, so I kept on working hard."

The State Championships will be held Saturday at Carrollton High School. The Class AA boys will take off at noon with the Class AA girls to follow.

"This year's team has been a joy to coach," Coach Hughes said. "The Region Meet really showcased the spirit and toughness of this group. Both varsity teams won their races, and both the boys and girls JV teams won their races too. It was a total effort, and I was extremely proud of what they accomplished."



Junior Stephanie Busse (right) gives a thumbs up after Coach Hughes (behind Busse) notifies the team that they're going to be crowned the new Region Champions. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers overcome 13-0 hole; storm past RMA with 35 unanswered

Union's offense lays 42 points and 454 yards on No. 2 defense in Region 8-AA

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Gainesville - Nine games into the 2014 season, Union County (8-1, 4-1) can claim its first come-from-behind victory after falling into a 13-0 first quarter deficit on the road last Friday night.

In some of the most unlikely conditions for a shootout, the offenses of Union County and Riverside Military Academy exchanged scores for most of the second half with the Panthers coming out on top, 42-27.

Union's 42 points is the most Riverside has allowed all season. In fact, the Panthers were the first team to score at least 25 on the Eagles in 2014. Entering last Friday's game, Riverside's scoring defense was ranked No. 2 in Region 8-AA, holding teams to 14 points-per-game, second only to Washington-Wilkes, who is allowing just 13 a game.

With a cold wind wreaking havoc and a mix of light rain and sleet falling on Maginnis Field during the second and third quarters, both teams combined for 975 yards of offense. Union piled up 454 yards, highlighted by senior Chase Barnett's 198 rushing yards.

The difference: four Riverside turnovers, highlighted by junior safety Andrew Brown's pick-6 on the first play of the second half. Brown returned the pass 34 yards down the Union sideline - extending the Panthers' lead to 21-13.

In the first half, the Eagles used a fake field goal that resulted in a 21-yard touchdown pass at the 5:21 mark of the first quarter.

"They got us," Union Head Coach Brian Allison said. "I thought he would kick it. He's got a strong leg and I wasn't expecting it."

Down 7-0, the Panthers were forced to punt on its ensuing possession but Brown recovered a Riverside fumble near midfield to breathe new life back into the Union offense.

Barnett broke off a 26-yard gain on a 3rd-and-3. Following a false start on the Panthers' line, junior quarterback Joseph Mancuso hit senior wide out Jacob Rogers for 7 yards but his next pass was intercepted in the endzone and returned to the Riverside 23-yard line.

On the final play of the quarter, Riverside scored on a 77-yard carry that appeared to be bottled up on the Panthers' sideline, until reversing direction and going untouched down the Eagles' sideline.

A high snap on the extra



Jacob Rogers (22) is okay after tweaking his knee at RMA and is expected play on Friday vs Washington Wilkes. Photo/Todd Forrest

point kept the score at 13-0 going into the second quarter.

"I'd say there was a little bit of rust from the bye week but I expected it," Coach Allison said. "Riverside is very athletic on defense and we were very concerned. They held Rabun to 24 points and Wilkes to 13, so they have a very good defense. It just took a little while for us to get adjusted on offense and our defense gave up some big plays, and that's a recipe for 13-0."

The Panthers first scoring drive started from their own 21-yard line where Rogers took an end around for 14 yards, then Mancuso found senior receiver Brett Dietz for a gain of 18.

Sophomore running back Bo Lynch rushed for 22 yards on three straight carries. On a 3rd-and-3, Mancuso connected with senior Robert Prunier for 4 yards and a fresh set of downs. After a 6-yard run by Mancuso, Barnett scored from 10 yards out - making it a 13-7 game with 9:22 left in the half.

Riverside started from its own 32 and on 3rd-and-13, Union forced an incompleteness but was flagged for a phantom pass interference penalty.

The Eagles advanced to the Union 17 where they connected on a 4th-and-3 touchdown pass, but the Riverside quarterback threw the pass from beyond the line of scrimmage and was penalized. The flag came with a loss of down - awarding the ball to the Panthers.

On the first play, Barnett powered his way for 16 yards, and later, on fourth down, Mancuso hooked up with junior Sam Gilbert for a fresh set of downs.

Faced with a 2nd-and-15, Prunier hauled in a pass for 14 yards, allowing Barnett to move the chains with a short run on third



Nic Sparks (36) in pursuit down.

Mancuso finally capped off the drive with a 14-yard carry on a 3rd-and-7 that he followed with an 11-yard scoring strike to Rogers for a 14-13 advantage at the break.

Riverside got the ball to begin the third quarter and Brown scored his second defensive touchdown of the season on a 34-yard interception return.

"That was a big play and probably the turning point in the game," Coach Allison said. "Another big play was their illegal forward pass that took away a touchdown in the second quarter because we got the ball back and scored right before halftime."

The Eagles offense came back on the field and drove its way into the Panthers' redzone where they were faced with a 4th-and-goal from the 4-yard line. Instead of going for six, Riverside went for the easy 21-yard field goal, but luckily for the Panthers, the kick sailed wide left and Union got the ball back, still leading 21-13.

Starting from the 20, Union continued to prescribe the Eagles a



Bo Lynch



Andrew Brown (25) returns the interception for a TD.

steady dose of Lynch and Barnett on the ground.

Lynch opened the drive with a 16-yard run and Barnett capped it off with a gain of 20 yards and a score from 7 yards out. At the 6:08 mark of the third, Union was on top, 28-13.

The Panthers defense would force a quick three-and-out and the offense went back to work.

Starting at midfield, Lynch rushed for 6 yards on first down and 12 yards on second.

Later in the drive, Barnett converted a 4th-and-1 and on another 4th-and-short, Mancuso ran for 5 yards. Two plays later, he found Rogers - who had a defensive back draped all over him - on a quick strike in the endzone from 12 yards out.

On the ensuing kickoff, junior Knox Kiernan's onside kick caught the Eagles napping and senior Nic Sparks pounced on the loose ball. However, the Panthers would fumble inside the redzone and the Riverside offense responded with a score - cutting the Union lead to 35-20.

The Panthers tacked on an-

other score after Barnett ran for 19 yards and Lynch hauled the rock for 13 yards. Prunier would battle his way inside the 5 on a quick screen and Lynch completed the drive with a 3-yard touchdown run.

The Panthers would receive a bit of a scare on their final scoring drive when Rogers rolled his knee while blocking downfield. Luckily, he avoided any serious injury and will be ready to go on Friday for Senior Night.

Riverside would later score from 60-plus yards on a screen pass and a lateral to make it 42-27 with 7:13 left.

The Eagles had one last chance to get within eight points but senior Billy Elder recovered a fumble on the 4-yard line to seal the victory in the final minute.

Friday will be Senior Night as Union hosts Washington-Wilkes in a 7:30 p.m. battle for second place in 8-AA and homefield advantage in the first round of State.

A win over Washington Wilkes, coupled with a Greene County victory at Rabun would result in a three-way tie for first between

Union, Greene, and Rabun.

"I'm not worried about what happens elsewhere," Coach Allison said. "All we're focused on is taking care of business against Washington Wilkes."

The Panthers were unable to reach their goal of 10-0, but can still reach 10 wins with a win on Friday and a home win in the first round of State.

"It's Senior Night and we want to get the win but we know Washington Wilkes is very big and very athletic," Coach Allison said.

Union County stats:
PASSING - Mancuso 15-25, 171 yards, 2 TD's, 1 INT.

RUSHING - Barnett 14 carries, 198 yds, 2 TDs, Lynch 15 carries, 78 yds, 1 TDs, Mancuso 6 carries, 7 yards.

RECEIVING - Rogers 6 catches, 75 yds, 2 TDs, Prunier 4 catches, 52 yds, Gilbert 3 catches, 27 yds, Dietz 1 catch, 17 yds.

TACKLES - Barnett 10 tackles, 5 assists, Thompson 6 tackles, 6 assists, Watson 3 tackles, 5 assists, 2 sacks.

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