

WEEK NINE RECAP



Panthers Bring Strong Season to a Close and Look to a Monster 2009 Campaign

Their families supported John McCain or Barak Obama or Bob Barr or Ralph Nader or maybe Ron Paul. They live in spacious homes tricked out with large flat-screen televisions or in cramped dwellings with rabbit-eared 14-inch TVs, in homes in which it is possible to get lost or in homes in which it is impossible to be alone. They believe in the Bible literally or they see allegory in Holy Writ or they are completely indifferent or perhaps even hostile to religion. They have family incomes that allow them to jet to the biggest games of the year or they live hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck, and worry they are an illness or broken muffler from ruin.

But in the end, they are not conservative or liberal, rich or poor, red or blue. They are a blend. They are purple. They are Panthers. And we are all richer for them.

The 2008 Paschal Panthers football team concluded its season last Friday, but the memories and friendships forged will last a lifetime.

The season began with daffodils and crocuses, in cool, caressing breezes and with the hopes and dreams spring nurtures. The excitement and optimism of spring football, culminating with the annual Purple-White game, gave way to brutal muscle-shredding, gut emptying conditioning sessions in the stifling heat and humidity of summer. They shared laughter. They shared pain. They shared sacrifice. And through this shared struggle they became one. They were proud to be Panthers, proud to play football at Paschal. And it showed.

They began the season with great pride, optimism and hope. Collectively they represented the best and most competitive team the school has fielded in years. They did not disappoint.

Though the Panthers fell to the Burleson Elks in the season finale, the team concluded the 2008 season last Friday just as they launched it – with great pride, optimism and hope. And though they shall sorely miss the leadership and skill of the team's seniors – William Hix, Matt Parker, Alec Baker, Abraham Leal, Michael Schroeder, Matt Blum, Sasha Lovett, Fabian Guerrero, Keafer Clegg, Abraham Shim, Luis Urias, Johnathon Withers and Byron Cook – the Panthers in 2008 laid the groundwork for an even brighter, more competitive, 2009.

The season came to a close on a beautiful clear-skied night, with a seething, expectant crowd on hand to watch the team one last time in 2008. Fans filled with pride as the team roared onto the field, a pride that overflowed when Matt Parker delivered a beautiful and moving a capella rendition of the national anthem.

After falling behind by a touchdown, the Panthers charged right back following Arron Stafford's kick return to the Paschal 48. QB Brian Gallagher found WR Lovett on the first play from scrimmage for a first down, then found WR Rochell Johnson for another. Gallagher then hooked up with WR Travoy McCarver for a touchdown at 8:18 of the first quarter. K Chris King hit the extra point to knot the score at 7.

Burleson, however, picked up two quick scores, and the Panthers found themselves in a deep hole. But these never-say-die Panthers continued to fight. After Angel Argueta returned a kickoff to the Paschal 30, the offense kicked it into high gear. Deftly mixing pass plays with the running game, the Panthers moved the ball to the Burleson 36 as the first quarter expired. Five plays later, RB Emmanuel Smith charged into the end zone from the two. King's PAT was true and the Panthers were right back in the game.

The defense rose to the challenge, forcing a punt. The offense began a promising drive but a turnover gave the Burleson Elks the ball on their own 32. The defense again needed to stand tall, and it did. Facing third and nine at the Paschal 45, Burleson tried its power running game but the D-line held tough and DB Kirby Campbell came up for the stop and just a one-yard gain. Burleson's punt pinned the Panthers on their own six with 2:29 remaining in the half.

Smith gave the offense some breathing room with a run to the 10, and then Gallagher found Smith with a short pass to the 15. Facing fourth and one deep in their own territory, Gallagher went to a hard count and successfully drew the Elks offside for a Paschal first down.

Gallagher led the team downfield with a series of nice passes and with 43.1 seconds remaining in the half, the team found itself in Burleson territory. Paschal turned to a trick play to pick up a huge chunk of real estate. Gallagher handed to Smith who handed to Lovett on a reverse. Lovett then threw downfield to McCarver to pick up a Paschal first down on the Burleson 10 with 28.8 seconds remaining. Gallagher hit Lovett in the end zone on the ensuing play. King's PAT was good, and the Panthers tied the game.

The Panthers appeared poised to take their first lead of the game on their first possession of the second half. The team marched to the Burleson 15 before stalling out and coming up empty.

Inigorated by the defensive stop, Burleson scored twice to take a 35-21 lead in the fourth quarter. The Panthers, however, were anything but out of it.

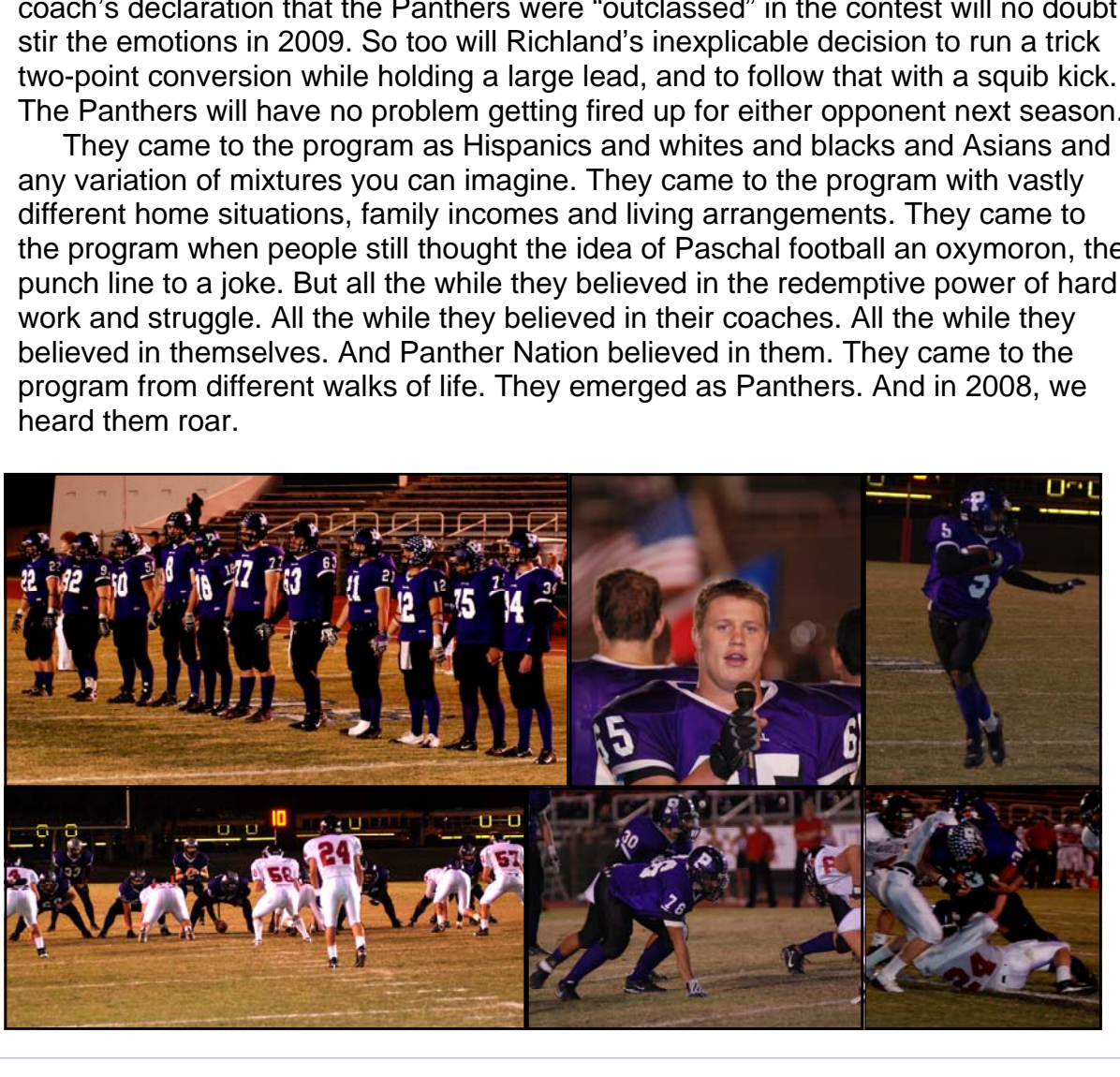
Starting on the Paschal 47, Gallagher found Hix for a first down at the Elks 39. A roughing the passer penalty on the next play gave the Panthers a first and 10 at the Burleson 20. Smith pounded it in for a score over the next four plays and at 8:05 of the fourth quarter, the score was Burleson 35, Paschal 28.

Burleson hit for a quick touchdown, however, and the Panthers were unable to answer.

Hearts ached for these Panthers, ached because the difference between a win and a loss in this game, as it was in so many others, boiled down to just a handful of plays. A score here, a stop there, and the Panthers win. It was true against Weatherford, it was true against Haltom, it was true against North Crowley and it was true against Burleson. Indeed, following Friday's contest the Burleson coach addressed the Panthers and commended them on their vast year-over-year improvement. These Panthers have come a long way, but we know -- they know and opponents know – that they are moving up to even bigger and better things in 2009.

The team was truly out of only two district games – Abilene and Richland Hills, two teams among the best in the state. But both teams knew they'd been in a dogfight by game's end. An Abilene player, for example, confessed he was just as bruised and sore following the Paschal game as he was after any other. Next year may well be a different story. Memories run long in Panther Nation, and the Abilene coach's declaration that the Panthers were "outclassed" in the contest will no doubt stir the emotions in 2009. So too will Richland's inexplicable decision to run a trick two-point conversion while holding a large lead, and to follow that with a squib kick. The Panthers will have no problem getting fired up for either opponent next season.

They came to the program as Hispanics and whites and blacks and Asians and any variation of mixtures you can imagine. They came to the program with vastly different home situations, family incomes and living arrangements. They came to the program when people still thought the idea of Paschal football an oxymoron, the punch line to a joke. But all the while they believed in the redemptive power of hard work and struggle. All the while they believed in their coaches. All the while they believed in themselves. And Panther Nation believed in them. They came to the program from different walks of life. They emerged as Panthers. And in 2008, we heard them roar.



JV Panthers Show Hearts of Champions against Burleson Elks

"May the pain you have known and the conflict you have experienced give you the strength to walk through life facing each new situation with courage and optimism."

This past week closed out the JV Panther season with a trip to the home of the Burleson Elks. The JV Panthers were playing a little depleted in numbers, but once again with the heart of a champion.

Early turnovers allowed the Elks to jump out to an early first quarter lead and the ball just wasn't bouncing the Panthers' way.

So how did the JV Panthers respond? The same as usual. They made their own good fortune when Raul Acosta recovered the fumble, giving the offense the ball in good field position. The JV Panther offense then marched down the field, and using what has become a "bread and butter" play, Louis Moreno threw a touchdown pass to Tyler Anderson on a run fake.

The Elks excellent a couple of efforts. The Panther tried two point conversions, both of which were stopped on excellent defensive efforts. The Panther special teams also provided a spark when a fake punt was called and Anderson threw to Acosta for a first down. The JV Panther offense was able to turn that spark into another score when, on a fourth down and 5, Marshall Norment found Anderson in the end zone for another touchdown. The half ended with the Elks up 39-13.

The second half started with the Panther defense holding tough, keeping the Elks scoreless for the entire third quarter. The fourth quarter played out much like the first, with some untimely turnovers and the Elks capitalizing on them. With the final ticks of the clock and the close of the 2008 season, the Elks won on the scoreboard 53-12.

The game against Burleson was in a way a microcosm of the season, big plays and turnovers from the defense, an opportunistic offense taking advantage of the opposing team's tendencies and weaknesses, and special teams contributing to the cause with some gritty play and a little sleight of hand.

And don't forget the coaches, who simply did everything they could to give our JV Panthers an opportunity to make plays and to win every time they stepped on the field. The JV Panthers showed some serious talent and most of all, the one thing that can't be coached, heart! So it's three cheers for the JV Panthers and a promotion to the next level, where new challenges await the new Varsity Panthers.

All year long I have had the good fortune to be on the football field taking pictures of our JV Panthers, and on several occasions, the Varsity Panthers, too. This past week, as our teams closed out the season, I was also lucky enough to be in a position to hear the Panther coaches speak to our boys after the games were over. I wish for every parent and fan that came to support our boys all year that I could convey to you how much our coaches care about each and every player that wears the purple and white, and I wish that every picture you see on the website could capture the connection that our boys have with the men who coach them. And my good fortune seized me back to the quote at the top of the page. The coaches spoke about football, sure, but they seized that moment to also remind every player that lessons learned on the field -- sacrifice, courage, teamwork -- all of those things will remain with them when the games are over.

Thank you to the JV coaches for an exciting 2008 football season, and thank you to the coaches for doing an exemplary job of coaching and mentoring our students. Just a little under 300 days until we kickoff the 2009 Panther Football Season....Come early, wear purple, and be loud!

Special thanks to Winky Hix for his game day reporting on JV action.



Freshmen Show Fight to the Finish against Elks

The freshmen white squad fell to the Burleson Elks last Thursday but showed the never-say-die attitude of true warriors. RB Tyler Arner scored the team's only touchdown on a three-yard run in the fourth quarter. Arner finished the day with more than 100 yards rushing.

The white squad finished the season 3-6, 3-3, good for third place.

The purple squad did not fare any better in their contest with the Elks, but continued working hard through the game. The team scored on it's last play from scrimmage when QB Chris Hanson found WR Rory Ginsburg streaking down the middle of the field and hit him in stride for a 60-yard touchdown. It was the fourth time this season that Hanson and Ginsburg hooked up for a touchdown of more than 30 yards.

Special thanks to Coach Michael Snapp for game day reporting on freshmen action.

A Beautiful Weekly Shared Communion Goes into Temporary Hibernation

Our Fridays will just seem a bit empty now.

We'll sit around the dinner table, perhaps, and part of us will ache for the caressing rays of Friday Night Lights. We'll think of the easy friendships we renewed weekly and wonder how our friends are taking season's end. We'll miss the games, we'll miss the miss. But in truth, it's not just the games themselves we'll miss.

High school football in Texas is king, but it is also pageant. It is cheerleaders and dance teams and marching bands and mascots and flag bearers and color guards and inflatable mascot head tunnels and overpriced nachos. It is muggy, still air and bone-chilling winds. It is fight songs and alma maters and it is homecoming and award-winning night-shows.

Panther Nation is blessed with one of the best spirit groups in Texas. The band is phenomenal, the cheerleaders awesome. The color guard is crisp and professional, the dance team talented and full of life. The mascots are crowd-pleasing maestros. All of them are as demuch a part of the Friday Night Experience as the team itself, and share equally in this season of redemption and hope.

All combined to create an atmosphere of positive team and school spirit from start to finish, all contributed to this season of hope's realization.

One can't help but feel a bit uncomfortable about Richland High School's Rebel flag. It's true that one can be a rebel in a positive way, but the team's school flags, looking distressingly like take-offs of the Stars and Bars or Bonnie Blue of the Confederacy, and the team's mascot, looking like a plantation owner, is surely out-of-step with the times and an image that is insensitive and hurtful. Why not add water cannon and snarling dogs to complete the tableau? It was wrong when that was America and it is wrong today.

Paschal's panther theme, by contrast, is fun. It's colorful. No mixed messages here, just good, clean All-American, and All-Texas, outsized fun. And we'll miss it.

The season would not have been complete without these sideline heroes, coaches and many volunteers who contributed to make Panther Nation the thriving community it has become. Whether it's parents making vats of macaroni and cheese or mashed potatoes or grilling hundreds of chicken breasts for the boys' pre-game, or parents cleaning up afterwards, this is an army with a support group deserving of the highest thanks and praise.

A hearty thanks to all who helped make the 2008 campaign a season to remember – and build upon.