

Sports

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Union qualifies 18 for Track and Field State Championships

By Todd Forrest
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Calhoun - Union County junior Riley Allison finished tied for first in the girl's high jump event, clearing 4-feet, 10 inches at last weekend's State Sectionals at Gordon Central High School to advance to the upcoming State Championship meet.

Including Allison, Union County athletes qualified 18 different times for this week's Class AA Track and Field State Championships at McEachern High School in Powder Springs. The top-eight performers in each sectional event advanced to the State meet.

Allison joined Lovett junior Makayla Moran and Pace Academy sophomore Brooke Fung Chung atop the Class AA high jump rankings - two inches ahead of a cluster of athletes at 4-8 that included two girls from Heard County and one apiece from Bremen and KIPP Academy.

Senior Noah Underwood's school-record distance of 42-10 was good enough for second in the shot put, 10 inches behind senior Michael Swinger of Model. Pepperell's Preston Groggins was third at 42-04 and Kenneth Seay



Senior Noah Underwood set a school shot-put record. Photo/Todd Forrest

of Therrell placed fourth at 42-02.

Underwood also qualified with an eighth-place finish in the discus throw.

The 4x800 girl's relay team of Allie Brey, Katelynn Rash, Rachel Reid, Campbell Chambers, Hana Gregory and Natalie Payne also set a school record with an 11:16.96, good enough for fifth place.

Not to be outdone, the boy's 4x400 relay team turned in a school-record time of their own, clocking in at 3:33.40. The team consists of Trace Wright, Brady Guild, Elliot Stepps, Zander Rotko, Hunter Hartzog, Luke Miller and Nolan Thompson.

Hannah Long set a school record in the girl's 100-meter hurdles with a



Coach Beau Kelley and UCHS track look to bring home another State Championship. Photo/Todd Forrest

sixth-place time of 17.65.

Gregory and Brey each advanced to State in the 800M, placing fourth and seventh, respectively. Gregory also moved on in the 1600M event following a sixth-place performance at sectionals.

Linley Jones was seventh in the girl's 300M hurdles. Rotko and Wright were fourth and eighth, respectively, in the

400M dash. Hartzog qualified in two individual events, coming in fifth in the 800M and seventh in the 1600M.

Luke Gambrell placed seventh in the boy's 3200M. The boy's 4x100 relay team of Riley Thomas, Underwood, Wright, Stepps and Eli Peugh finished sixth.

The boy's 4x800 relay team came in fourth. The

squad includes Gambrell, Hunter Payne, Daniel Griggs, Hartzog, Rotko and Guild. The girl's 4x400 relay team of Mia McCombs, Lexi Sisum, Katie Byers, Long and Allison placed eighth.

State competitions get underway Thursday and continue through Saturday at McEachern.

Wrestling: JJ Littles picks Lakeland

By Todd Forrest
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Union County senior grappler JJ Littles is taking his mat skills to Mattoon this fall as a member of the Lakeland University wrestling squad in Mattoon, Illinois.

Littles becomes just the third wrestler in Union County program history to wrestle at the next level, joining Bryan Nelson (Class of 2018, Life University) and Cristian Martinez (Class of 2020, Waldorf University).

Littles, a three-sport athlete (baseball and football) at Union County, sustained a serious knee injury in the winter that required surgery, costing him his fourth and final wrestling and baseball campaigns.

However, first-year Lakeland wrestling coach Ben Rosen remained supportive throughout Littles' injury and rehab, and never wavered on his offer to the UCHS senior.

"I asked [the Lakeland coach] if I could still wrestle if I have knee surgery, and he told me as long as [the operation] is a success and I'm cleared to wrestle, they would still love to have me," Littles said.

At the beginning of the journey, Littles' intentions weren't to wrestle at Lakeland. The school originally had its eye on his math work, not his mat work. But when Lakeland became aware of his physical gifts, the university's athletic department began showing interest as well.

"I got an email from a [Lakeland] counselor about my grades, but when they found out that I wrestled, the [wrestling] coach contacted me," Littles said. "He told me that the program was currently rebuilding and asked if I wanted my name attached to the program's turnaround."

With Lakeland situated almost halfway between St. Louis and Chicago, Littles visited the school and loved what he saw, remarking that despite



Top: JJ Littles with family and Coach Byers during his signing ceremony. Bottom: JJ Littles with teammates. Photos by Todd Forrest

the midwestern climate, the campus reminded him a little bit of home.

"The school wasn't very big and it looked a lot like [UCHS]," he said. "It was small and the buildings were separated just like our high school. The practice mats [at Lakeland] were soft and the gym was really nice and big."

Littles expects to make a full recovery from knee surgery and return to action in year one where he'll likely compete in the 133-pound weight class. He plans to major in early childhood education before returning to Union County as a coach.

"I want to thank my friends, family and coaches for supporting me through everything," he said. "I can be really stubborn at times and I've put

them through a lot, but they've always been there for me no matter what."

"This is huge for our wrestling program," Union County wrestling coach Justin Byers added. "It lets kids know that wrestling provides a viable path to becoming a college athlete. But the best thing about JJ is his character, it's extremely hard to replace someone like that."

Littles joins a Lakeland program that didn't finish lower than third in its conference between 2003-2015 while placing first and advancing to nationals every year from 2008-2012.

Lakeland also produced six individual national qualifiers between 2003-2015, headlined by a sixth-place and a third-place finish.

XC: Hunter Payne signs with YHC

By Todd Forrest
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Union County senior distance runner Hunter Payne will be little more than a cross country course away from home when he attends Young Harris College this fall as a freshman member of the Mountain Lions cross country team.

As a Panther, Payne made tremendous strides over the years as part of a UCHS squad that hasn't missed a State Tournament in over a decade while winning it all in 2018 and placing second in 2019.

"He has come so far since middle school," Union County athletic director Mandy Hunter said during her comments to open Payne's signing day ceremony on Thursday, April 29. "Back then, all he wanted to do was throw the football and be a football player, but now all of his hard work has paid off and we're looking forward to his bright future."

Payne placed 35th in the state during the 2020 State Championships in Carrollton with a time of 18 minutes, 58 seconds.

His 18:37 two weeks earlier in the Region 8-AA Championships at Unicoi State Park resulted in a seventh-place finish. His senior time was an improvement of 2:38 over his ninth-grade race at Unicoi during the 2017 Region 7-AAA meet. At that event, Payne clocked in at 21:15 to place 25th in the JV race.

"I had told myself that I was going to play football, but during my freshman year, God called me to run cross country," Payne said. "At first I wanted to run cross country just to become faster for football but I fell in love with the sport and the team. It was just an awesome experience."

In 2019, he completed the Region 8-AA junior varsity race at Oglethorpe County with a second-place time of 19:25, which would have been good enough to defeat 31 runners in the varsity race with a 19th place finish.



Top: Hunter Payne with family and coaches during signing day at the UCHS library. Bottom: Payne with his extended family. Photos by Todd Forrest

Oglethorpe County.

"I'm very proud of Hunter, he is a person of integrity," Union County cross country coach Paige Dyer said. "He embodies the entire cross-country culture. He's very dedicated and has that internal drive to do better and work hard. And hard work has already taken [him] places and it will continue to do that throughout [his] life."

Academically, Payne plans to major in broadcast journalism. Athletically, he isn't ready to get that far ahead of himself.

"I just want to go all-in as soon as I get there and take it one practice at a time," he said. "But none of this would be possible without God and my family and friends. The support that they give me is a feeling like no other. I'm just so thankful for them all."

Woody Gap Band of Steel, special guests all set to rock 'The Mike' on Saturday

By Todd Forrest
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The Woody Gap Band of Steel has gained a following over the years by never fearing to push the musical envelope. And this Saturday, May 15, band director Doug Roberts and his charges will continue expanding the limits of their craft when they invade Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium for their most challenging steel drum performance to date.

Saturday, the Band of Steel welcomes guest artists Jake Finkbeiner, Timm Johnson, Kayleen Justus, Stephen Lawthorne, Taft Marsh, Dave Morgan, Glenn Rowsey, Tyler Swick and Tracy Thornton for the 5:30 p.m. benefit concert. Admission is free but the band will accept donations.

In the event of rain, the show will move indoors to the UCHS gymnasium.

According to Roberts, this weekend's concert is almost 18 months in the making after ending up on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We've been planning something like this since last year," he said. "We were planning on doing a Georgia regional steel band festival. We had it reserved at Kennesaw State University before COVID hit and we were going to invite every big pan player in the southeast to converge

together and all play with Tracy Thornton as the clinician." More recently, Roberts discussed bringing in Thornton to work with the Band of Steel personally, but after Thornton mentioned that many of his professional colleagues haven't performed live since the start of the pandemic, the preparation got underway for what would eventually become Saturday's concert.

"I said, 'absolutely, the more the merrier,'" Roberts answered when Thornton asked if a few friends could tag along. "That began laying the groundwork for this weekend. We were already working with Kayleen Justus, who is a professor at Kennesaw State, and everything just started coming together and it's been truly awesome."

Before the show, Thornton -- who recently finished recording a steel drum tribute to the band Rush alongside former Dream Theater and Avenged Sevenfold drummer Mike Portnoy -- will conduct a three-day percussion clinic with the Band of Steel, and many of Saturday's guest musicians will participate in the session.

"It's amazing to have someone of his caliber come in, especially since most of the songs we'll perform are his arrangements," Roberts said. "After the three-day clinic, we're going to move everything out to the stadium and

we're going to jam. The professionals are going to show off their individual songs and we're going to join them and play our planned set."

A few of the tunes that guests should recognize on Saturday are *Kashmir* by Led Zepelin, *The Who's Baba O'Riley* (aka Teenage Wasteland), *Take on Me* by A-ha, *Surrender* by Cheap Trick and others.

Music gets underway at 5:30 p.m. and admission is free. Barbecue plates will also be available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Donations are welcomed and all proceeds will remain with the band to help cover the costs of instrument tuning, upgrades, purchases and other expenses. Furthermore, band donors can mail checks to Woody Gap schools. For additional information, feel free to contact Roberts at droberts@ucschools.org or by calling the school at (706) 747-2401.

"With things opening back up, we're hoping to get back to full performances," Roberts added. "We love playing at community events, so if anyone is interested please contact us."

"I'm really proud of these kids, they've overcome a lot. And the music we'll be performing is harder than anything we've ever done before. We're hoping to put on a high-energy show that resonates from the performers to the audience."

Union County 4-H BB Team wraps up 2021 season



Union County 4-H BB Team

Union County BB Team finished the season with Third Place honors at the Walton County Sheriff Championship Shooters have been practicing for the last four months, each shooter practicing the four positions: prone, standing, sitting and kneeling. During the season the team has competed in two virtual shoots and qualified to compete at the State Contest, by shooting a team score of 1550 or better.

BB team members included: Maci Bennett, Jeffery Carroll, Evyn Davis, Reid Deaver, Kade Dills, Emilie Ekeberg, Matthew Elliott, Kaylee Garrett, Lacy Grace, Conner Stephens, Jada Taylor and Piper Taylor.

Third Place shooters at the Walton County Sheriff Championship included: Kade Dills who led the team as the tournament's overall 4th top

shooter. Matthew Elliott, Emilie Ekeberg, Conner Stephens and Grace Lacy all took top 5 honors in the new shooter's division; along with top experienced shooters Piper and Jada Taylor.

Mike Bottinelli and Aaron Dills coach the Union County team. "The team didn't get to travel much this season because of Covid restrictions, but we were able to compete in a couple virtual matches and qualify for the State Competition. I'm proud of how well we finished this year and look forward to next year", says Mike Bottinelli, head coach. Special thanks to parents Angie Dills and Sarah Stephens who helped score targets this season.

The BB Program is a part of the Georgia 4-H Shooting Awareness, Fun and Education Program (S.A.F.E.).



The team is coached by Mike Bottinelli, and Aaron Dills.

4-H is the youth program of the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

For more information about this program or other 4-H offerings, contact Timothy Jennings at the Union County Extension Office at 706-439-6030. NGMay12.215CA

Soccer: Coach Robbins reflects on 2021, already prepping for 2022

By Todd Forrest
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The North Georgia News and Union County men's soccer coach Chris Robbins spoke at length following the Panthers' heartbreaking 2-0 playoff loss to third-ranked Lovett on April 29.

Robbins discussed the loss to Lovett and how his team entered the match coming off the season's best week of practice. He also touched on his favorite memories regarding the Class of 2021, the future of the soccer program, as well as GHSA rule changes and their potential impact on Union County soccer.

NGN: What was the scene like in the locker room after the loss to Lovett? I'm sure that was one of the most difficult situations you've dealt with as a coach.

CR: Anytime you have to deliver that final talk to a team it's always tough. But it was extremely quiet [in the locker room], I can tell you that. When I got in there, it was church quiet.

But it is what it is. We gave every bit of effort that we could give, we were just out-gunned athletically. It's the coach's job to find ways for your team to win when you don't match up very well with the opponent. Coach [Jon] Krieger and I came up with a few things that other teams had not seen and we felt like they would be effective. We had a phenomenal practice that week and the boys were excited and felt like they had a really good chance [vs. Lovett].



Union County men's soccer coach Chris Robbins address his team before the Lovett match. Photo/Todd Forrest

A lot of times when you step up to the private-school level [you feel like you don't stand a chance]. Lovett has 22 players that play club ball or travel ball and we only have five, so we were simply out-manned, but we still felt like we could have won so that makes it even more heartbreaking.

NGN: Then, as if they need more help, Lovett gets a questionable penalty kick right off the bat that puts us behind 1-0.

CR: It was a ridiculous call. [The Lovett player that drew the foul] couldn't do anything from the position he was in and was about to go out of bounds. Then, [Union junior sweeper MJ Delatte] kicked the ball and was called for the foul. I don't think he's ever been called for a foul

in the box during his entire high school career. Supposedly that [Lovett player] has a reputation for getting into the box and flopping to try and draw fouls. All the ref has to do is just look at the situation and realize the [offensive player] has no play right there so he's taking a dive. He's literally going out of bounds but they give him a PK, which is a [ridiculous] call.

NGN: After the penalty kick, it seemed like we settled down and would hold Lovett to just that one goal in the first half. But then we gave up a second late in the half. How much did that affect what we were trying to do and what was the mood like at halftime?

CR: The guys were extremely positive. Even being down

2-0 they felt like they could get back in the game. We held them scoreless in the second half and had a few scoring opportunities. But eventually, we just started to press a little too hard. It's not like basketball where you can hit a 3-pointer and go from down two points to up one. It's a fight for every goal, and when that clock starts ticking away, it's hard to remain under control.

But it just wasn't meant to be. And that's what I told them. I said 'guys, it's just a game. You did everything that you could do.' But if you believe that in the real world the good guys always win, then you're mistaken. Just because you want something more than the other guys doesn't mean you're going to get it.

Just because you have a better attitude, better character and you're more respectful, and you're not taunting and dropping F-bombs throughout the game, it doesn't mean that you're going to win.

The older I get, the more I see that there is more to life than winning games. For instance, I told our guys that win or lose, I would take them over any other team 1,000 times just because of the way they act. Eventually, the way you act is going to catch up with you, especially if you treat people incorrectly.

This team has a bond unlike any other that I've been blessed to coach. If you listen to them, they don't call themselves a team, they say 'family.' And they have become a family. They love each other, look out for each other and protect each other. It was a tough loss, but at the same time, when everything was all said and done, Aaron [Helton] led them in prayer, and I said to myself, 'what I'm witnessing right here is way better than winning a game.'

NGN: Is that what will you remember most about this senior class?

CR: Yes. That and just the overall improvement in some of the kids. As I said, we have five kids that play any kind of travel ball. For the rest of the guys, they see a soccer ball maybe three months out of the year. Some of the guys made monster gains and were continuing to get better, but it's just hard to match up with kids that play almost year-round. I did everything physically to try and

match the speed of Lovett in practice, but it still wasn't enough. I did the same thing when we made the State Championship match [in 2019], but luckily, all those private schools were in different classifications then.

NGN: According to Tim Hunter, the girls have a talented class coming up from middle school. What's next year's freshmen class looking like for you?

CR: Pretty good. I invited some of those guys to come practice with the varsity after their season was over and I saw some talent. We're going to be a young team next year there's no doubt, but I'm willing to push them as hard as they want. It depends on how hard they're willing to work and how bad they want it.

I think we'll be okay in region play, but getting past the private schools at the state level is always going to be difficult. But I have a lot of confidence in this year's freshmen, they just need to get a little bigger before they become sophomores. And from what I understand, the soccer program has generated a lot of excitement at the school so we might have some new players come out.

I'm also hoping the new home school rule will allow some players to join our program. I know a couple of guys that are interested. But you really never know what's going to happen from year to year.

(On the heels of their victory at Union, Lovett blanked Bacon County 10-0, setting up a final four showdown at top-ranked and unbeaten Bremen.)

Local Racing: Jones takes checkered flag at TCR

By Blake Lynch
Racing Reporter
North Georgia News

Brasstown, NC - Tri-County Racetrack's third race of the season was held on May 7 with cool weather and a red-hot racing program.

This event was originally scheduled for Thursday night, but due to the rain early in the week, it was moved to Friday.

Friday also marked the FWD Spring Championship with an \$800 prize to the winner along with the first points race of the season.

FWD: Blairsville's Shannon Jones' No. 7 car took home the win. No. 19R Sean Rice took second place. No. J3 Josh Dease was third. No. 232 Jim Exum came in fourth. No. 28 Jason Coats took fifth.



Street Stock: The 12 car of Murphy's Roger Beaver took home the win. No. 21 Troy Turner came in second place. No. 35 Jody Winkler finished third. No. 01 Jacob Lynch took

home fourth place. No. 76 Bobby Thrasher rounded out the top five.

Modified Hobby: Murphy's Jamie Oliver (No. 38) took home a win. No. 37 Michael Barnett took home second place. Third place was No. 25 Jacob Hamby. Fourth went to No. 44 Bobby Elkins. Fifth was No.51 Drew Deaver.

Pony: No. 47 Dustin Pruitt took home the win. F11 Kaylee Payne placed second. No. 00 Cam Winkler took third place. No. 38 Josh Cordin finished fourth. No. 01 Phil Wood rounded out the top five.

Crate: The 'Real Deal' No. 7 Jason Deal took home the win with No. 4 Danny Ledford in his rearview. No. 4H Levi Hicks was third. No. 108 Chuck Southard took home fourth place. No. 156 Andy Standridge placed fifth.

The next race is Friday May 14. Come out and support your local track and hometown drivers.

Women's Golf Day at Old Union Golf Course scheduled for Tuesday, June 1

Women's Golf Day is a five plus hour experience happening globally where women and girls can experience golf for the first time or where current players can play and engage with women interested in golf. It is being hosted at golf courses and retail locations all around the world on the same day. Old Union Golf Course, Cameron Forest and the Old Union Women's Golf Association are planning a fun filled day celebrating "Women's Golf Day".

All women are invited to attend, regardless of skill level. If you know someone who is "playing around with the idea" of learning golf, or curious about the game, please invite them. This is a great way to empower women to embrace the game, cultivate new friendships and enjoy the great outdoors the Georgia mountains have to offer.

You may go to www.OldUnionWGA.com and register if you would like to participate in playing 9 holes, games, prizes, golf lessons,

Learn to play Pickleball

Free Beginners Classes every Saturday at 10 a.m. (weather permitting). All equipment is provided and there is no need to sign-up... just come. Courts are located on Chase Drive behind the Health Department. For more info contact: blairsvillepickleball@gmail.com.

free Chick-fil-A and wine tasting... all for \$10. Or you may text or call Karen Mussoline at 352-638-3649 All skill levels are welcome!

Events - Golf: Check-in time: 8:30 AM (Coffee, donuts, etc.); Shotgun start: 10:30 AM; 9 holes; Cost \$10.

Activities: Old Union Golf Course will have an obstacle putting green; prizes will be awarded to the 4 best putters. Chip-in contest consisting of a large basket at the chipping area where the ladies will have a certain number of

balls to attempt to chip-in the basket. Prizes will be awarded to the winners.

Mini Lessons: Mary Holmes at the range giving a lesson *tentative; Matt Cook giving chipping lessons.

Luncheon and Drinks: Chick-fil-A will provide free lunch; The Wine Shoppe will provide a free wine tasting (The Wine Shoppe will not be able to sell wine at the golf course, but they will be available to take orders to pick up at their store in Blairsville.)

Union County Sports Center

Union County Sports Center will now be open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday 8 AM - 8 PM, Wednesday, 8 AM - 5 PM, and Saturday 8 AM - 4 PM. There is no fee and basketballs are available. The court cannot be reserved. It will be open to everyone for walking and basketball. The gym is located at 519 Industrial Blvd.

Meeks Park pool will open Saturday, May 29, 2021 for the season!

The pool will be open daily 12 PM-6 PM \$5 per person, children 5 and under are free.

Family season passes for up to 5 members in a household or single person membership will be available to purchase at the Union County Sports Center May 17th or at the pool when it opens. Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.

Mark your calendars!
Meeks Park pool will begin booking pool parties for the summer Monday, May 17, 2021 for Union County residents only. Booking for non-residents will begin June 1st.
Parties are available T/Th/F/Sat/Sun 6 PM - 8 PM.
Cost of \$145 includes use of facility and 2 lifeguards for up to 40 people.
A \$25 non-refundable deposit will be due at time of booking.
Please go to the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd. or you may call 706-439-6074 to reserve by phone with a credit or debit card.
Our office is open 8 AM-4:30 PM M-F, closed for lunch 12 PM-1 PM.

