

Wrestling: Panthers seek first Duals State Tournament appearance

Despite concerns, Coach Byers remains optimistic ahead of Friday's Area Duals tourney

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County Wrestling was off to a hot start in 2020-21 when COVID-19 tapped the pause button on the Panthers' mat action last month.

Now, with business set to resume this week, Union County is gearing up to participate in the Area 8 Duals Tournament at Fannin County on Friday, Jan. 15.

Since the program's inception almost a decade ago, Union wrestling has garnered consistent success at the individual level; however, the Panthers have never qualified for State in the duals (team) tournament. But since the conclusion of last season, there's been a program-wide sentiment that 2021 would be different, according to coach Justin Byers. And despite the recent season-ending injury to 182-pound grappler Sean Phillips, Byers is confident his team can crack the top-two this weekend and make its first appearance at the State Duals tourney.

"I definitely think we [have a better shot at qualifying for State] this year," he said. "Looking at the numbers and experience we had coming back at the end of last year, I believed it was possible to contend for



Union County wrestling coach Justin Byers watches his team warm up prior to last month's duals match with Jackson County. Photo/Todd Forrest

a top-three in the old Area. But when the new Area was aligned, I had a really good feeling that we could literally win it."

According to Byers, host Fannin County and perennial State title contender Banks County should provide Union

with its most formidable competition of the weekend.

"It's going to be an uphill battle," he said. "Fannin has a great program, and Banks is rebuilding, but they have a great coach and are still an elite program.

"It's been a struggle for

us. We wrestled in three duals tournaments (before Christmas) and haven't wrestled since, and that worries me. We also had an injury, Sean Phillips was hurt in practice and will be out for the season, leaving us with two holes in the lineup. But I still believe that we can take one of

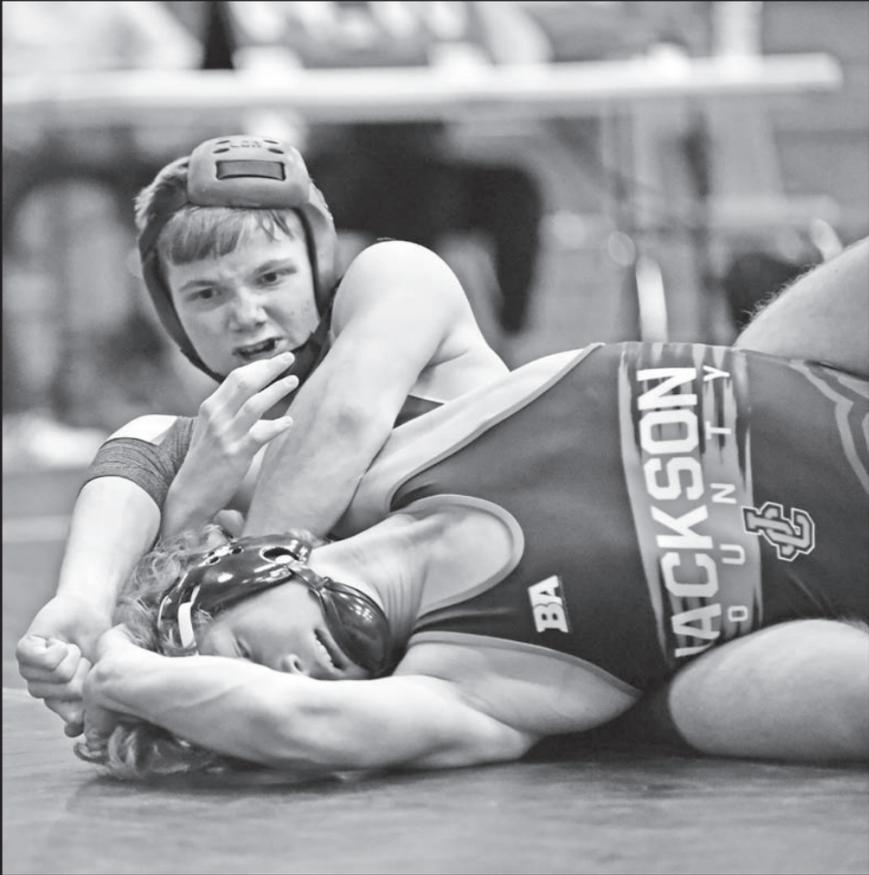
those top two spots [at Area].

"In the meantime, we just continue to practice, train and try to get better. Even if we can't meet, I still talk to the team every day, telling them that we should consider each practice a blessing and that we need to capitalize on it

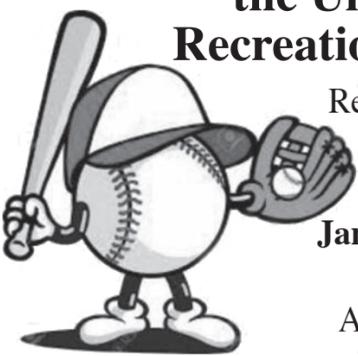
and leverage the blessing into something positive. This has been a unique season and I'm extremely proud of the effort and dedication this team has shown, and I'm confident that good things are still in store for this season."

Union County High School winter sports photos: November/December 2020

Photos by Todd Forrest



Baseball and Softball Registration at the Union County Recreation Department



Registration for baseball and softball opens at the Union County Recreation Department
January 5, 2021 - February 19, 2021 for ages 5-14.

Age you will be September 1, 2021 is the age group you will play in.
Fee is \$55.00

Please register online at unioncountygga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center, 519 Industrial Blvd.
Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.

Soccer registration at Union County Recreation Department

Soccer registration will open at the Union County Recreation Department
January 5, 2021- February 19, 2021 for ages 5-14.

Age you are January 1, 2021 determines age group you play in.
Copy of birth certificate is required.

Fee is \$55.00
Please register online at unioncountygga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd.

Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.

