

Sports

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Wrestling: Union sending a record number to Sectionals

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Elberton - One year ago this week, Union County Wrestling coach Justin Byers was thrilled with the direction of his program.

Fresh off the Area Championships, Union County Wrestling had just qualified four competitors for the upcoming State Sectionals - tying a program record.

"We're a young team with only three seniors and we tied a (program) record with four going to sectionals, so I'm very proud of them," Byers told the *North Georgia News* in February 2019.

One year later, and with only one senior on the squad, the program continues to trend upward. During last Saturday's Area Championships at Elbert County, Union County placed a school-record five wrestlers in the top-four, all qualifying for this weekend's State Sectional tournament at Lamar County.

Turner (John) Cone (160 pounds), Brady Guild (152), Cristian Martinez (182), Sean Phillips (170) and Eli Smith-Foot (285) each placed third and Eli Smith-Foot (285) finished in fourth.

"We came into the season knowing we had at least three or four solids (for sectionals) and another three that (could potentially qualify)," Byers said, following Saturday's Area Championships.

"But we've had to battle through a lot this season. We've



L-R: Union County Wrestling's State Sectional qualifiers from last weekend's Area Tournament at Elbert County: Cristian Martinez (182 pounds), Turner Cone (160), Brady Guild (152), Sean Phillips (170) and Eli Smith-Foot (285). Photo/Todd Forrest

battled through sickness the last couple of weeks, we've had injuries, we had the unexpected accident with Trevor Guild that put him out of the tournament, but they still wrestled their butts off today. And now we have five going (to sectionals) for sure, and two more that could potentially go as alternates."

Each of Union County's qualifiers advanced to the Area

semifinals on Saturday before suffering their first loss of the day. And with a spot in sectionals at stake later in the afternoon, all five came out on top in their opening match of the consolation bracket.

With the exception of Smith-Foot, who placed fourth, each of Union's five qualifiers were victorious in their respective third-place bouts -- their final matches of the day.

Martinez and Phillips each qualified for sectionals last year. Alternates Guild and Smith-Foot just missed out, while Cone is in his first year with the program. And following Saturday's action, Byers talked about the improvement he's witnessed in Guild and Smith-Foot over the last 12 months to progress from alternates to automatic qualifiers.

"There's definitely been

an improvement with those two guys and with everyone" he said. "Over the summer we went up to Ohio for a really great camp up there, the Jeff Jordan Camp.

"We came back and had a really good (summer) with open mats. Then, once school started back they were lifting and running and getting ready for the season.

"These are some great

young men that I'm very proud of. This is a very tough sport and it takes a lot of commitment. It's not a sport that you can take time off from."

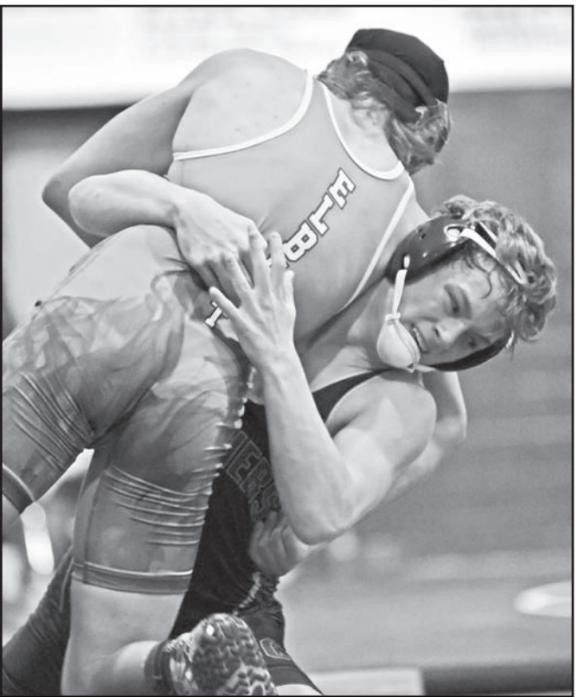
Sectionals are scheduled to begin on Friday at noon in Lamar County (Barnesville) and will end on Saturday. The top-six from sectionals will advance to the State Championships on Feb. 12-15 in Macon.



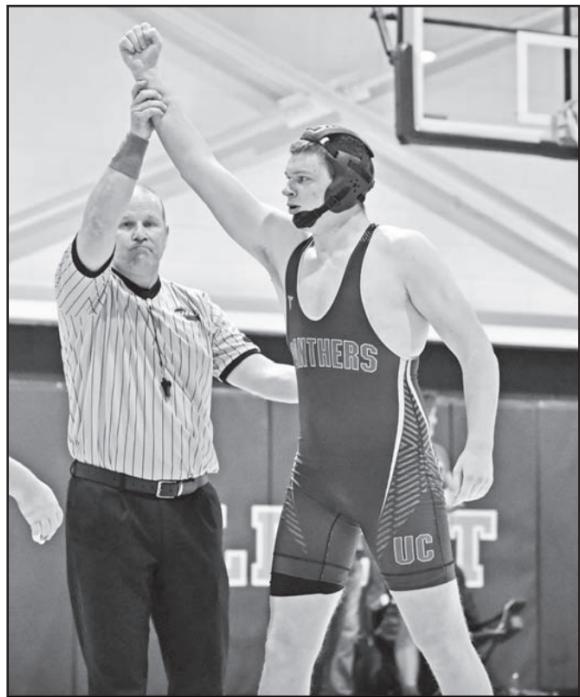
Sean Phillips slams his opponent during last Saturday's Area Championships. Photo/Todd Forrest



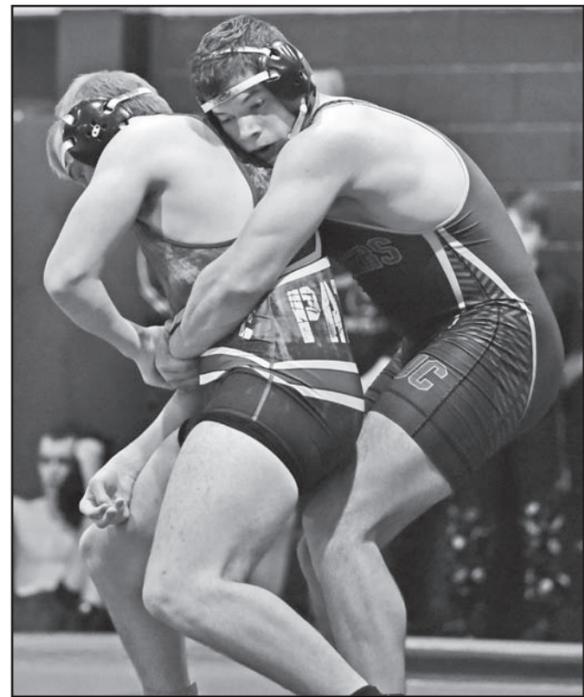
Turner Cone during the early rounds of last weekend's Area Championships. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County's Brady Guild in action at Area. Photo/Todd Forrest



Eli Smith-Foot punches his ticket to Sectionals. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Cristian Martinez placed third at Area. Photo/Todd Forrest