

# Sports

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## Coach Robbins: Union soccer 'chomping at the bit' following postponements

### Panthers thump Indians 5-0; Lady Panthers allow three second-half goals in 3-0 loss at Lumpkin

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**Dahlonega** - After the 2020 season was cut short and the early stages of 2021 were littered with weather cancellations, Union County Soccer returned to the pitch for the first time in 352 days when they opened at Lumpkin County on Friday night.

But with an entire day's worth of rain already soaking the Lumpkin County High School playing surface and evening showers in the forecast, both Union County teams were unsure if they would even get a single game in before Region 8-AA competition opens on Tuesday at Banks County. Fortunately, Lumpkin gave the go-ahead around 1 p.m., providing the UCHS coaches and players a rare sigh of relief.

"Our guys have been chomping at the bit to play," said new Union County men's coach Chris Robbins after the win. "We were just anxious to get out here and get a match in. You can only practice so much before you have to be at game speed, and that goes for any sport."

**Panthers 5, Lumpkin County 0** - Kyler Robbins and Malachi Patrick scored two goals apiece, Benton Gregory added a penalty kick and goalkeeper Aaron Helton recorded his 15th career shutout in Union County's season-opening victory at Lumpkin County.

"I'm happy with the win and I know our guys will get better as the season progresses," Coach Robbins said. "Right now, we're missing one player but I think (Coach Krieger) and I have our formation where we need it. Two years ago, when we made our run at State, it



Junior Kyler Robbins battles for possession during Union County's 5-0 victory at Lumpkin County on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

took us until midseason to get our formation right." The Panthers were the aggressors early on Friday, challenging Lumpkin's sophomore keeper with three shots on goal (two by freshman Zuriel Mancillas and one from senior Nolan Bachman) over the first 10 minutes. After one more Mancillas attempt sailed high in the 26th minute, Union finally broke through in the 27th when Zach Jackson fed Kyler Robbins for a 1-0 advantage.

Lumpkin County's potential equalizer missed wide in the 32nd minute, and then an offside wiped away another Indians' scoring opportunity in the final seconds of the half.

Still up 1-0 early in the

second, the Panthers could not take advantage of an open goal situation in the 47th minute. Moments later, Aaron Helton turned away the Indians with the first of three saves on the night.

Union County finally opened up some breathing room in minute 58 as Kyler Robbins converted a feed from Patrick for a 2-0 lead.

After Helton's final save a minute later, the Panthers fired wide on their next two shots before a free kick in the 61st minute led to Patrick's first goal.

Five minutes later, Benton Gregory put the Indians away for good with a penalty kick to extend the margin to



Both Union goalkeepers had a night to remember at Lumpkin County. Senior Aaron Helton (L) recorded his 15th career shutout and freshman Kyra McKechnie (R) had 25 saves in her debut. Photo/Todd Forrest

4-0. Patrick collected the brace, joining Kyler Robbins, when he blasted his second goal of the night past the Lumpkin keeper for a 5-0 score during the 73rd minute.

Freshman Eli Decker was credited with the assist on Patrick's second goal.

"Our young guys really stepped up big tonight; especially the freshman," Coach Robbins said. "It's a big deal when your 14 year olds are able to step in and battle with 17 and 18 year olds, so I am very proud of them."

The Panthers open Region 8-AA play on Tuesday when they visit Banks County. The Leopards are currently 1-3 on the year and have been

outscored 23-1 over their four matches. However, Banks County is 1-0 in region play following its 1-0 victory over Riverside Military Academy.

On Friday, March 5, Union County travels to Elbert County before going to Rabun County on March 9.

The Panthers' next home game is March 19 vs. Banks County.

"We kept our composure and didn't pick up any cards tonight, so I am very happy about that," Coach Robbins said. "We're just working on some things right now, trying to get it right, but I'm just pleased with the team overall. They're a good group of kids, they are a balanced team and hopefully

we'll have a hot year."

**Game notes:** Union County opened the season at No. 9 in EuroSport's Class AA Top 10. But since the Panthers didn't play their first match for more than two weeks, and others have already had 5-6 contests, the Panthers have dropped from the rankings.

**Lady Panthers 0, No. 4 Lumpkin County 3** - Despite an onslaught from fourth-ranked Lumpkin County, Union's freshman goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie did her best to give the Lady Panthers a fighting chance well into the second half.

In the first match of her

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## Basketball: Callaway bounces Panthers, Lady Panthers from State first round

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**Hogansville** - Both Union County basketball teams suffered a first-round exit during last week's Class AA State Tournament, bringing an arduous 2020-21 season to a close.

The Lady Panthers were done in by a cold second quarter on Wednesday night, allowing top-seeded Callaway to blow the contest open 39-23 at halftime, en route to a 72-45 victory. Meanwhile, the Union men turned in a courageous performance but could not keep pace over the final seven minutes in a 65-42 loss.

**Panthers 42, Callaway 65** - Despite entering the post-season winless, the Union County men gave the Region 5-AA Champion Callaway all it could handle for three-plus quarters before running out of gas down the stretch.

Locked in a tightly contested battle for much of the night, the Panthers held a second-half lead for the first time since their 1-point loss at Fannin County on Dec. 12. In front of 13-11 in the first period, Union County entered the second all square at 13-13 before trailing 22-21 at the break. Less than a minute into the third frame, senior Kaston Hemphill, who made his first appearance since a Jan. 23 injury, knocked down a 12-foot jumper to move the Panthers ahead 23-22.

The Cavaliers responded



Senior Kaston Hemphill made his first appearance in 32 days at Callaway after suffering an injury in January. Photo/Todd Forrest

with a 14-2 run to build a 36-25 advantage, but Union County continued to scrap and claw, refusing to go away at 44-36 in the final moments of the third.

Junior Lake Hughes did his best to keep the Panthers within striking distance, scoring eight of his 13 points in the third on 2 for 4 from 3-point range and one steal.

Following a Hemphill free throw that trimmed the deficit to 47-37 early in the

fourth, Callaway finally delivered the knockout blow in the form of a 10-0 outburst, ignited by a 4-point play just shy of the seven-minute mark.

The two squads combined for 50 free throws, but neither were proud of the results as Union County hit 9 of 26 (35%), and Callaway made just 9 of 24 (38%). However, the Cavs made up for it with a 47% performance from the field (24 for 51) on 8 of 23 (35%)



Freshman Sofia McNabb posted career-high performances of 7 points and 8 rebounds in her State tourney debut at Callaway. Photo/Todd Forrest

from long range.

The Panthers, meanwhile, shot 14 for 36 (39%) overall and 5 of 18 (28%) from 3-point territory.

Union County began the evening by hitting 2 of 3 from deep and 4 for 8 overall during the first quarter, resulting in a 13-13 tie. Junior Landon Kight proved a tough matchup early on, scoring seven of his 12 points in the first, connecting on a trey and two free throws.

Despite trailing by one at halftime, the Panthers were ice cold in the second, hitting just 3 of 11 in the quarter on 0 for 5 from three.

Along with Hughes' 13 points and Kight's 12, Hemphill scored 8 points in his return with four rebounds and an assist.

Braylen Rader had 3 points, while Caleb John, Hayden Payne and Eli Underwood added 2 points each.

Kight led Union County with five boards, John dished out three assists and Hughes had three steals.

Griffin Young finished with two assists and Sean Donohue added one dime.

Hughes and Underwood pulled down four rebounds each; Daniel Snow had three.

Callaway finished with a narrow edge on the boards, out-rebounding the Panthers 32-29. The Cavs outscored the visitors 18-14 in the paint and 21-2 in transition.

Ball security difficulties led to the largest discrepancy as Union County's 23 giveaways resulted in a 31-8 Callaway advantage in points off turnovers.

**Lady Panthers 45, Callaway 72** - Following a 17-point first period, the Lady Panthers were limited to just 18 over the next two quarters, allowing Callaway to pull away in a 72-45 victory.

Ava Hunter wrapped up her junior season with team-highs of 13 points and eight rebounds. Meanwhile, Union County finishes its topsy-turvy 2020-21 campaign at 2-13 overall and 0-6 in Region 8-AA, just one year removed from equaling the second-highest win total in program history at 23-7 and claiming the Region 8-AA title.

The Lady Panthers opened Wednesday's road trip with a 4-0 advantage for the second straight contest after

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