

Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

Soccer: Fourth-ranked Panthers open region play with a bang

Robbins and Solorio combine for eight goals in 10-0 win over Elbert County

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The fourth-ranked Union County men (7-1, 2-0) conveyed an early-season statement in their quest to repeat as 8-AA Champions, kicking off region competition last week with a pair of 10-0 home-field victories over Banks County and Elbert County.

And their message to the rest of 8-AA was resounding and unmistakable: The road to a region title still goes through Blairsville.

Sophomore Zuriel Mancillas and junior Wilson Walker each recorded a hat trick during Tuesday's thumping of Banks County, while senior Kyler Robbins collected a brace and two assists. In Friday's Senior Night win over Elbert County, freshman Antonio Solorio picked up his first high school hat trick in the Panthers' second clean sheet of the week, only to be topped by a career-best five-goal outing from Robbins.

Goalkeepers Trent Baker and Ethan McBride both saw action in the two shutout victories.

In Union County's Tuesday, March 1 rout of Banks, the Panthers needed less than 40 minutes to end the match via the 10-point mercy rule, knocking out the Leopards with one second remaining before halftime via a Liam Smith penalty kick.

While Union County spent most of the first half scoring at will, the Panthers needed



(L) Antonio Solorio (14) flicks a header past the Elbert County goalkeeper, spotting the home team an early 2-0 advantage last Friday night -- the freshman would finish with his first career hat trick in the win. (R) Senior Kyler Robbins fires away during his five-goal showcase vs. Elbert County. Photos/Todd Forrest

almost eight minutes to get on the board but eventually broke through courtesy of Mancillas. Walker extended Union's margin to 2-0 during the 30th minute and Solorio made it a 3-0 game 29 seconds later via a rebound in the box.

Mancillas opened the flood gates with his second goal, just 20 seconds removed from Solorio's shot. And during the 15th minute, Robbins found the net via a curling, left-footed strike beyond the outstretched fingertips of the Leopards' keeper.

With his team on top 5-0,

Walker's athleticism shined in a 1-on-1 situation to spot the Panthers a 6-0 advantage in the 18th minute. Mancillas put the finishing touches on his three-goal evening during the 33rd minute, and Robbins made it an 8-0 contest in the 35th.

Walker's hat trick came with 55 seconds left before the intermission, and with one tick remaining on the clock, Banks County committed a costly foul in the box that allowed Smith to end the match on a penalty kick.

Mancillas and Solorio added an assist for the Panthers,

while sophomore Kooper Ashcraft, senior MJ Delatte and sophomore Seth Rutan also picked up one helper apiece.

Union County needed almost the entire second half to mount a 10-0 advantage over Elbert County on Friday night, eventually closing the door on the Blue Devils during the 74th minute by way of Robbins' fifth and final goal.

Solorio opened the scoring in the 4th minute before the freshman made it a 2-0 game eight minutes later game via a header off a Mancillas corner kick. Robbins started to impose



(L) Antonio Solorio (14) flicks a header past the Elbert County goalkeeper, spotting the home team an early 2-0 advantage last Friday night -- the freshman would finish with his first career hat trick in the win. (R) Senior Kyler Robbins fires away during his five-goal showcase vs. Elbert County. Photos/Todd Forrest

his will beginning in the 13th minute with the first of his four straight goals, spotting his team a 6-0 halftime advantage.

Delatte found the net with a rebound goal in the 48th and Walker put the finishing touches on a corner kick during the 58th minute. Solorio's hat trick stretched the difference to 9-0 in the 62nd and Robbins halted the action with 6:36 on the clock.

Union County hosts Rabun County (2-3, 1-0) on Tuesday with the girls getting underway at 5 p.m. The Wildcats are coming off a 4-0

victory at Banks County on Friday night.

On Friday, March 11, the Panthers will host the defending Class AAAA State runner-up when East Hall pays a visit to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium beginning at 5:30 p.m. Last season, the Vikings needed a late goal to edge the Panthers 1-0 in Rabbitown.

Union County concludes the first half of the 8-AA schedule next week when they host last year's region runner-up, Riverside Military Academy, on Tuesday, March 15.

Garrett reflects on 2021-22, envisions bright future for basketball program

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

When the dust settled on the 2021-22 basketball season, the *North Georgia News* and Union County boys basketball coach Corey Garrett spent some time reminiscing the highs, lows and in-betweens of the Panthers' recent campaign.

Coming off an 0-14 mark in 2020-21, expectations in the fall weren't all that high outside of Blairsville. But following a season-opening victory over Class 6A Habersham Central, observers and outside media began to take notice of the upstart mountain program.

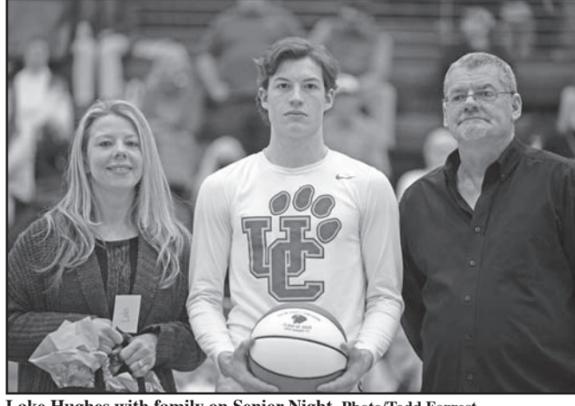
Unfortunately, the Panthers' frontcourt suffered a significant blow when Landon Kight injured his hand, costing the All-Region senior the remainder of Union's non-region slate.

With Kight sidelined, Garrett leaned more heavily upon a young, inexperienced rotation, forcing his returning seniors and the incoming youth to discover their on-court chemistry earlier than anticipated.

What followed was a riveting three months that put Union County basketball back on the map and restored confidence in the future of a once-struggling program.

NGN: Before the season, you said the team's success would ride on getting the seniors and young guys to gel. Looking back, would you consider yourself successful in that regard?

CG: Yeah, I think so.



Landon Kight with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Landon Kight with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

We knew that would be a big deal coming in, but when Landon went down early in the season, we had to start moving guys around and plugging guys into new situations. But as far as gelling those guys together, I think we were clearly successful. We went from 0-14 to 12-14, so that's an obvious improvement.

NGN: Was there a moment where you realized that things had finally clicked and the team had a shot at making a run at the region? Did it come early vs. Habersham, Towns

or Chestatee, or did it come later on after we were finally 100%?

CG: We started off as well as we could beating Habersham, but then we went to Rabun Gap and that game was it was. Then we had those few close losses-in-a-row against Cherokee Bluff, Wilson Academy, North Hall, Towns County at home and at Fannin County where we were right there at the very end in each one. But during that stretch, knowing that Landon was out and we were playing so many



Caleb John with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Hayden Payne with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

young guys, just seeing us compete, that was definitely a bright spot. Nobody likes losing, but I knew that we were onto something back then.

We had a long Christmas break, but we came back and beat Commerce, who I felt was a good team. Then we had Rabun on the ropes and even though we lost, I knew we were right there and could make some noise [in 8-AA].

NGN: And from what I remember, in some of those losses like Cherokee Bluff and Towns, we had young guys

thing that really surprised you this year?

CG: Maybe the way Landon came back from his injury and was ready to go right away, then he gave us all those monster 25-point double-doubles over the final two or three weeks. But I don't know if he was a big surprise because he's always been capable of that. I think what the freshmen did was probably more of a surprise. I knew what they could do coming in, but they by far exceeded my expectations.

This season was just a great ride and I was ready to start practicing again the next day [after the season-ending loss to Lovett]. I was so fired up about what we had accomplished and this was one of those seasons you don't want to see end. It wasn't a 20-win season, but it was different because of the growth of the young guys and the resiliency of the returners after what we went through last year. They came back this year with so much hunger and excitement, it was a blast. And it's just fuel for the fire of what's to come.

NGN: I know we lose a lot of seniors, but when you look at what we return next year: A point guard in [Houston] Henry, a wing scorer in [Jude] Ellis and a post presence in [Eli] Underwood, would you agree there are not as many holes to fill as you would normally see after graduating such a large class?

CG: Yes, and had we not had such a large senior group, I wouldn't have been afraid to throw those other young guys into the mix.

NGN: Was there any-

See *UC Basketball*, Page 3B

Lady Panthers overwhelm Banks and Elbert, surge atop Region standings

Union County seeks control of 8-AA when defending region champs visit Tuesday

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers (3-2, 2-0) are off to a 2-0 start in Region 8-AA following consecutive home wins over Banks County and Elbert County, setting up a Tuesday showdown with defending region champion Rabun County (1-3, 0-1).

Sophomore Lara Turner returned from the hardwood and collected a hat trick and two assists in her first game back - an 8-1 victory over Banks County (3-5, 1-0) on Tuesday, March 1.

Sophomore Zoe Crawford chipped in one goal and two assists as six different Lady Panthers found the net vs. the Leopards.

Despite the one-sided final, Union County nursed a 1-0 advantage into the second half courtesy of a Turner goal in the 22nd minute off a feed from junior Haleigh Helcher.

Still clinging to a 1-0 edge during the 47th, Turner found junior Kaylee Helton to spark a three-goal onslaught in under five minutes. Turner's second goal came 110 seconds later via a Crawford assist and sophomore Avery Murray connected with freshman Ariel McCarter -- also fresh off the basketball court -- in the 52nd minute to open up a 4-0 lead.

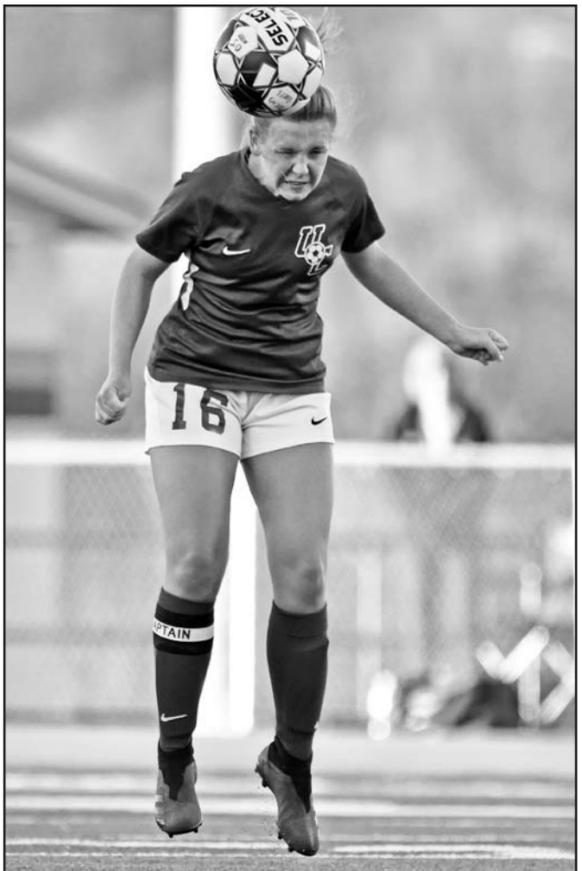
The Leopards' lone



Sophomore Lara Turner looks for room to operate during her three-goal performance vs. Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

score came in the 61st but Union answered six minutes later when an unassisted goal from Crawford resulted in a 5-1 tally in the 64th. Senior Melia Whitener found Turner

a minute later, then Turner returned the favor during the 69th minute, setting up a Whitener goal and a 7-1 runaway. Senior Lorelei Skinner



Senior Lorelei Skinner returns a Banks County kick with her head during Union's 8-1 win on Tuesday. Photo/Todd Forrest

accounted for the evening's final goal via a feed from junior Kaylee Ashcraft in the 72nd minute.

Union County's offense struggled early during its Se-

nior Night victory over Elbert County (2-6, 0-1) on Friday but two goals from Turner helped the Lady Panthers pull away in a 3-0 win. Turner kicked off the

scoring in the 11th minute, courtesy of a helper from senior Savannah Evans, but Union County wouldn't find the net for the remainder of the half. Sophomore goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie turned away a pair of Blue Devils' free kicks during the first 40 minutes, finishing the half with four saves.

Shots by Whitener, Turner and Crawford couldn't beat the Elbert keeper in the early stages of the second half, while the Blue Devils were unable to capitalize during a one-on-one breakaway in the 51st minute. Helcher finally pushed the margin to 2-0 when she converted a pass from Murray during the 59th, then Turner put Elbert County away in the 69th courtesy of a Whitener feed.

McKechnie stopped eight Blue Devils' shots with her final save coming in the 80th minute.

Union County wraps up the first half of Region 8-AA competition when they host Rabun County at 5 p.m. on Tuesday.

The Lady Cats are coming off an 11-6 loss at Banks County on Friday and currently sport a 1-3 record after graduating senior superstar Lauren Barnes, who tallied a mind-boggling 65 goals in 14 games last spring -- 11 coming in their two victories over Union County.

Baseball: Panthers split with Fannin, stumble late at White and Gilmer

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County (1-8) baseball ended a six-game skid, picking up its first win of 2022 behind a gem from right-hander Parker Grisham and three RBIs from Logan Anderson during a 5-2 victory at Fannin County on Friday, March 4.

The win came 48 hours removed from the Panthers' 9-8 home loss to Fannin on Wednesday, March 2, where Union nearly rallied from a 6-1 deficit despite committing six errors. The Panthers dropped another heartbreaker at Gilmer on Tuesday, March 1, when the Bobcats pushed across the winning run with two away in the bottom of the seventh.

Over the weekend, the Panthers were on the wrong end of a doubleheader sweep at White County, falling 15-3 in game one before giving up a pair of late runs in a 6-5 game-two loss.

Panthers 5, Fannin County 2 - Grisham took a shutout into the seventh but departed after scattering eight hits, allowing one earned run and striking out five over 6 2/3 innings.

Senior lefty Lake Hughes nailed down the save via a five-pitch strikeout after Fannin County pushed across two runs, then loaded the bases with two down in the seventh.

Union County built its 5-0 advantage with two in the first, one in the third and two more in the seventh. The two-run opening frame came after Hughes and Bailey Brown walked to begin the game and Thomas Dyer singled to load the bases with nobody out. An RBI groundout by Chris Fletcher plated Hughes then Tyler Loyd was plunked by a 2-1 offering to load the bags again. Anderson made it a 2-0 contest by working a five-pitch walk before consecutive strikeouts limited the damage.

Grisham kept Fannin off the board after allowing two Rebels to reach during the first and second innings. After escaping with the shutout intact, his offense rewarded him in the third when Fletcher reached on an error and eventually came around to score on a wild pitch.

Grisham survived a bases-loaded situation in the bottom half of the frame, then worked around a two-out single in the fourth and sixth innings. Brown and Dyer started the seventh with base knocks before moving into scoring position via a double steal. Later, with two on and two out, Anderson welcomed Fannin's Landon Norton to the mound with a two-run single up the middle.

Grisham fanned the lead-off man to start the seventh but ran into trouble by plunking the second batter. His defense didn't do him any favors either, committing a one-out error ahead of an RBI single to left, but Grisham regrouped by inducing a grounder to third for the second out.

An RBI single and a walk brought the winning run to the dish, forcing Union County head coach Zach Odom to call



RHP/1B Parker Grisham had a productive week. Photo/Todd Forrest

on Hughes for the game-ending K. **Panthers 8, Fannin County 9** - Hughes drove in two, walked twice and scored twice but it wasn't enough to ferry the Panthers out of a 6-1 hole.

Fannin County touched up Loyd for seven hits, six runs (four earned) and five walks over 2 1/3 before James McPherson entered to work 4 1/3 in relief - surrendering four hits and three runs (two earned).

Down 4-0 in the bottom of the first, Hughes worked a leadoff walk and came around on Brown's RBI double. Trailing 6-1 in the third, Brown walked and later scored via an error off the bat of Caleb Towe, then Union trimmed the margin to 6-4 in the fourth on an RBI groundout by Hughes and a run-scoring base hit from Fletcher.

Fannin's one-out double made it 7-4 in the fifth until Anderson answered by plating Towe with a double in the Union half of the frame.

With a Rebels' baserunner on third and one down, the Panthers were unable to turn an inning-ending double play in the sixth, allowing Fannin County to widen its cushion to 8-5.

However, Union County's best opportunity came in the bottom of the sixth when Hughes walked, Brown was hit by a pitch and Fletcher reached on an error to bring the go-ahead run to the plate with no outs.

Loyd brought home Hughes with a sacrifice fly and Towe beat out a double-play ball, allowing Brown to score from third and cut the margin to 8-7.

Two errors led to a Fannin insurance run in the seventh while closing the book on McPherson with two away. Towe entered with one aboard and walked a batter before inducing a pop fly to left.

In the bottom of the inning, Thomas Dyer fell behind 0-2 but fought back to even the count before launching a one-out triple to centerfield. With two away and Dyer still at third, Hughes scored his fellow senior on an infield single before advancing into scoring position with a stolen base. Unfortu-

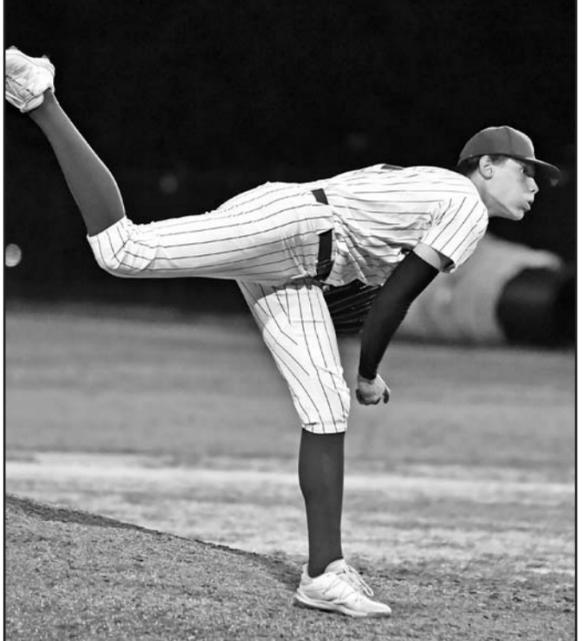
nately, he was left stranded at second as Fannin survived with a 9-8 victory.

Brown walked twice and scored twice during a 1-for-2 game. Fletcher finished 1 for 4 and Loyd ended his night 1 for 3. Towe scored and drove in a run, Anderson went 2 for 3 with an RBI while Fleming and Dyer each finished 1 for 2 with a run.

Panthers 3, Gilmer 4 - Towe went 2 for 4 with a run and Will Duncan doubled and drove in two during a 1-for-3 evening at the plate.

Scoreless after three, Union grabbed a 2-0 lead in the fourth when Duncan doubled home two after Anderson walked and Towe singled.

Gilmer evened the game with a two-out, two-run base hit in the fifth but Loyd put Union back on top in the sixth with a pinch-hit, run-scoring single.



James McPherson deals vs. Fannin County. Photo/Todd Forrest

A costly two-out balk brought home the tying run in the Bobcats' half of the sixth and Union couldn't capitalize on a walk and a single in the top of the seventh.

A walk and an error put the winning run in scoring position with two away in the seventh when Gilmer took advantage of a second Panthers' error to survive via a walkoff victory.

Duncan fanned seven over six innings, yielding two hits, five walks and three earned runs. Towe walked one and struck out another while allowing one unearned run in 2/3 of an inning.

Brayden Sweat walked once during a 1-for-2 game. Anderson walked twice and scored; Brown and Connor Shields each drew a base on balls.

Panthers 5, White County 6 (Game Two) - Fletcher

doubled twice and scored twice during a 2-for-3 afternoon on Saturday, March 5 in Cleveland.

Duncan went another six innings, striking out three while surrendering five hits, five unearned runs and four walks. Loyd walked one and allowed one unearned run in 1/3 of an inning.

The Panthers scored three in the second to seize a 3-2 lead when Shields, Duncan and Hughes each drew a bases-loaded walk. Fletcher doubled and later scored via an error off the bat of Shields to make it a 4-2 game in the third.

Two Union errors allowed the Warriors to move within a run in the bottom of the inning, but Hughes scored Shields on a sacrifice fly for a 5-3 score in the fifth.

White County took advantage of another error to trim

the margin to 5-4 and Union County hit into an inning-ending double play with two aboard in the sixth. The Warriors eventually knotted the score with a two-out RBI double in the bottom half of the frame and the Panthers stranded two in the seventh.

A leadoff walk started the bottom of the seventh and following a fly out to center, an error and a stolen base moved the winning run to third where he eventually came around on a 3-1 wild pitch.

Shields drove in two during a 1-for-3 day at the plate. Duncan went 1 for 3 with an RBI and Anderson scored during a 1-for-3 game. Hughes walked twice and drove home two. Towe went 1 for 3 and Loyd scored a run.

Panthers 3, White County 15 (Game One) - The Warriors used a nine-run third to blow open a 2-2 game in Hughes' first start of 2022.

The senior southpaw tossed 51 pitches over two-plus innings, allowing five hits, six runs (three earned), one walk and striking out three.

Dyer, Loyd and Towe each singled to account for Union's only hits of the day. Fletcher drove in one while Hughes, Dyer and Towe came around to score.

McPherson worked 1/3 of an inning, giving up two hits, two walks and five earned runs. Fletcher walked five and surrendered two earned over 2/3 of an inning. Brown threw one inning and issued a walk while allowing one hit and two unearned runs.

Union County hosts Murphy, North Carolina on Tuesday at 4:30 p.m. The Panthers will visit the Bulldogs on Friday at 4 p.m. Region play opens next Tuesday, March 15 with a trip to No. 8 Elbert County at 5:55 p.m.

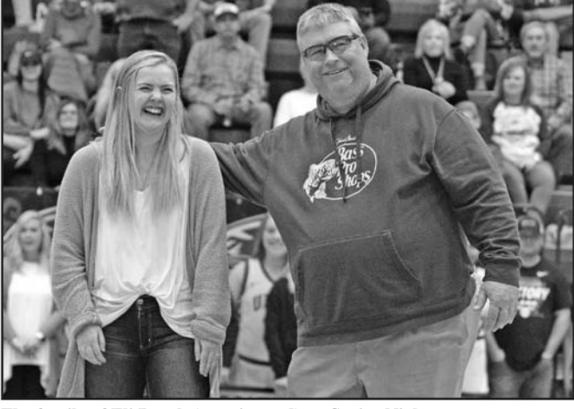
UC Basketball... continued from 2B

Physically, they might have been a little behind just because they're so young, but those guys didn't lack any competitiveness. We're going to be a hard-working, hard-playing, competitive and gritty basketball team over the next few years. The young guys came in right away and challenged the old guys in practice and that made our practices really fun. I got to see those young guys in practice every day and they are one extremely competitive bunch. And credit goes to the older guys for being leaders; they deserve a lot of credit for the growth we saw this year.

NGN: Is there anyone else that deserves a mention or a thank you?

CG: I want to thank our fans for their support. I feel like we played in front of a great home crowd, and when we played at home, sometimes I felt like we could beat anyone in the state. The student section definitely deserves a shout-out, they brought that excitement back to our games and I feel like our program is in a really good place moving forward.

Ava Hunter's Lady Panthers' scoring record article will be in next week's edition of the North Georgia News.



The family of Eli Peugh (not pictured) on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Daniel Snow with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Austin Taylor with family on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest