

# Sports

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## Perry: 'I have some big shoes to fill' as new Union football coach

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Union County High School tabbed former East Hall and Centennial head coach Michael Perry to take the helm of its football program following Brian Allison's January resignation.

Perry takes over the program following consecutive two-year head coaching stints at East Hall (2019-2020) and Centennial High (2017-2018). Before that, he served as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Gainesville High (2011-2015) and Coffee County (2016), helping mold six different All-State quarterbacks between 2012-18.

Meanwhile, Union County is coming off its first losing season since 2011, but still managed to reach the State playoffs for the seventh time in eight seasons. The Panthers' offense also took a nose-dive in 2020, failing to top 40 points in a game for the first time since the aforementioned 2011 campaign.

Allison left following the 2020 season, taking a program-best 121 wins to East Forsyth.

Union County will return rising-senior quarterback Logan Helcher in 2021. Before missing the final three-plus games due to injury, Helcher flashed his potential upside, throwing for 207 yards at state-powerhouse Commerce and completing 10 of 16 for 172 yards vs. Class AAAA Pickens. But after finishing the year on a bit of a down note, Helcher should be one of Union County's main beneficiaries from Perry's impressive QB resume that includes an NFL first-round draft pick in Deshaun Watson.

Last Thursday morning, the *North Georgia News* sat down with Coach Perry for the



The electric Friday night atmosphere at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium is what first attracted Perry to UCHS. Photo/Todd Forrest

first interview since his hiring. During his introductory visit to UCHS as its new coach, Perry discussed replacing a legend, his unforgettable first visit to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, keeping the spread offense, tinkering with the defense and more.

**NGN:** When did you learn that the job was yours and what was your initial reaction to the news?

**Perry:** I found out on Tuesday, and I was super excited and extremely humbled and grateful for the opportunity. Coach Allison did a tremendous job here for a long, long time, so I know I have some big shoes to fill. But the great part about it is, I know that things were done the right way, so I'm stepping into a program that has clear expectations.

**NGN:** When you meet the [Union County] players for the first time, what are you hoping they take away from that meeting, and what kind of first impression would you like to make?

**Perry:** The biggest thing is just letting them know that I'm going to care about them long after they graduate from here. Relationships are huge for me and that's why I do this. There is nothing like it. The reason I'm a high school football coach is because I had great coaches when I was at Gainesville. They were great men and role models, and I want to be like them. My best friends, to this day, are guys that I played high school football with.

**NGN:** I don't know how much of the school or town you've been able to experi-

ence, but what's been your first impression, so far?

**Perry:** It's such a great community. Everyone has been super friendly and welcoming, and I really appreciate that.

**NGN:** What was it about the Union program that attracted you to the job?

**Perry:** I remember a couple of years ago, I came up here for a game, and I had never been up here before. I had been to Blairsville before, but I'd never been to the school. My wife and I were sitting there, and I was looking out at everything, and I thought, 'this is the coolest stadium that I've ever been in.' I've been to a lot of different stadiums, Buford, Valdosta, Grayson, all the big dogs, but Union County has the coolest, most beautiful setting that I've ever seen. At that moment,

I knew that if this job ever came open, I would try everything in my power to get it.

**NGN:** You ran a spread offense when [Union] played East Hall in 2019. Is it your plan to stay that way?

**Perry:** Yes. I've always been a spread offense guy, and it will help the transition knowing these [Union] guys are already used to throwing the ball around.

**NGN:** Defensively, Union County has primarily used a 3-man front for several years. We've used a lot of 3-3 and 3-4 packages; do you anticipate that changing?

**Perry:** We'll be a little different on defense. We will be multiple and our main focus will be getting after the quarterback. You have to be able to bother the quarterback in

modern-day football.

**NGN:** What is the one thing that fans can expect from a Michael Perry-coached football team? What is their calling card?

**Perry:** Between the whistles, we're going to play as hard as humanly possible. We're relentless.

**NGN:** What's the next step after meeting the team? Are there any plans for spring practice?

**Perry:** We will definitely have spring football. We haven't finalized any dates or anything else yet, so we're not sure about some things. But yes, there will definitely be spring ball.

**NGN:** Any news on your coaching staff? You have a twin brother that coached with you at East Hall, correct?

**Perry:** Yes, it is. My brother has coached with me for a long time, but it's still early, and our staff hasn't come together yet. But that's something that I look forward to putting together.

**NGN:** Being from Gainesville originally, how well did you know [current UCHS Principal] C.T. Hussion? Did the thought of working with him make the decision to come here any easier?

**Perry:** Mr. Hussion was actually a football and wrestling coach at Gainesville when my brother and I played. He is a great man and is a big reason why I came up here. There is no doubting his integrity and what he stands for.

**NGN:** Is there anything else you would like the community to know about yourself?

**Perry:** My wife and I are so excited to get started up here. This is a tremendous opportunity, and I know this will be a great place and a great experience. We hope to be here for a very long time.

## Baseball: Panthers' losing skid reaches five with losses to Dawson, Chestatee

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With a pair of non-region games remaining between a five-game losing streak and the start of Region 8-AA competition, the Union County Panthers need a quick turnaround after being outscored 37-10 in its last three outings.

Last week's struggles were bookended by two mercy-rule shortened losses to Class AAA Dawson County, sandwiched around an 11-5 defeat at the hands of Class AAAA Chestatee on Thursday.

The competition only gets more challenging this week when Union pays a visit to Class AAA No. 10 Franklin County. The Lions enter this week with a 10-1 record after finally cracking the Georgia Dugout Club Top 10.

The Panthers will take the remainder of the week off before visiting Class AAA Gilmer on Monday, March 15 in a rematch of last month's extra-inning nailbiter. On Feb. 22, the Bobcats, having already blown a 5-2 lead, took a 6-5 advantage into the 10th inning when Damien Chitwood's two-run, walk-off double allowed the Panthers to escape with a 7-6 victory.

On Tuesday, March 16, region action gets underway as Union County hosts Elbert County before concluding the three-game series with a Friday doubleheader in Elberton.



Senior Isaak Mullinack's 3-run shot at Dawson County on Friday was the Panthers first home run of the season. Photo/Todd Forrest

**Panthers 5, Chestatee 11** - A 5-0 third-inning lead wasn't enough for the Panthers and senior ace Zeke Swartz as the War Eagles rattled off 11-straight runs to pull away in an 11-5 victory.

While only allowing one hit and fanning six over 3 1/3 innings, Swartz uncharacteristically issued five walks, forcing Coach Odom to pull the southpaw with a 5-2 lead in the fourth following two bases on balls.

Chestatee eventually trimmed the margin to 5-4 off junior Thomas Dyer, who

replaced Swartz and allowed a run-scoring fielder's choice and an RBI single.

Bad luck took a massive bite out of Union County's momentum in the bottom of the fourth when Dyer's two-run double was negated after striking baserunner Isaak Mullinack, who was leading off from third with two on and two outs. Dyer laced a frozen rope down the line, headed for the left-field corner, but the ball connected with Mullinack's leg in fair territory, resulting in the third out.

Chestatee capitalized in



Damien Chitwood closed the week hitting .500 over the final two games, going 2 for 4 vs. Chestatee and 1 for 2 at Dawson. Photo/Todd Forrest

the fifth, seizing the lead for good at 7-5 with consecutive two-out hits following a walk and a hit by pitch earlier in the inning.

The Panthers stranded two in their half of the fifth when Hunter Loyd walked and Lake Hughes singled with one down.

The War Eagles put the game away with a four-run sixth, beginning with a leadoff homer to left field - the first home run at UCHS in nearly two years. Two errors, a walk, a single and a hit batter allowed Chestatee to build an 11-5 lead before Union escaped via an inning-ending 6-4-3 double play.

having a two-run double taken away. Chitwood also turned in a 2-for-4 day at the plate.

Swartz doubled twice, going 2 for 2 with 3 RBIs and a walk. Mullinack walked twice and scored twice while finishing 1 for 2. Hunter Loyd was issued two bases on balls.

Hughes went 1 for 3 with a walk; Tyler Loyd walked, scored and was hit by a pitch; Hunter Fleming also scored a run and was hit by a pitch.

Union County out-hit Chestatee 8-7 but committed four errors and issued nine walks (seven for CHS).

**Panthers 5, Dawson County 16 (Five innings)** - For the second time in four days, Dawson County mercy-ruled the Panthers, the second coming on Friday in Dawsonville.

After giving up 13 walks over five innings during a 10-0 loss to Dawson on Tuesday, Union pitching surrendered 14 walks in Friday's loss, bringing their weekly total to 36 free passes in three games (17 innings).

For the second time in 24 hours, Union County out-hit the opposition in defeat -- giving up 8 runs in the second and 7 in the fourth during a 16-5 loss in five innings.

Once again, the Panthers grabbed an early lead with a four-run second, but it was short-lived as Dawson responded with eight in the bottom half of the frame. Union County trimmed its margin to 9-6 in the

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