

# Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

## Soccer: Lady Panthers take control of 8-AA, extend winning streak to four

### McKechnie and Turner shine during victories over Rabun County, East Hall

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers (6-3-1) clamped down on Region 8-AA's top spot, ending a three-game slide to Rabun County with a 4-0 home victory over the Lady Cats on Wednesday, March 9.

Later in the week, the Lady Panthers survived East Hall's late comeback bid, fending off the Vikings in a 2-1 Friday night victory at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

**Lady Panthers 4, Rabun County 0** - On top 2-0 out of the intermission, Union County sophomore forward Lara Turner put the Lady Cats away with two goals in the first 11 minutes of the second half. Turner's brace proved more than enough for the Lady Panthers' defense, led by seven saves from sophomore goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie during her fifth shutout of the season and 10th of her career.

Both squads spent the first 17-plus minutes feeling each other out, exchanging unsuccessful corner kicks and missing one shot apiece. Union County eventually broke through when sophomore Avery Murray connected on a free kick during the 18th minute.

After getting turned away on a shot attempt in the 21st, the Lady Panthers built a 2-0 advantage during the 29th minute via freshman Kiella Strand. The score came when Union County failed to convert a corner kick, but Strand gathered the rebound in traffic and punched it in for her first high school goal.

During the second half, a Lady Panthers' free-kick couldn't find the net in the 43rd, and McKechnie denied Rabun during the 47th before



Sophomore goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie recorded a season-high 18 saves during Union County's 2-1 victory over Class AAAA East Hall on Friday, March 11. Photo/Todd Forrest

Turner connected on a right-footed chip shot over the Lady Cats goalkeeper to mount a 3-0 lead.

On the verge of putting away the defending region champions, Turner continued to attack and extended the margin to 4-0 in the 51st minute. Union County refused to let off the gas with shot attempts in the 55th, 63rd and 64th minutes. Freshman Ariel McCarter was turned away in the 66th and 69th, and Turner also missed during the 69th minute.

Union's last shot on goal came in the 74th, and McKechnie accumulated her seventh and final save during the 80th minute.

Union County can clinch at least a share of first-place in 8-AA as early as Friday with a win at second-place

Banks County, assuming Elbert County and Rabun County split their two meetings this week (Monday at Rabun; Friday at Elbert).

Regardless of what happens elsewhere, the Lady Panthers can clinch the No. 1 seed by winning at Banks County on March 18 and at Elbert County on March 25.

**Lady Panthers 2, East Hall 1** - Two first-half goals from Turner withstood an aggressive Lady Vikings squad on Friday night as Union County escaped with a W behind a season-high 18 saves from McKechnie.

The Lady Panthers goalkeeper found herself protecting a lead for 77 minutes and 57 seconds as Turner put Union on the board with 37:57 to play in the first half.

The Lady Panthers took a 2-0 advantage into the locker room courtesy of another Turner goal, along with a McCarter assist and nine stops from McKechnie.

The second half opened with an uneventful six minutes before McKechnie denied East Hall in the 44th. A hand-ball awarded Turner a free kick in the 46th but her kick sailed wide of the post.

Moments later, senior Melia Whitener missed wide on Union's second free-kick of the first seven minutes. Union's third free-kick came in the 49th but East Hall turned away another Whitener shot, plus an attempt from McCarter off the rebound.

East Hall eventually broke through in the 53rd, setting up seven hard-fought



Sophomore Lara Turner with a chip shot over the Rabun County keeper to supply the Lady Panthers a 3-0 edge. Photo/Todd Forrest

minutes on the heels of the Vikings' lone goal. Over that stretch, McKechnie and the Lady Panthers' defense preserved the 2-1 advantage, turning away four East Hall shots, along with a free-kick and one corner kick.

After surviving the onslaught, a Union County free-kick was unsuccessful in the 71st, along with a corner kick two minutes later. East Hall would get off two shots over the final 120 seconds, including a free-kick, but both attempts drifted wide of the goalposts.

**Up next:** The Lady Panthers visit Gilmer at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 16 before resuming region play on Friday at Banks County - kickoff is scheduled for 5:30 p.m.

**Throw-ins:** Last Wednesday's victory over Rabun County

was rescheduled from the day before due to heavy rain and thunderstorms

\* After being outscored 20-9 in three consecutive losses to Rabun, Union County defeated the Lady Cats for the first time since a 12-2 win on March 5, 2019. The Lady Panthers' last shutout of Rabun came back when UCHS was a member of Region 7-AAA -- a 9-0 victory on Feb. 20, 2018.

\* The Lady Panthers have won five straight vs. East Hall, dating back to 2017. The 2020 meeting was canceled due to the COVID-19 lockdowns.

\* Last week proved costly for Union County with juniors Haleigh Helcher (meniscus) and Kaylee Helton (ACL) both suffering significant knee injuries.

## Baseball: Union hurlers stifle Bulldogs in second victory of 2022

### Region play begins this week with three-game set vs. eighth-ranked Elbert County

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

**Murphy, NC** - Four different Panthers combined to limit Murphy (NC) to five hits and one run during a 3-1 road victory on Friday night.

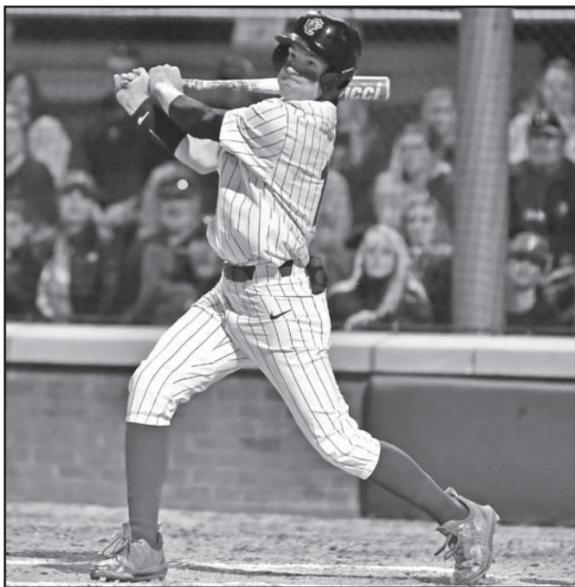
Senior southpaw Lake Hughes got the nod and worked three innings, giving up two hits and striking out four. Hughes doubled and scored during a 2-for-3 performance at the dish that included a walk and a stolen base.

Union County (2-8) scored all three of its runs in the first inning, sparked by Hughes' leadoff double and a pair of free passes to seniors Bailey Brown and Thomas Dyer.

Senior Chris Fletcher opened the scoring by plating Hughes with a one-out single up the middle. Dyer followed him home two pitches later courtesy of a passed ball, and senior Logan Anderson scored Fletcher via an RBI groundout.

Hughes' only hiccup came in the Bulldogs' half of the first when he surrendered a leadoff single and a two-out walk. But he eventually escaped the two-out, two-out jam with a strikeout to retire the side.

Hughes handed off to senior Parker Grisham in the fourth and he held Murphy in check, fanning three while allowing two hits and a walk.



Since his return, Lake Hughes has posted a team-best .519 OBP and is tied atop the team with six runs and five steals. Photo/Todd Forrest

Junior Will Duncan ran into trouble during a 28-pitch sixth frame that saw the Bulldogs scratch across their only run of the night via a leadoff single, a walk, a wild pitch and two Union County errors.

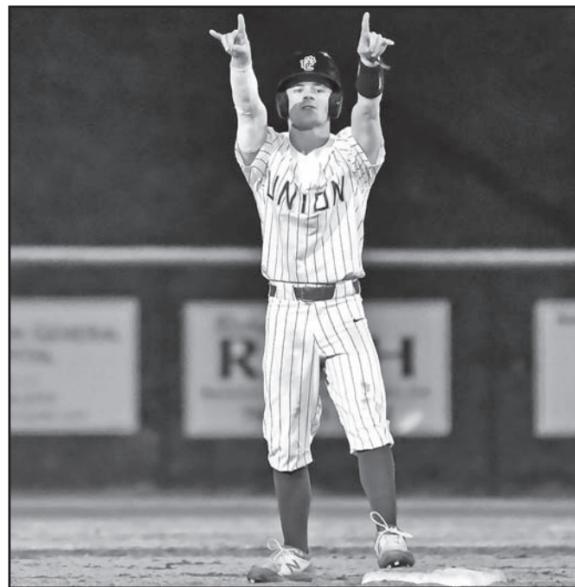
With runners at the corners and two away, a wild pitch plated one run, but Duncan sat down the potential tying run with a swing-and-miss strikeout to preserve the 3-1 cushion.

After the Panthers left a would-be insurance run stranded at second in the seventh, junior James McPherson nailed down

the save with a 1-2-3 bottom half of the frame.

Dyer finished 1 for 3 with a walk and a run; Fletcher drove in a run and scored during a 1-for-2 game. Anderson went 1 for 3 with an RBI, and senior Tyler Loyd ended his night 1 for 3 at the plate. Sophomore Brayden Sweat drew a base on balls while Bailey Brown walked and added a sacrifice bunt.

**Up next:** The Panthers open Region 8-AA action on Tuesday with a visit to eighth-ranked Elbert County at 5:55 p.m. The Blue Devils (7-3, 2-0)



Bailey Brown fires up the Union dugout. The senior infielder is among the team leaders in OBP, runs, steals and walks. Photo/Todd Forrest

return to Blairsville on Friday night to square off with Union County in a 5 p.m. doubleheader.

After dropping its first two games, Elbert has won seven of eight, including a pair of region blowouts of Riverside Military Academy by a combined score of 30-2.

The Blue Devils have scored at least 10 runs in five straight contests, outscoring the competition 72-7 over their last five outings.

The defending region champions finished 26-9 a year

ago, reaching the Sweet 16 where they lost at home in three games to the eventual State runner-up, Lovett.

Elbert County won all three meetings with Union County last spring: 14-3, 4-3 and 6-1. The two teams didn't meet in 2020 due to COVID-19 but the Panthers swept a 2019 doubleheader in Elberton by scores of 10-7 and 4-0.

During last year's three-game series, Hughes started game three in Elberton and pitched well for three-plus innings. All even at 1-1 in the

bottom of the fourth, the Blue Devils began to solve the Union lefty, pushing across two runs via three singles, a walk and an error.

Up 3-1 later in the fourth, Elbert eventually blew things open with a two-run, two-out double. The Blue Devils manufactured the sixth and final run off Hughes in the fifth via a one-out single, a stolen base, a sacrifice fly and a wild pitch.

Hughes' final stat line read: five innings, six hits, six earned runs, five strikeouts and two walks. Loyd worked a scoreless sixth, allowing one hit and one base on balls.

Duncan also saw action on the bump during last year's Elbert series, giving up four hits, four unearned runs and a walk in 1 1/3 innings. Dyer tossed 1 2/3 innings vs. Elbert, surrendering five hits, three earned runs and two walks.

However, Caleb Tower raked during the three-game set, posting a slashline of .500/.556/.750 in nine plate appearances vs. Elbert.

Brown went 2 for 5 in two games with a double and an RBI; Hughes finished 2 for 9 at the dish, scoring once, driving in a run and stealing a base.

Meanwhile, Dyer, Loyd and Connor Shields struggled vs. the 2021 Blue Devils, finishing a combined 0 for 21 with one walk, six strikeouts and five fielding errors.

# Soccer: No. 4 Union County blanks Rabun, wins 11th straight region match

## Panthers stumble vs. Class AAAA East Hall, resume Region 8-AA competition Tuesday

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Fourth-ranked Union County picked up a 4-0 home victory over Rabun County on Wednesday, March 9, improving to 3-0 in region play while extending its 8-AA winning streak to 11 games ahead of Tuesday night's showdown with last year's region runner-up, Riverside Military Academy.

Two days later, the Panthers suffered a 2-0 loss to East Hall, the 2021 Class AAAA State Runner-Up, on Friday night at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

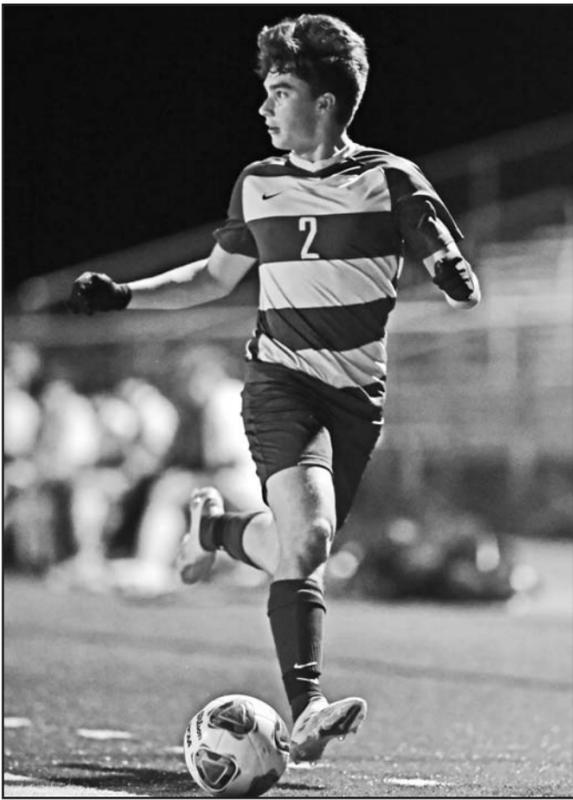
Region play resumes this Tuesday when Union County hosts Riverside Military Academy at 6 p.m. The Panthers and Eagles do not share a common opponent, but Union County owns a 2-1 win at Dawson County, who finished in a 2-2 tie with Chestatee. As for Chestatee, they picked up a 5-0 shutout over Riverside earlier this month.

**Panthers 4, Rabun County 0** - Union County's offense overcame a sluggish start and finish, but still did enough for junior goalkeeper Trent Baker and the Panthers' defense to notch their fourth-straight win over the Wildcats.

Locked in a 0-0 tie until the 36th minute, Union County senior Kyler Robbins blasted a right-footed shot over the Rabun keeper from 25 yards out when the Wildcats failed to clear a Panthers' corner kick. As a result, Robbins found a brief opening and drilled a kick that came in just under the crossbar after splitting two defenders.

Union made it a 2-0 contest in the 40th when Robbins deflected Joel Mendoza, who found the back of the net between the left post and a diving Rabun County goalkeeper.

The Panthers seemed to



Senior MJ Delatte and the Panthers look to get back on track this week with RMA at home, plus Gilmer and Banks on the road. Photo/Todd Forrest

finally settle in when Robbins stretched the margin to 3-0 less than three minutes into the second half. This time, the senior used a left-footed strike that found the top-right corner of the net from just over 20 yards away.

Junior Wilson Walker extended the advantage to 4-0 in the 46th minute when senior MJ Delatte dribbled up the far sideline, eventually passing ahead to a streaking Walker, who beat the Wildcats' keeper with his right foot capping off the one-on-one breakaway.

All four Panthers' goals came during a 10-minute, 47-second stretch. After needing almost 36 minutes to score its first goal, Union County couldn't

find the net over the contest's final 34:17.

But the Panthers weren't without plenty of opportunities, Delatte misfired in the 50th minute, Walker couldn't connect in the 54th and sophomore Zuriel Mancillas fired wide in the 55th.

After Union County failed to capitalize on two corner-kick situations, Mancillas and Robbins couldn't convert in the 67th and 72nd minutes, respectively. Additionally, freshman Antonio Solorio was unable to knock in a header attempt during the 74th minute.

Baker denied a Wildcats' free kick in the 77th, and Union County missed its final three shots of the match, all com-



Trent Baker has ended any concerns that goalie would be a weak spot after Union graduated four-year starter Aaron Helton. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing between the 77th and 79th minutes.

**Panthers 0, East Hall 2** - The Panthers suffered just their third regular-season shutout since 2018, falling 2-0 to Class AAAA East Hall on Friday, March 11.

In a contest marred by chippy play, multiple yellow cards and a handful of questionable whistles, No. 4 Union County failed to take advantage of its limited opportunities against one of north Georgia's elite programs.

East Hall's first score of the night came during the 30th minute when a 50/50 out-of-bounds call went in favor of the Vikings, setting up a go-ahead corner kick.

The corner kick came on the heels of an East Hall long pass that appeared to travel over the goal line when a Union defender whiffed on the return kick; however, the Vikings retained possession and scored via a header off the ensuing corner kick.

With under a minute remaining before halftime, Robbins fired a one-hopper off the goalkeeper's chest from 22 yards away, but a leaping Baker responded on the other end when he deflected a 19-yard smash to deprive East Hall's last-second counterattack, preserving the 1-0 deficit.

Delatte opened the second half by lobbing a put-back chip shot over the crossbar during the

43rd minute; the senior missed high again in the 46th, this time from 29 yards away.

East Hall continued nursing its narrow lead until the 54th minute when they benefited from a controversial foul in the box, resulting in a penalty kick and a 2-0 advantage.

What made the PK particularly frustrating for the Union faithful was the potential foul that went uncalled during the 33rd minute when a Panthers' break was disrupted by the Vikings' keeper, sending Walker flying through the air two steps inside the penalty box.

Two minutes removed from East Hall's second goal, the Panthers came within inches of answering when Baker's best goal kick of the night split two Vikings beyond the center circle, allowing Walker to slip behind the defense with only the keeper to beat from less than 15 yards away.

As the fans rose to their feet, Walker pushed a right-footed shot past the diving keeper, where, unfortunately, it clipped the left post and slowly trickled into the corner.

However, Robbins gathered the miss and went on the attack, eventually leading to a corner kick that resulted in a Panthers' header clearing the crossbar. Later in the match, a Union County corner kick during the 65th minute and a Robbins' free kick in the 80th both came up empty to put the finishing touches on the East Hall victory.

The Panthers host Riverside Military Academy in a boys' only contest at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 15. Both Union County squads travel to Gilmer on Wednesday before resuming 8-AA competition on Friday at Banks County.

The Gilmer girls' match kicks off at 5 p.m. and Friday's action gets underway at 5:30 p.m.

# Mountain Gymnastics Center's new season begins with impressive showings in Dahlonega, Cartersville and Roswell

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Mountain Gymnastics Center's (MGC) competition season got underway with November's Winter Warm-Up, January's Winter Jam Invitational and the Champions Cup on Feb. 19.

At Cartersville's Winter Jam, MGC took home four first-place all-around finishes from the Jan. 30 event, beginning with Baylor Sullivan in Level One competition. Reagan Gwynn finished first in AAU Silver while Shaylyne Davis and Keely Shook each collected all-around gold medals at the AAU Gold level.

Sullivan's all-around high score of 35.85 included a first-place tally (9.5) on the floor to go with three runner-up performances on the vault (9.225), the bars (8.45) and the beam (8.675).

Gwynn recorded a 36.075 all-around score behind a pair of second-place 9.3's on the vault and the bars. She also finished third on the beam (8.55) and the floor (8.925).

Davis' 36.05 all-around score was good enough for first overall thanks to three first-place finishes on the bars (8.95), the beam (9.05) and the floor (9.225). Last but not least, Shook took home a 35.775 overall score behind tournament-best scores on the bars (8.9), beam (9.0) and the floor (9.1). She just missed a clean sweep by coming in second on the vault, pulling in an 8.775.

Other AAU Gold performers included Addison Harkins' third-place all-around finish that included a high score of 9.175 on the floor, and a runner-up showing on the bars (8.8).

Addyson Lee came in fourth behind a second-place performance on the bars (8.9) and third (8.75) on the beam. Overall, the MGC team took home second with a grand total of 107.5.

As for the Level 1 gymnasts, Ellenore Perrone and Hope Wright each took home third all-around with Wright pulling in a high score on the vault (9.475) plus third on the bars (8.35) and beam (8.55). Meanwhile, Perrone placed second on the floor (9.3) to go with third-place finishes on the vault (9.35) and floor (9.3).

Raelynn Thomas came in fifth with a pair of third-place scores on the beam (8.55) and the floor (9.3). Renley Lloyd's sixth-place finish was paced by a fourth (8.075) on the bars, and Camilla Duello came in eighth while tallying a 9.1 on the vault.

The team placed second overall with a total of 107.7.

In other AAU Silver action, Kylee Coggins and Makenzie Duvall each placed fourth overall with Coggins taking home a top score of 9.4 on the vault and a third-place total of 9.375 on the bars. Duvall came in second on



MGC's AAU Gold squad came in first at the Champion's Cup. L-R: Addyson Lee, Addison Harkins, Shaylyne Davis and Keely Shook. Photo submitted by MGC



MGC's AAU Silver team. L-R: Reagan Gwynn, Kylee Coggins, Hartley Hodges, Makenzie Duvall, Selah Patterson, Madelyn Primeaux and Lucie Burgess. Photo submitted by MGC.

the floor at 9.15 and third on the bars at 8.425.

Lucie Burgess and Madelyn Primeaux took home a pair of fifth-place all-around totals with Burgess shining on the vault, notching a third-place score of 9.275. Primeaux stood out on the beam, collecting a third-place finish (8.55) for her squad.

Selah Patterson placed fourth on the bars (9.275) during a seventh-place performance in AAU Silver competition.

During last month's Champion's Cup in Roswell, Shook notched a 37.725 first-place all-around score to lead MGC's Gold team to a first-place finish (112.225). Shook's performance was highlighted by a 9.2 high score on the vault and a pair of runner-up finishes on the bars (9.375) and the beam (9.65).

Davis, who tallied a 36.925 all-around total, finished right behind Shook in second place, posting a high score on the bars (9.5) and a runner-up finish on the floor (9.525).

In Level One action, Perrone placed first all-around (37.20) behind a high score of 9.4 on the

bars and a second-place total of 9.5 on the vault.

Mattie Kate Alexander came in fourth all-around at 36.4 following a third-place score of 9.15 on the beam. Sullivan finished ninth, Lloyd placed 11th, Duello came in 12th and Thomas rounded out MGC's day with a 13th place performance.

Coggins placed second overall (36.775) in Silver competition, finishing second on the bars (9.325) and third on the floor (9.05). Gwynn came in first on the vault (9.5) and the bars (9.1) en route to a fourth-place all-around day.

Duvall finished sixth all-around and Primeaux ended up ninth to guide MGC to a fourth-place team finish. Emma Schuette placed fourth in USA Level 7 competition, finishing in a tie for first on the beam at 9.55.

Other competitors from the first-place Gold team were the bronze-medalist Harkins, who placed third on the beam at 9.5, Shy'ann Beasley finished fourth with a high score on the beam (9.675), and Lee came in ninth behind two top-fives on the vault

and the floor.

The season opened in November at Dahlonega's Winter Warm Up with Perrone taking home a first-place all-around performance with a 35.8. The USA Level One gymnast recorded a high score of 8.975 on the bars and second-place showings on the beam (8.725) and the floor (9.0).

Sullivan came in second overall with a 34.875 while taking gold on the beam (8.975) and the floor (9.15). Wright finished third (34.675) after nailing down a first-place score of 9.2 on the vault.

Alexander placed fourth overall, Duello was fifth and Thomas was seventh to round out MGC's Level One competitors.

Davis placed second all-around (35.95) in AAU Gold competition with a second-place score of 9.35 on the bars. Shook was third on the bars and sixth all-around, Lee was seventh overall and Harkins came in eighth.

In AAU Silver action, Gwynn finished sixth all-around, Coggins took home seventh and Duvall turned in a top-three finish on the bars.

# Union's Payton Legatt wins Freshman State Wrestling tourney



Union County High School freshman Payton Legatt is a State Champion. Legatt wrestled in the 145-lb. weight class at the Georgia USA Freshman State Tournament on Feb. 20 in Jefferson. Legatt survived a 21-man bracket that included freshman from all Georgia high school classifications to become the first Freshman State Champ from Union County Schools. During his 2021-22 high school season, Legatt was a Class AA State qualifier but fell short of placing by one round. He finished his freshman campaign with a 41-14 record.

# Union County's track and field season gets underway

Union County's track and field season began at Buford on Feb. 22 with Linley Jones and Hunter Hartzog each taking home gold in their respective events.

Jones came in first in the 300-meter hurdles with a time of 52.78 seconds. Meanwhile, Hartzog set the pace in the 800M event, crossing the finish line at 2 minutes, 1.77 seconds.

Hannah Long turned in a runner-up performance in the 100M hurdles with a time of 18.69. Allie Brey placed second in the high jump at 4-feet, 4 inches and Mia McCombs came in second with a 29-1.5 in the triple jump.

The girls' 4x800 relay team placed second and the 4x400 squad finished third.

Ashley Shipes turned in a pair of third-place showings in the 1600M and 3200M events. In the 1600M race, Shipes clocked in at 6:39.93 and finished the 3200M event at 14:36.15. Jones also came in third in the 100M hurdles.

Other top-five girls performers included Lexi Sisum - fifth in the 200M dash. Hana Gregory and Brey were fourth and fifth in the 800M race. Natalie Payne was fourth in the 3200M.

The 4x200 relay team placed fourth and the 4x100 relay team came in fifth. McCombs and Ellie Adams took home fourth and fifth in the



Mia McCombs

long jump.

The boys' 4x400 relay team placed second (3:42.55) and the 4x100 squad came in third (46.76). The 4x200 team finished fourth with a time of 1:38.08.

Nolan Thompson's 48.07 was good enough for third in the 300M hurdles. Kanon Abercrombie finished third in the 110M hurdles with a time of 19.74. He also notched a third-place distance of 34-10.5 in the triple jump.

Damon Wallace turned in a fourth-place showing in the 100M hurdles, crossing the line at 20.36.

Keyton Chitwood placed fifth in the high jump, clearing 5-8.