

# Sports

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## Boys Soccer: Panthers blast Rabun 6-0, take sole possession of first in 8-AA

Union County looks to defend region's top spot Tuesday at second-place Riverside

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The Union County men became the only undefeated team remaining in Region 8-AA competition with a 6-0 rout at Rabun County (2-4-1, 1-2) last Tuesday, March 9.

A day later, however, the Panthers' overall record suffered its first blemish of 2021 in a hard-fought 1-0 loss at Class AAAA's eighth-ranked East Hall.

The Panthers resume region play on Tuesday, March 16 with a trip to second-place Riverside Military Academy (RMA). The Eagles are fresh off Friday's 4-1 victory at Rabun County, setting up this week's Union County showdown as another battle for 8-AA's top spot.

Sitting at 2-1 in the region, RMA can join the Panthers atop the standings with a win. Meanwhile, a Union victory in Gainesville opens up a two-game cushion on second place, granting the Panthers a near-stranglehold on 8-AA with four matches remaining.

**Panthers 6, Rabun County 0** - Union County improved to 4-0 for the first time since 2015 thanks in large part to a five-goal eruption that blew things open on the heels of a 1-0 halftime advantage.

Junior Kyler Robbins scored the first goal before taking on a distributor role after the intermission, dishing out assists on four of his team's five second-half goals. Sophomore Wilson Walker accounted for Union's only non-Robbins assist and added a goal during the 53rd minute that opened up a 4-0 lead.

Other goals belonged to seniors Zach Jackson, Clayton Lester and Malachi Patrick. Freshman Benton Gregory also got involved in the scoring dur-



Union County senior Zach Jackson celebrates his goal in the 48th minute at Rabun County that sparked a second-half surge. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing the 60th minute - finding the net from just beyond the penalty area and extending the margin to 5-0.

After both squads spent much of the first 15 minutes feeling out the opponent, the Panthers began imposing their will on the home team.

Union's half-dozen-goal evening got underway in the 16th minute when Robbins used his right foot to wrap a free-kick around the post from just inside the touchline.

Despite getting off several good looks in the opening 40 minutes, Union entered the break with a narrow 1-0 lead. Although,

the first scoring opportunity of the contest belonged to Rabun - coming less than nine minutes in when a Wildcats' free-kick resulted in senior goalkeeper Aaron Helton's only save of the night. And after Walker was unable to put Union out front during a breakaway situation in the first 10 minutes, Panthers' freshman Zurriel Mancillas sent a header wide of the goal in the 12th minute.

On top 1-0 later in the first, Union County could not extend its advantage before halftime despite shot attempts from Lester, Robbins and Walker.

Panthers' assistant coach

Jon Krieger was issued a yellow card for questioning an out-of-bounds ruling in the 38th minute. Undeterred, his team remained on the attack, but kicks by Robbins and Zach Jackson each missed wide over the final 135 seconds.

A Jackson goal off a feed from Walker in the 48th minute ultimately opened the flood gates early in the second half. Less than 90 seconds later, Walker's shot attempt was denied, but Union didn't have to wait long for its third score thanks to a Lester header-goal off another Robbins free-kick. The senior's first career goal came from point-blank range in the 51st minute when he

flicked the Robbins volley past the Wildcats' keeper.

Just 44 seconds later, Jackson failed to record his second-straight brace when his shot attempt was off target. However, 70 seconds removed from the Jackson miss, Walker continued the onslaught with his first varsity goal off a Robbins assist.

Union's rout was officially underway in minute 60 when Gregory connected from approximately 20 yards out for a 5-0 advantage. Patrick put an exclamation point on the win with the Panthers' sixth and final score of the night two minutes later

**Panthers 6, Rabun County 0**

**Hall 1** - Union County suffered its first loss of 2021, as well as a brief scare during last Wednesday's visit to Valhalla.

Panic levels momentarily skyrocketed when Helton required assistance exiting the pitch due to an ankle injury in the waning moments of the first half. His ankle was taped at halftime and he returned for the second half as Panther fans let out a collective sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, the senior was unable to record his fifth straight shutout despite stopping a season-high nine shots.

The Vikings broke through in the early stages of the second half but Helton continued to battle with four spectacular saves to keep the Panthers in contention.

In dramatic fashion, Union's prime scoring opportunity came via a Mancillas corner kick during the 80th and final minute. Robbins was able to get his head on the Mancillas kick, but he pushed the equalizer a couple inches wide of the post.

East Hall went on to defeat Class AAAA's No. 5 Jefferson 1-0, two days after beating 10th-ranked Union County by the same score. Earlier in the year, the Vikings tied Class 5A's fifth-ranked Clarke Central 1-1 and defeated No. 7 Johnson-Gainesville 1-0.

**Up next:** Tuesday's boys-only fixture at Riverside gets underway at 5 p.m. The Eagles appear to have turned the corner following a slow start that included a 1-0 February loss at Banks County. Since the defeat, RMA knocked off Elbert County 6-3 and Rabun County 4-1.

The second-half of Region 8-AA play begins Friday with Senior Night when Union County hosts Banks County (1-6, 1-2). The girls' fixture kicks off at 5:30 p.m. with the Senior Night festivities and the guys' match to follow.

## Girls Soccer: Lady Panthers can't keep up at Rabun, rally for win in Valhalla

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Union County's Region 8-AA title hopes may have been dealt a serious blow in last Tuesday's 6-3 loss at Rabun County, but the Lady Panthers (3-2, 2-1) remain on the verge of guaranteeing home-field advantage in the Class AA State Tournament's first round.

Already playing without the services of senior defender Jenna Scott, Union was stung by the injury bug a second time when the team's leading scorer, junior Melia Whitener, was shaken up in the first half at Rabun.

Following a valiant effort to fight through the pain, Whitener was eventually pulled by head coach Tim Hunter, who also chose to sit her as a precaution during Wednesday's 2-1 victory at East Hall. According to Hunter, Whitener is expected to return before Friday's 8-AA rematch vs. Banks County (3-5, 1-2).

Speaking of this week's meeting with the Leopards, a Union County victory puts the Lady Panthers in an excellent position to secure a top-two seed and home-field in round one. And while Union County isn't out of the hunt for the No. 1 seed, a 6-3 loss to Rabun places their back firmly against the wall. Should Union win out and defeat Rabun, they would need to beat the Lady Cats by at least four goals to earn the tiebreaker



Union freshman Reagan Covington (3) scores her second of the half goal while leaping over the Rabun County goalkeeper. Photo/Todd Forrest

(since Rabun currently owns a three-goal victory in the first head-to-head meeting).

**Lady Panthers 3, Rabun County 6** - Lady Cats' senior Lauren Barnes scored five (four unassisted) of her team's six goals to move Rabun County into sole possession of first place in Region 8-AA.

Tied at 1-1 late in the first half, the Lady Cats scored four unanswered goals after Whitener suffered an injury in the 28th minute. The Lady Panthers rallied to within 5-3 late, but Rabun killed the match with a goal in the 78th for a 6-3 final tally.

In the five minutes fol-

lowing Whitener's injury, Union was tagged with a pair of (iffy at best) yellow cards - the second resulting in a penalty kick that put the Lady Cats back in front 2-1 during minute 33. Four minutes later, Barnes recorded the first-half hat trick on a breakaway that spotted the home team a 3-1 advantage at the break.

Despite the 3-1 deficit, Coach Hunter's squad saw a plethora of scoring opportunities, but the only goal came courtesy of sophomore Haleigh Helcher's equalizer in the 16th minute - tying the score at 1-1.

The Lady Panthers failed to capitalize on three corner kicks between the fourth and

10th minute. Additionally, Union got off three good looks over the first 26 minutes that were denied by the Rabun keeper, along with a free kick in the 29th and a fourth corner kick in the 35th minute.

The second half began with consecutive saves by freshman goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie, but Union came up empty on a corner kick and a free kick, then misfired off a deflection.

Senior Demi Thorn's shot attempt was denied in the 47th minute, and in the 49th, Barnes pushed the margin to 4-1 with an unassisted goal. Rabun County took control at 5-1 in the 55th minute, one minute removed

from a shot-on-goal by Union sophomore Maggie Payne.

The Rabun victory seemed a lock with the final 20 minutes nothing more than a formality. That was until freshman Reagan Covington's first high school goal pulled Union within 5-2 in the 77th minute. Exactly 30 seconds later, Covington struck again, this time off a feed from freshman Zoe Crawford, suddenly making it a 5-3 contest.

However, the Lady Cats needed just 19 seconds to put the visitors away with their sixth goal of the match.

Covington recorded her first high school goal, followed by her first career brace, both

within a half-minute span. Helcher picked up her first goal while Crawford, sophomore Kaylee Helton and freshman Lara Turner chipped in one helper apiece.

**Lady Panthers 2, East Hall 1** - Union County bounced back from its first region loss in 371 days with a 2-1 victory at East Hall on Wednesday, March 10.

An early miscue allowed the Vikings to grab a quick lead when a Union County own-goal put the Lady Panthers in their second 1-0 deficit in 24 hours. But this time, Union would overcome with Covington delivering the equalizer in the 20th minute, courtesy of a feed from sophomore Avary Smith-Foot.

Tied at the intermission, the Lady Panthers secured the lead for good when junior Lorelei Skinner converted a pass from Crawford during the 45th minute.

McKechnie finished with seven saves. Smith-Foot snagged her first varsity assist.

**Up next:** With the guys at Riverside on Tuesday, the ladies picked up a non-region contest at winless Sonora (0-8) on Wednesday. Kickoff is at 5:30 p.m.

UCHS will honor its seniors between Friday's games vs. Banks County. The girls' match is slated for 5:30 p.m.

Union County won the first meeting vs. Banks 3-0 in Homer. The Leopards' lone region win was a 7-3 victory at Elbert.