

Baseball: Elbert rallies from 3-1 deficit in game two, sweeps three-game series

Dyer, Towe lead the way as Panthers jump on Gilmer early in 8-5 road victory

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Headlining Union County's recent week was a classic circumstance of good news vs. bad news.

The good news: The Panthers (5-10, 0-3) ended a six-game losing streak on Monday at Gilmer. The bad: Later in the week, Union suffered a three-game sweep at the hands of Elbert County to open Region 8-AA competition.

Unfortunately, the Panthers will not get a reprieve this week as they square off in a three-game series with 8-AA's other top squad, Banks County, beginning Tuesday in Blairsville before the series shifts to Homer for a Friday doubleheader.

Panthers 8, Gilmer 5 - Union County fended off a late rally in Ellijay on Monday night after jumping out front 7-1 in the fourth inning.

Junior Tyler Loyd struck out three Bobcats in the win, allowing 4 hits and one earned run over 4 innings. With his team on top 7-2, junior Thomas Dyer battled through a rocky fifth inning, giving up 3 runs (one earned), 2 hits and 2 walks before settling down to pitch a scoreless sixth.

The Panthers added an insurance run in the seventh when senior Hunter Loyd drew a two-out walk and junior Caleb Towe scored pinch-runner Logan Anderson with a double to center, extending Union's margin to 8-5.

Senior Zeke Swartz recorded the save with a rare 4-strikeout seventh frame. With two strikeouts already in the books, a passed ball on a swing-and-miss third strike allowed Gilmer to keep the inning alive, but Swartz eventually slammed the door for good with his fourth K of the inning.

Union County grabbed the lead and never looked back following a five-run third inning after Gilmer took a brief 1-0 advantage in the second with two singles and an RBI groundout.

Four of the five third-inning runs came with two down after senior Isaak Mullinack singled and scored to tie the game at 1-1. Following a two-out double by Swartz and a Conner Shields base on balls, junior Lake Hughes brought home Swartz with a base hit to center.

The Panthers loaded the bases when a 2-0 pitch plunked Tyler Loyd, and moments later, Hunter Loyd brought in Shields with a five-pitch walk. Towe broke things wide open with a two-run single up the middle, scoring Hughes and courtesy-



Junior Caleb Towe ended his week with a .500 average, a .750 slugging percentage, a 1.288 OPS and 3 doubles - all team highs. Photo/Todd Forrest runner Hunter Fleming for a 5-1 score.

Union loaded the bases again in the fourth, this time with nobody out, on back-to-back singles by Mullinack and Dyer, followed by a Swartz base on balls. A fielder's choice off the bat of Shields scored Mullinack, then a Hughes single moved Swartz to third, allowing Tyler Loyd to score him with a sacrifice fly.

A leadoff walk and a one-out error allowed Gilmer to pull within 7-2 in the bottom half of the inning. But Tyler Loyd exited on a high note, fanning the next two batters to retire the side.

Dyer entered in the fifth and recorded the first out, but two hit batters and an error loaded the bases. A one-out single made it a 7-3 game before two passed balls cut the Panthers' lead to 7-5.

At the plate, Dyer finished 3 for 4 with an RBI. Towe drove in a career-high 3 RBIs during a 2-for-4 game that included his first of three doubles on the week.

Mullinack scored twice while going 2 for 4; Hughes finished 1 for 3 with an RBI and a run. Swartz went 1 for 3 with a double, a run and a stolen base. Shields walked, was hit by a pitch, scored once and drove in a run. Hunter Loyd walked twice, was hit by a pitch and added an RBI.

Tyler Loyd drove in one; Fleming and Anderson scored a run.

Panthers 3, Elbert County 14 - The Blue Devils pulled away with 10 runs over the final four innings while Union County

committed seven errors in its Region 8-AA opener on Thursday night in Blairsville.

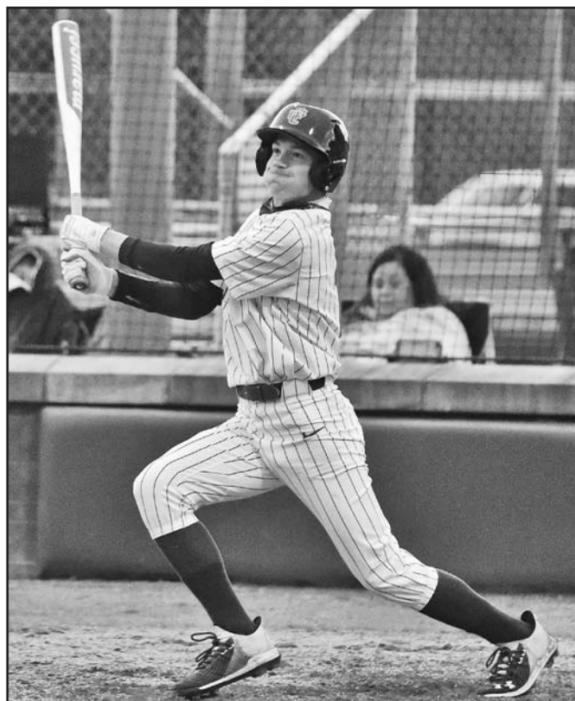
Elbert County's lineup employed a death-by-paper-cut strategy, using 14 singles (17 total hits) to chip away at the Panthers little by little before eventually running away for good in the later innings. Meanwhile, the Union County bats didn't awaken until finding themselves in a 6-0 hole, allowing Elbert starter Clay Conrad to take a perfect game into the fourth inning.

Mullinack got the nod for the Panthers, but the Blue Devils immediately tested the Union defense with a couple of early bunts. With two on and no outs, Mullinack plunked the No. 3 hitter on a 1-1 pitch to load the bases. An opposite-field single followed by a catcher's interference made it 2-0. But Mullinack escaped the first with just a 3-0 deficit thanks to a punch out and a 3-6-3 double play.

Down 6-0 in the fourth, Mullinack opened the inning with a walk and Swartz drew a one-out free pass. With two away, Hughes broke up the no-hitter and the shutout with a bloop single to left that scored Mullinack.

Dyer took the mound in the fifth and the Blue Devils used three singles, two steals, a sacrifice bunt and a walk to pull away at 9-1. Union left the bases loaded in the bottom half of the inning following a Towe single and walks to Fleming and Dyer.

On top 10-1, the Blue Devils experienced a power surge in the seventh off sophomore pitcher



Junior Lake Hughes breaks up the Elbert County no-hitter with a two-out single to left in the fourth inning of game one. Photo/Todd Forrest

Will Duncan, who replaced Dyer by recording the third out in the sixth.

Elbert's 4-run seventh got underway with a two-out error and an RBI single when a two-run homer made it 13-1. The visitors tacked on one more via a single, a stolen base and a Union throwing error.

The Panthers went down swinging with two runs in the seventh, starting with a Duncan walk and consecutive doubles by Towe and Mullinack.

Towe was responsible for Union's only two-hit performance, going 2 for 3 with a run. Mullinack drove in two runs and scored once during a 1-for-3 game. Hughes finished 1 for 3 with an RBI.

Mullinack allowed 6 runs (two earned) over 4 innings - walking one, striking out three and giving up 8 hits. Dyer went 1 2/3 innings, surrendering 5 hits, 3 earned runs and a pair of walks. Duncan worked the final 1 1/3, allowing 4 runs, 4 hits and a base on balls.

Panthers 3, Elbert County 4 - Union County head coach Zach Odum turned to his ace in game two, but Swartz came up two outs short of the victory as the Blue Devils survived thanks to a seventh-inning walk-off single.

Swartz and the Panthers took a 3-1 lead in the sixth but Elbert scored one in the bottom half of the frame and two in the seventh.

Swartz went the distance for Union County, yielding 9 hits over 6 1/3 innings, giving

An infield single moved the winning run into scoring position, and a base hit to center loaded the bases with only one out. And facing a 0-1 count on the ensuing hitter, Swartz's 104th offering of the game was lined into centerfield for the Elbert victory.

Panthers 1, Elbert County 6 - The Blue Devils scored six-unanswered runs to sweep the series after Union County jumped out front 1-0 in the second inning of game three.

Hughes got the nod and was extremely effective until the fourth inning when Elbert County broke through with a 4-spot. At the plate, Towe and Hunter Loyd each doubled but the Panthers' lineup could only muster four hits on the night.

Hunter Loyd scored Union's lone run of the game when his two-out double kept the inning alive for junior Bailey Brown, who singled to center for a 1-0 advantage.

Elbert answered in the bottom half of the inning, using a walk, a single and a sacrifice fly off Hughes to even the score. Union County wasted a scoring opportunity in the fourth when Towe led off with a double and Shields moved him to third with a sacrifice bunt. Hunter Loyd put runners at the corners when he was plunked by a 2-1 pitch, but the Panthers went down silently with a pop-up and a fly out to right.

Two singles and an error kick-started Elbert's four-run fourth inning. Later, a walk, a steal and a base hit made it a 3-1 game before a two-out, two-run double opened up a 5-1 advantage.

The Blue Devils used a sac fly and a wild pitch to manufacture an insurance run in the bottom half.

Hughes went 5 innings, giving up 6 hits and 6 earned runs and striking out five. Tyler Loyd walked one and allowed one hit during a scoreless sixth inning.

Brown finished 1 for 2 with an RBI. Mullinack walked twice while going 1 for 2. Towe walked and doubled during a 1-for-2 out-inning; Hunter Loyd ended his night 1 for 1 with a double, a run and a hit by pitch.

Up next: Union County and Banks County (11-5, 6-0) will open the region series on Tuesday at 5:55 p.m. in Blairsville. The series concludes Friday in Homer with a 5 p.m. doubleheader.

The Leopards are fresh off a three-game sweep of Riverside Military Academy, outscoring the Eagles 39-7 in the series.

The Panthers will visit Towns County (5-8, 3-5) on Monday, March 29 at 5:30 p.m.

UCHS Senior Night photos continued from Page 2C



Senior Jenna Scott with family



Senior Demi Thorn with family



Seniors Katie and Reid Baumeister with family



Senior Clayton Lester with family

Thomas joins Koalas' Track and Field



Riley Thomas (seated-center) is joined by teammates and assistant coach Paul McBride (seated-left) during last Thursday's college signing at the Union County High School library. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County senior track-and-field standout Riley Thomas is on his way to Columbia College (SC) in the fall.

Through three early-season matches at UCHS, Thomas has already notched a pair of top-three individual finishes, including a first-place performance in the High Jump at Gilmer on Feb. 25. At the same meet, Thomas came in third in the Triple Jump event.

Last Thursday, March 18, Thomas was joined by family, friends, coaches, teammates and others during his signing ceremony at the UCHS library.

Before the Panthers' track star put pen to paper, athletic director Mandy Hunter offered a few introductory comments.

"This is a special day for [Thomas] and something he will never forget," she said. "This is a big step and a big commitment for him but I know he's ready to meet it head on. We're all super proud of him and we're excited to be here today to support him."

After the signing, the North Georgia News spoke with Thomas regarding his decision and what the next four years have in store for the future Columbia Koala.

NGN: What was it that attracted you to the Columbia program?

RT: It was their coach [Eric N'Dri], honestly. He has a great reputation and he ran track in the Olympics for [Ivory Coast] and he helped coach the USA sprint team. He's almost like a father figure and that's nice to have as a head coach.

NGN: Have the two of you been able to meet in person?

RT: We met at a camp last summer and he invited me on a tour of the campus. It's a small college with a really nice environment.

NGN: Were there other schools that you considered?

RT: There were a few. Mainly Belmont Abbey (NC) and a few other small schools.

NGN: What did Columbia have that [those schools] didn't?

RT: The coach [at Columbia]. Just his background and the way his teams compete for championships made the difference.

NGN: What are your immediate goals? Anything you hope to accomplish in your first year?

RT: Of course. I want to set a school record. (Laughs)

NGN: In what event?

RT: The coach told me I'll probably compete in the 100 Long Jump and maybe [a

relay event].

NGN: What about four-year goals? Have you thought that far ahead?

RT: Hopefully I'll be finishing up my college career and getting ready to come back [to Union County] to coach.

NGN: Do you have a major picked out?

RT: Education. I want to be a teacher.

NGN: Did academics factor into your decision to choose Columbia?

RT: Yes they did. They have a very good graduation rate and the acceptance rate is pretty low so it felt like a great fit academically as well.

NGN: Is there anyone you would like to thank?

RT: Coaches Kelley and McBride, and all of my family and supporters that I've had around me.

Notes: Coach N'Dri was named the Columbia head coach for men's track & field in December.

N'Dri is also in his second year of assisting the women's track and field team, working with sprinters focusing on the 100-Meter dash, 200-Meter dash, 400-Meter dash, and the 4x100 relay teams.