

# Sports

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## Nelson takes the reins of Lady Panthers basketball program

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Second-year assistant athletic director Thomas Nelson accepted the girls basketball's head coaching position at Union County High School (UCHS) ahead of the 2023-24 season.

"This is a great opportunity and the community has been very supportive in all sports, but basketball is huge here," Nelson said ahead of Thursday's announcement. "It's a tremendous opportunity to lead a program that I believe I can help turn around. Other sports here are moving in the right direction and I hope this is another step in getting all of our sports here on the right track."

"I'm thankful to [UCHS athletic director] Mandy Hunter, [superintendent] John Hill, [principal] CT Hussion and the school board for supporting me and letting me have this opportunity to coach these kids."

A 1993 graduate of Murphy High School (MHS) in North Carolina, Nelson enjoyed a stellar two-sport high school career, starting on the court and the gridiron for the Bulldogs, where he won a state title for the latter program in 1991.

After finishing up his football playing career in 1997



New head coach Thomas Nelson during last Thursday's introductory address to the returning Lady Panther players. Photo/Todd Forrest

at Emory and Henry College, Nelson remained at the school as an assistant football and softball coach. He eventually returned to his alma mater in 2006 and was a part of five football state championships as Murphy's defensive coordinator and strength coach. Nelson also served as the school's softball coach during his 15 years at MHS.

Nelson will no longer serve as Panther football's defensive coordinator, allowing him to concentrate on girls' basketball.

"I'm only basketball from now on and I'm fully committed to that team," he said. "But I'll still be here to help the [football players] in weight training and things like that."

Nelson introduced him-

self to the returning players on Thursday, March 23 at the UCHS gymnasium, offering a taste of what they can expect during summer camps, fall practices and the winter season, emphasizing his anticipated increase in commitment.

"This isn't a situation where you or the coach was awful last year, it's not like that, it's just the opportunity that

presented itself and now here I am talking to you today," he told the girls. "Before we begin, I want a show of hands, how many of you think we could have been a little more interested or committed last year?"

"I've coached female sports for 15 years," he continued. "The only time I haven't is when I was here, but I am totally committed to making

you the best you can be. I have very high expectations for you. Not just on the court, but in the classroom and the community -- we're going to start saying, 'yes sir and no sir; yes ma'am and no ma'am.'"

Nelson should benefit from an experienced squad in 2023-24 that returns four starters and several reserves off a team that finished 14-14 and earned a postseason berth, despite dropping three straight games to end the season. Around the region, Banks County finished as Class AA State Runner-up but will graduate its region player of the year, Kamryn Grier.

The remaining playoff spots in 8-AA went to three evenly matched teams in Athens Academy, East Jackson and Union -- all of which were bounced in the first round of State.

Athens Academy graduates 70% of its roster, and East Jackson bids farewell to six seniors, including standout guard Antonia Pittman.

"Next year looks very promising based on what we have coming back and what everyone else lost," Nelson said. "We lost two very solid seniors, but with the young girls coming back, I think we have a very good shot at [winning region] if we do things right."

## Lady Panthers clinch playoff berth with OT win at East Jackson

Panthers survive PK shootout at East Jackson; Union swept by Fellowship Christian

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County collected two thrilling victories at East Jackson on Tuesday, March 21, but suffered a pair of home losses to Fellowship Christian three days later, dropping the men from second place in Region 8-AA.

Assuming the third-ranked Fellowship girls defeat East Jackson on Wednesday, the Lady Panthers have secured third place in 8-AA via the three-way tiebreaker over East Jackson and Providence Christian. The Union girls locked down the postseason berth with a 1-0 overtime victory on Tuesday, courtesy of senior Italia Salazar's game-winner during the 92nd minute.

Later, the Union men finished 100 minutes locked in a 1-1 tie before edging the Eagles 5-4 in the penalty kick shootout. However, the Panthers came out flat vs. Fellowship and fell into an early 3-0 hole en route to a 6-3 loss. As a result, Union is most likely eliminated from a top-two spot in 8-AA but will have to wait on Wednesday's East Jackson vs. Fellowship contest to learn their State seeding.

**Lady Panthers 1, East Jackson 0 (OT)** - Union County welcomed goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie back to the pitch following an injury, and the junior showed no signs of rust in a 100-minute shutout of the Eagles.

McKechnie's diving save in the 26th minute kept the match scoreless before she laid out for another save in the 56th and broke up an East Jackson one-on-one in the 76th.

Union's best scoring chance came 8 minutes in when Lara Turner found room in the open field but pushed her shot to the right. The Lady Panthers were unlucky again when senior Maggie Payne couldn't convert during the final minute after she was unable earn a whistle on



Italia Salazar embraces goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie following her game-winning goal at East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

contact inside the box. Earlier, Union caught a break of its own when an Eagles' offside halted a close-range scoring opportunity in the 31st minute.

Following an uneventful first overtime session, Salazar connected from the middle of the field, more than 75 feet away, during the second minute of the final OT. Her kick sailed beyond the keeper's fingertips and into the back-left corner of the net.

Union continued pressing the action, looking for a late two-goal edge, but Turner misfired in the 98th and 100th minutes.

**Panthers 1 (5), East Jackson 1 (4)** - Senior goalkeeper Trent Baker's kick save kept the Eagles from converting the first of five penalty kicks, while the Panthers connected on each of their attempts during Tuesday night's PK shootout in Nicholson.

Union County went on the attack early with six shot attempts in the first 20 minutes but couldn't find the net, sending the two teams to the break in a scoreless tie. East Jackson was the aggressor later in the first half, trying six shots over the final 18 minutes, culminating with Baker's timely save at the halftime buzzer.

The Eagles finally broke through in the 45th minute, going the other way off an unsuccessful Union corner kick. Later, senior Wilson Walker flicked a header over the crossbar during the 47th, courtesy of a free kick, but junior Zuriel Mancillas eventually drilled the right-footed equalizer during the 48th.

A kick by Antonio Solaro was stopped in the 63rd minute before the sophomore missed high in the 66th; Walker was turned away in the 65th. The Panthers rejected two Eagles' corner kicks in the 75th



Senior goalkeeper Trent Baker makes a critical save during Union County's penalty kick shootout victory at East Jackson last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

and 77th but couldn't find the net on shots from Walker and junior Benton Gregory during the 80th minute.

Baker notched a save in the 83rd and East Jackson stopped Walker's attempt during the 90th. Baker came through again five minutes into the second overtime, preventing a score off a corner kick.

The game remained tied through two overtime periods after the Panthers were tagged with an offside in the 99th minute.

The shootout opened with Baker's kick save and a conversion by Walker, putting the pressure on the home team. East Jackson hit their next four penalty kicks, but senior Isaiah Ortiz, along with juniors Mancillas, Evan Bohms and Eli Decker each found the net on their attempts for a 5-4 PK win.

**Panthers 3, Fellowship Christian 6** - Union's hopes of hosting a home playoff game

took a serious blow on Friday night, surrendering four first-half goals in a 6-3 loss to Fellowship.

Despite getting out-shot by Union during the first half, the Paladins never trailed after grabbing a 1-0 lead in the 14th minute. Fellowship added goals in the 18th and 28th for a 3-0 advantage before Union County got on the board via Bohms' PK in the 37th.

However, the Panthers surrendered a costly goal moments later to face a 4-1 deficit at the intermission.

Union moved within a score at 4-3 via two quick second-half goals, beginning with Mancillas' shot from 60' in the 44th. Mancillas struck again in the 47th off a feed from Bohms and a Panthers' rally appeared to be brewing in Blairsville.

Walker's equalizer attempt from close range bounced wide moments later, which proved extra costly when Fel-

lowship put in a free kick in the 51st minute.

The Paladins put the game away with a corner-kick header in the 67th.

**Lady Panthers 0, No. 3 Fellowship Christian 10** - Nationally-ranked Fellowship Christian scored eight goals in the first 27 minutes, eventually ending the game via the mercy rule with two goals in six minutes during the second half.

Union County saw the return of sophomore Ariel McCarter in limited minutes, but it wasn't enough to challenge an elite Paladins squad.

Fellowship scored 19 seconds into the contest then added five more goals in an 8-minute span between the 11th and 19th minutes. Ahead 6-0, Fellowship tacked on scores in the 24th and 27th before putting it into cruise control to finish the half.

**Up next:** Union County hosted Commerce on Monday.

# Track: Relay teams earn two golds at Battle of the Blue Ridge

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

**Mt. Airy** - Union County took home two gold medals in the relay competitions at last Friday's Battle of the Blue Ridge at Habersham Central High School.

With a time of 11 minutes, 5.50 seconds in the 4x800 race, the Union ladies pulled away from second-place Lumpkin County by more than 46 seconds. In the boys' 4x400, the Panthers crossed the line in 3:38.60, edging second-place Hart County by 1.2 seconds.

Elsewhere, freshman Lola Hunter finished second in the 3200M with a time of 12:08.44. She also took home bronze in the 1600M event at 5:43.51.

Zander Rotko placed second in the 400M race, clocking in at 52.41. The boys' 4x200 relay team came in third with a time of 1:34.26. Cooper



The Union County track and field relay teams in action during a recent meet. Photos/submitted

Kluth finished second in the 300M hurdles at 44.43, holding off senior teammate Sam Page, who came in third at 44.68.

Hannah Kazmierzak's time of 2:43.65 was good enough for third in the girls' 800M and Noel Hyatt placed fourth in the 400M at 1:06.63. Linley Jones came in fourth in the 300M hurdles at 53.93; Taylor Whitehead was fourth in the guys' 400M with a time of 53.59.

The boys' 4x100 relay team also placed fourth at 47.14. Fifth-place finishers included the girls' 4x200 relay team, Katie Byers (100M hurdles), Ava Loyd (100M),

Jones (triple jump), Daniel McPhee (triple jump), Natalie Payne (1600M) and Jacob Turner (110M hurdles, 300M hurdles). Union County travels to White County on Friday,

March 31 for the Mt. Yonah Invitational. Teams expected to participate include Gilmer, Habersham Central, Hart County, Lumpkin County, Stephens County, Tallulah Falls, Union and White.

# Baseball: Union County bats go cold in Providence's three-game sweep

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Providence Christian swept a three-game series from Union County, taking Tuesday's opener in Blairsville before winning both meetings of Friday's doubleheader in Lilburn.

The Storm recorded shutouts in the first two meetings, limiting Union County to six combined hits in a 6-0 final on Tuesday and a 13-0 game on Friday. In the finale, the Panthers committed seven errors and allowed seven first-inning runs during an 11-2 loss.

**Panthers 2, Providence 11** - Union County pushed across one run in the top of the first, but the Storm answered with seven in the bottom half, one in the third and three in the fourth. The Panthers added one in the third.

Freshman Maddox Patton capped off a five-hit series, going 2 for 2 with a double, two runs and a pair of walks.

Senior Will Duncan drove in one during a 1-for-3 day. Eli Sosensky finished 1 for 3 and Hunter Fleming went 1 for 2 with a stolen base.

Lane Haney swiped a bag and was hit by a pitch.

Duncan started on the mound, allowing three walks and six unearned runs in 2/3 of an inning. Freshman Gunnar Atkins lasted 2 1/3, fanning two and giving up two earned runs on five hits.

Patton struck out three



Freshman Maddox Patton collected five hits and worked three innings on the mound during the Providence series. Photo/Todd Forrest

over three frames, surrendering two hits and one run. **Panthers 0, Providence 13 (5 inn)** - The Storm scored five in the first, two in the second and six in the fourth, coming on 12 hits and two Union County errors. Patton and Connor Swanson

each singled for Union County and Swanson stole a base. Sophomore Hayden Hughes drew his team's lone base on balls.

Freshman Eli Gwynn gave up eight hits and seven earned before exiting with two down in the second. Duncan



Senior Will Duncan finished 1 for 3 with an RBI during Friday's third game at Providence Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

entered and picked up the final out before giving way to Kaden Combs in the third. The sophomore allowed four hits, two walks and two earned runs over two innings.

**Panthers 0, Providence 6** - Hughes fired a complete game on the hill, but the Union

lineup finished with four hits and one walk in the shutout.

Patton went 2 for 3 to start the series; Gwynn and Fleming turned in a pair of 1-for-3 games, and Mayo Collins-Spiva worked a walk.

Hughes gave up 11 hits and six earned runs while fan-

ning four and walking three hitters.

**Up next:** Union County resumes Region 8-AA action Tuesday at Athens Academy - first pitch is at 5:30 p.m. Later in the week, the Panthers host the Spartans in a Friday doubleheader at 5 p.m.



UCHS head coach Zach Odom with his team prior to a recent game. Photo/Todd Forrest

## UCHS 2023 Baseball season stats

#	Rooster	GP	PA	AB	H	1B	2B	3B	HR	RBI	R	HBP	ROE	FC	CI	BB	SO	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS
14	Maddox Patton	18	56	49	19	15	2	2	0	4	8	0	2	0	0	7	11	.388	.464	.510	.974
32	M Stevens	1	3	3	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	.333	.333	.333	.667
15	Gunnar Atkins	7	17	15	4	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	9	.267	.353	.467	.820
3	Holten Fleming	9	4	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	250	.250	.250	.500	
17	Will Duncan	15	39	30	7	6	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	8	13	.233	.410	.267	.677
11	Hayden Hughes	11	28	26	6	5	1	0	0	3	1	0	1	1	0	1	12	.231	.250	.269	.519
27	E Gwynn	4	11	9	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	4	.222	.364	.444	.808
27	Eli Gwynn	9	23	21	4	4	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	2	5	.190	.261	.190	.451
5	Hunter Fleming	18	52	43	8	8	0	0	0	1	3	0	2	0	0	8	11	.186	.314	.186	.500
19	Lane Haney	11	24	22	4	3	1	0	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	1	7	.182	.250	.227	.477
1	Eli Sosensky	16	41	36	6	5	1	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	4	10	.167	.268	.194	.463
25	Kaden Combs	11	24	24	4	3	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	7	.167	.167	.208	.375
8	Connor Swanson	14	30	25	4	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	13	.160	.300	.160	.460
10	Jordan Gilliam	12	24	16	2	2	0	0	0	0	4	3	0	1	0	5	10	.125	.417	.125	.542
32	Moses Stevens	11	21	19	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	1	0	1	11	.105	.143	.105	.248
36	Mayo Collins-Spiva	9	15	14	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	12	.071	.133	.071	.205
23	Bo Brown	8	16	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	8	.000	.250	.000	.250
4	Brayden Sweet	9	21	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	5	.000	.286	.000	.286
Totals		18	440	383	75	62	10	3	0	19	23	9	11	5	0	54	153	.196	.308	.238	.546

## Union County's 1995 Class A State Runner-up baseball team honored during Feb. 7 ceremony



Players and coaches from the Union County's 1995 State Runner-up baseball team were recognized during halftime of the Feb. 7th girls' basketball game vs. Fellowship Christian. Photo/submitted

## Jala Stamey crowned Individual Invite Champion

On Monday-Tuesday, the No. 21 Truett McConnell University women's golf team traveled to compete in the Golden Tigers Spring Invitational, hosted by Brenau University, where the Lady Bears finished runners-up out of nine teams, with a final team score of 648 through two rounds. Most notable, sophomore Jala Stamey was crowned individual invite champion out of 54 golfers.

No. 4 Southeastern University was crowned overall invite champions with a team score of 642, while TMU was featured besting No. 13 Milligan University (649), Tennessee Wesleyan (666), Brenau University (689), Point University (738) and St. Andrews University (782).

"The ladies had their physical and mental strength tested this week due to cold temperatures, wet conditions, and strong winds," said Head Coach Steve Patton. "I was pleased with our effort and perseverance. It was exciting to see Jala get her first collegiate win and to see the ladies battle down the stretch. We currently have 4 ladies ranked inside the national top 150 in golfstat which is the first time in our history this has been accomplished. We have a few



**Jala Stamey** loose ends to tie up over the next couple of weeks before our next big tournament in Nashville. The girls and I are ready to get back to work."

Stamey was crowned champion after shooting a 75 through round one and an 82 through round two. Mary Grace Davidson finished tied for seventh after shooting an 84 and cut off six strokes for a 78 in round two, followed

by Sylken November who finished in 12th with an 81 and 83, respectively. Madison Panter tied for 13th while shooting an 83 and 82, followed by Erin Dorsey who individually finished in 16th shooting an 81 and 86. Audrey Grace Holder finished tied for 20th with an 88 and 84, while Lauren Weaver individually finished in 36th, shooting an 84 and 101. N(Mar29/23)CA