

Sports

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Soccer: Union County men near first Region title in six years

Lady Panthers clinch home field in first round of Class AA State Tournament

By Todd Forrest
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Both Union County soccer teams secured home-field advantage in the first round of the Class AA State Tournament with a pair of convincing Region 8-AA victories over Elbert County on Friday.

On the heels of their 10-0 rout over Elbert, the eighth-ranked Union men are one win away from locking down their first Region 8-AA title since 2015. The Panthers will have two opportunities to pick up that region-clinching victory, beginning with Tuesday's home fixture with Rabun County. The region schedule will conclude Thursday at second-place Riverside Military Academy.

The Union County girls wrap up region play when they host Rabun County on Tuesday. The Lady Panthers can still claim their second-straight 8-AA title (since last season was canceled) with a four-goal victory over the Lady Cats. However, it won't be easy considering that Rabun already owns a 6-3 victory over Union on March 9 and the Lady Panthers are without their leading goal-scorer for the remainder of the season.

Lady Panthers 5, Elbert County 0 - A pair of first-half goals from sophomore Kaylee Helton helped Union County seize control with a 2-0 advantage in the 27th minute of Friday's Region 8-AA victory over Elbert County.

Freshman Lara Turner assisted on both of Helton's goals - the first coming just 3 minutes, 14 seconds into the match.

Junior Loralei Skinner opened up some breathing room



Junior Loralei Skinner scored the third and fourth goals of Union County's 5-0 victory over Elbert County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Skinner added her second goal of the contest in the 56th minute, and sophomore Madison Torres capped off the scoring with an unassisted goal in the 72nd.

Torres and freshman Zoe Crawford also chipped in one assist each for the Lady Panthers.

Tuesday's region showdown with Rabun County will get underway at 5 p.m.

Panthers 10, Elbert

County 0 (53') - No. 8 Union County set a new season-high for scoring -- and they needed less than 28 minutes to accomplish it.

The Panthers' previous season-high of eight goals had been accomplished three times, most recently in the March 19 win over Banks County. But during last Friday's win over Elbert County, Union held a 9-0 halftime advantage.

After being held scoreless during the early stages of the second half, the Panthers ended the contest via the mercy



Senior Zach Jackson recorded his first career hat trick, two coming in the first half, during Union County's 10-0 rout of Elbert County on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

rule when senior Zach Jackson completed his hat trick with a goal in the 53rd minute.

Jackson opened the scoring off a feed from freshman Zurriel Mancillas in the 6th minute. Junior Kyler Robbins, who also finished with a hat trick, gave Union a 2-0 advantage with an unassisted goal in the 11th. Two minutes later, Mancillas recorded the second of his four helpers when he found Robbins for a 3-0 lead.

Senior Malachi Patrick got in on the scoring in the 16th minute, courtesy of a Robbins

assist. Mancillas was rewarded in the 17th off a pass from Jackson to build a 5-0 advantage.

Senior Nolan Bachman made it 6-0 in the 18th minute, coming off the hockey assist from Patrick and Mancillas.

Patrick collected the brace in the 23rd minute on Mancillas' fourth assist of the night. Robbins picked up the hat trick three minutes later with his second unassisted score of the match.

The first-half onslaught came to a close in the 28th minute when Jackson scored off

a feed from Robbins.

Union County improves to 7-1 overall and 6-0 in 8-AA as senior goalkeeper Aaron Helton notched his seventh shutout of the year. Tuesday's region fixture with Rabun County gets underway at 5 p.m. with the guys' match to follow. Thursday's trip to Riverside begins at 5 p.m., but as of last week, RMA still is not allowing fans at home sporting events due to COVID-19 restrictions. Anyone wishing to attend should check ahead before making the trip.

Baseball: Union swept by No. 9 Banks County; winless RMA on deck

State playoff implications headline upcoming three-game set vs. Riverside Military

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Despite leading in all three games, Union County endured its second-straight Region 8-AA sweep last week at the hands of No. 9 Banks County (13-5, 6-0).

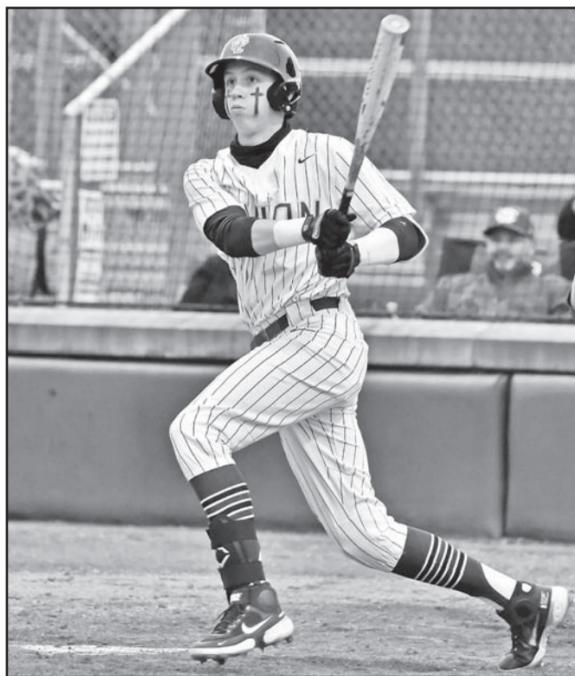
With the losses, the Panthers fall to 0-6 in region play and 5-13 overall with a three-game slate vs. Riverside Military Academy (RMA) on deck.

Panthers 3, Banks County 5 - Tuesday's series opener in Blairsville showed promise as junior starter Lake Hughes entered the fourth inning in a 2-2 tie when a free pass and a hit batter sparked a three-run inning.

Trailing 5-2, Union couldn't take advantage of a second-and-third, no-out situation in the bottom of the fourth, but Isaak Mullanack replaced Hughes and escaped the fifth with an inning-ending 4-6-3 double play to keep his team within striking distance.

The Panthers chipped away in the fifth with a Thomas Dyer walk and a Zeke Swartz RBI single to pull within 5-3.

And despite a scoreless sixth by Mullanack and a 1-2-3 seventh from Swartz, the Union County offense couldn't generate a base runner over the final two frames.



Senior Zeke Swartz's 4 RBIs and .600 batting average led Union County during last week's series with Banks. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Panthers grabbed an early 1-0 lead after Hughes fanned two in the top half of the first, then drew a leadoff walk in the bottom half. A sacrifice bunt by Dyer and a Mullanack single put runners at the corners for Swartz, who scored Hughes with a base hit up the middle.

Banks grabbed a 2-1 lead in the second with a bases-loaded single, but the Panthers knotted the score in the third when Hughes walked, stole second and

eventually scored on a Mullanack ground out.

Hughes' night ended with two walks, two runs and a stolen base. On the bump, he struck out four in 4 innings, allowing 9 hits, 5 earned runs, a walk and 2 hit batters.

Mullanack entered in the fifth and worked two scoreless innings, giving up one hit, two walks and fanning one. He finished 2 for 4 at the plate, driving in one run and stealing a base.

Swartz tossed a perfect



Shortstop Conner Shields (4) fires first to complete a 4-6-3 double play, ending a Banks threat in the fifth inning of game one. Photo/Todd Forrest

seventh on six pitches, recording two groundouts and a pop fly. At the dish, the senior went 2 for 3 with 2 RBIs.

Caleb Towe finished 1 for 3 with a steal. Dyer walked, scored and stole a bag. Hunter Loyd walked and Damien Chitwood was hit by a pitch.

While Union pitching limited the heart of the Leopards' lineup (3-6 hitters) to just one hit in 10 at-bats, Banks' 7-9 hitters finished a combined 6 for 7 with 4 RBIs

and 3 runs.

Panthers 3, Banks County 11 - Game two saw Swartz and Union County jump out to a 3-0 advantage in Homer before surrendering 11 runs over the final three innings.

Through 3 2/3 innings, the Panthers' senior lefty allowed just two hits without a walk and was one out away from taking a shutout into the fifth. However, back-to-back walks set the stage for a two-out, two-run triple, followed

by consecutive singles and a hit batter.

Tied at 3-3, Mullanack replaced Swartz to begin the fifth and gave up four singles and a hit-by-pitch, allowing the Leopards to push across three more runs. Banks continued to pull away in the sixth as Mullanack hit three batters and walked three more. Combined with a single, an error and a sacrifice fly, the Leopards built an 11-3 lead through six innings.

Union's three runs came during the first two innings when Hughes singled to start the game, then came around to score on a Dyer sacrifice and a Swartz base hit.

Leopards' pitching had control problems of their own in the second, walking Hunter Loyd to open the inning before plunking both Conner Shields and Bailey Brown to load the bases. A walk to Hughes brought home Hunter Loyd and a single by Dyer scored Shields, spotting the Panthers a 3-0 advantage. Unfortunately, with the bases still loaded and nobody out, Union was unable to extend its three-run cushion.

Hughes walked twice and scored once during a 1-for-2, one-RBI day. Dyer finished 2 for 3 with an RBI; Mullanack went 1 for 3 with a walk and an RBI.

Panthers 2, Banks County 12 (six innings) - The Leopards exploded for 10 runs

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