

Sports

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Baseball: Winning streak reaches four with Senior Night victory

Third place in Region 8-AA up for grabs during this week's Union-Rabun series

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With the 3-seed from Region 8-AA on the line in the upcoming three-game series vs. Rabun, Union County baseball is starting to click at just the right moment.

Currently riding their longest winning streak (four games) since 2019, the Panthers will face a pair of rivals this week, beginning Monday at home with Towns County. On Tuesday, the action moves to Tiger for game one of a three-game slate vs. Rabun County that will determine third place in Region 8-AA. The series concludes with a Friday doubleheader in Blairsville.

Panthers 8, Lumpkin County 2 - Union County saw limited action last week due to spring break and weekend rain showers. However, they were able to pay tribute to the Class of 2021 before Friday's Senior Night victory over Lumpkin County.

Damien Chitwood, JJ Littles, Hunter Loyd, Isaak Mullanack and Zeke Swartz were honored alongside their families prior to the first pitch on Friday, April 9. And when the action got underway, Swartz recorded his second-straight win as Union County (9-14, 3-6) jumped all over Lumpkin with 6 runs in the first three innings en route to an 8-2 victory.

Swartz struck out a season-high 12 batters over 5 innings of work. The senior lefty didn't issue a walk while allow-



Five members of the Class of 2021 were recognized last Friday. (L-R) Damien Chitwood, Hunter Loyd, JJ Littles, Isaak Mullanack and Zeke Swartz. Senior Night individual family photos will be included in a future edition of the NGN. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing just 3 hits and one earned run in his second April start. At the plate, Loyd and junior Lake Hughes each delivered a 2-for-3 day with Hughes scoring three runs and Loyd driving home three.

After laboring through an early-season slump, Loyd is slashing .533/.667/.867 with 6 RBIs and 6 runs over his last eight games - dating back to the mid-March series vs. No. 6 Elbert County. And since the calendar flipped to April, the Emmanuel signee is hitting .625 with a 1.825 OPS.

"I think he was just putting a lot of pressure on himself to be the man this year because he knows that he's capable of it," Union head coach Zach Odom said regarding Loyd's turnaround. "Early on, he was

trying to do too much, then he started to relax at the plate. He stopped chasing [pitches out of the strike zone] and started hitting pitches that he could handle. Now that he's done that, he's really taken off."

In Friday's win, Loyd spotted the Panthers a 2-0 lead with a first-inning double - scoring Hughes and Thomas Dyer. Union extended the margin to 5-0 in the second when the Indians plunked Conner Shields to open the frame, then surrendered a bunt single to Caleb Towe.

With two on and one out, Hughes drove in Shields with a base hit to right. Thomas Dyer would make it 4-0 with a sacrifice fly that brought home Towe, and Mullanack scored Hughes with a two-out single to left.

Swartz struck out the side

in the third and the Panthers tacked on another run in the bottom half of the inning. A pair of one-out singles from Chitwood and Shields moved a runner in scoring position for Bailey Brown, who went the opposite way, plating courtesy-runner Hunter Fleming on a two-out base knock.

Three singles allowed Lumpkin to get on the board in the fourth despite three more Ks from Swartz.

Union wasted a walk in the fourth and a hit batter in the fifth, keeping the score at 6-1 when junior Tyler Loyd took the mound to start the sixth.

After fanning the leadoff man on four pitches, control issues became a concern for the Union County right-hander. Two walks and a hit-by-pitch loaded

the bases when a sacrifice fly trimmed the Panthers' advantage to 6-2. Tyler Loyd was unable to close out the inning, issuing another base on balls, bringing the tying run to the plate and Mullanack to the mound.

On the senior's first offering of the game, a sharp grounder off the bat of Lumpkin's Dolan Harder was headed for right field, but Brown laid out to make a diving stop to end the inning with a 4-3 putout and limit the Indians to one run.

As is usually the case in the game of baseball, a web gem for the third out tends to result in that same fielder leading off the next inning, and Brown got the bottom of the sixth underway by taking the pay-off pitch for ball four. Hughes followed with another full-count walk and Dyer

bunted his way aboard to load the bags with nobody out.

After a pop-up and a strikeout, Hunter Loyd finally made the visitors pay by lining a 2-2 pitch up the middle, scoring Brown and Hughes for an 8-2 advantage.

Mullanack sat down the Indians in order during an 11-pitch seventh to push his team's winning streak to four games. Mullanack fanned one and didn't allow a baserunner over 1 1/3 innings.

The Class of 2021: Coach Odom, who served as an assistant during their freshman campaign in 2018, reflected on his four years with the five seniors. Odom took the reins in 2019, leading the Panthers to their first State Tournament appearance in three years.

"The one thing I will always remember about this [group of seniors] is how much fun they have," Odom said. "They always find a way to make me laugh, even when things aren't going so well."

While Odom will always cherish the highs, there were a few lows that also stood out. Most notably, when Littles informed his skipper that a knee injury would cost the senior his fourth year on the diamond.

"He came and talked to me in the hall that day and told me [about his injury], and I could tell that he was really torn up," Odom said. "But the awesome thing about JJ, he's going to find a way to get involved. He always has a smile on his face, and he's basically been like

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MGC stays busy during February, enters spring on high note

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Blairsville's Mountain Gymnastics Center (MGC) hasn't seen very much downtime over the last two months, competing in four events across North Georgia between Feb. 13 and March 6.

MGC took part in the Champion Cup in Roswell on Feb. 19-21, coming away with six all-around championships.

Emma Schuette was victorious on the vault (9.25) and the bars (9.40), good enough for a first-place all-around tally of 36.975 in USA Level 6 competition.

The AAU Gold squad took home three first-place finishes to pick up a team championship with a 111.425 total score.

Shaylyne Davis was first on the vault (9.325), bars (9.35), beam (9.35) and came in second on the floor exercises for a high score of 37.275. Shy'Ann Beasley's 9.825 on the beam would not be topped. Her 9.275 gave her a second-place score on the bars to headline her first-place all-around tally of 37.45.

Brown recorded a victory on the vault with a 9.35. She also placed second on the bars (9.1) and floor (9.3) to go with a top-three on the beam (8.95). She finished with an all-around high score of 36.7.

Nevaeh Leopold came in first on the bars (9.25) but suffered an injury and was unable to compete in the vault and floor exercises.

Addison Harkins finished first with a 36.9 all-around score in AAU Silver competition. Her score of 9.325 on the floor was good enough for first. Meanwhile, her 9.1 on the beam was second to go with third-place



Under the direction of coach Shelley Thomas, local gymnasts perfect their performances on the vault (9.0) and bars (9.475).

In other AAU Silver action, Keely Shook was second all-around with a 36.75 after taking home first on the bars (9.55) and second on the floor (9.3).

The USA Level 6 team placed fourth overall behind Schuette's all-around victory and Poston's fifth-place finish that included a top-three (9.4) on the floor.

In AAU Bronze, Madelyn Primeaux was second all-around (36.7), despite top scores on the vault (9.5) and the floor (9.05). She also came in third

on the bars (9.3) and the beam (8.85). Kylee Coggins placed fourth all-around with a 35.8. The highlight of her day was a second-place performance on the floor (9.0) and a third-place (9.225) on the vault.

Brooke Mowry used a third-place finish on the floor (8.8) to propel to a top-five all-around total of 35.025. Selah Patterson placed sixth all-around (34.475) and Baylor Sullivan was seventh (32.875).

At Woodstock's Spring Break Out on Feb. 26-27, MGC recorded three all-around victories, courtesy of Madelyn Earley,



craft during a recent practice at MGC. Photos by Todd Forrest

Beasley and Shook.

In AAU Silver action, Earley took home first on the vault (9.2), beam (9.5) and floor (9.0). She was second on the bars (9.3) for an all-around score of 37.0. Shook came in first on the vault (9.6) and the bars (9.45) to headline her first-place all-around tally of 37.0. Her 9.05 on the bars and 8.9 on the floor were good enough for second and third, respectively.

Patterson claimed gold in AAU Gold with a 37.4 all-around score. Her marks of 9.15 on the vault, 9.55 on the bars and 9.7 on the beam were all the highest

of the day.

Davis placed second at 36.65 despite coming in first on the floor (9.3) and second on the vault (8.8), bars (9.25) and beam (9.3). Abby Brown also came in second at 35.65 thanks in large part to a first-place score of 9.05 on the vault.

Harkins and Grace Rice were each second in AAU Silver. Harkins' 36.35 was headlined by a high score of 9.1 on the floor and a pair of seconds on the vault (9.3) and bars (9.25).

Rice's 9.6 on the bars was the best of the day. Her second-place marks on the vault

(8.7), beam (8.6) and floor (8.9) helped propel her to second with a 35.8.

Schuette and Poston came in second and third, respectively, in USA Level 6. Schuette's 36.65 featured a first-place score of 8.95 on the bars. She also placed second on the vault (8.75) and third on the beam (8.775).

Josie Poston turned in a pair of runner-ups on the beam (8.875) and the floor (9.5) for a 35.075 total.

Addison Lee finished fourth on the bars, beam and floor to come in fourth all-around. Mowry and Primeaux were also fourth in AAU Bronze with a 35.1 and 36.6, respectively. Primeaux turned in high scores on the bars (9.55) and floor (9.3). Mowry placed third on the vault (8.5), bars (8.8) and beam (9.1).

Coggins came in fifth with a 35.4; Lucie Burgess and Coggins were sixth at 35.0 and 35.4, respectively. Patterson placed seventh with a 34.85.

Schuette took home first all-around with a 36.475 at the March Madness in Cobb County. Her 9.05 on the vault, 9.15 on the bars and 9.75 on the floor were all top scores.

Reese Chambers came in first on the beam (9.575) in USA Gold and finished sixth all-around with a 35.8. Lola Patton's 9.35 was good enough for third on the beam, propelling her to a seventh-place all-around tally (35.475).

Rounding out March Madness was an eighth-place 35.35 by Poston, headlined by a second-place mark of 9.475 on the floor.

On Valentine's Day weekend, MGC traveled to Athens for the Made in the USA meet.

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