

Sports

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Soccer: No. 4 Panthers host Towers in Round 1 on Friday

Union and White end in 2-2 draw; Lady Panthers close 2024 with loss

By Todd Forrest
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Cleveland - The 4th-ranked Union County men wrapped up the regular season with a 2-2 tie at White County on Tuesday, April 9, ahead of Friday's first-round playoff game vs. Towers.

The Lady Panthers suffered a 6-0 loss at White County to finish their 2024 season.

At White County, the Panthers scored first courtesy of junior Antonio Solorio in the 13th minute before White County responded with the equalizer in the 34th.

Senior Zurial Mancillas broke the tie in the 61st, but White County answered 5 minutes later.

Mancillas and senior Zach Depalma added assists in the 2-2 draw.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers fell into a 4-0 deficit at the intermission and couldn't crack the scoreboard during a 6-0 loss.

Third-seeded Towers (Decatur) visits Blairsville on Friday night as the Panthers look to keep their first-round winning streak alive. Union's last first-round playoff loss came in 2014 at Greater Atlanta Christian, and excluding the cancelled 2020 COVID-year, the Panthers have advanced to the Elite Eight or beyond each season since reaching the State title game in 2019.



Senior Evan Bohms and the Panthers look to continue their run of first-round playoff victories dating back 10 years. Photo/Todd Forrest

Towers visits UCHS with a 6-7-1 record, with three of its losses coming vs. state-ranked teams (Callaway, Landmark Christian and Wesleyan).

The Panthers, meanwhile, own an 8-2-3 record with wins over state-ranked Lumpkin County, Gilmer and Providence Christian.

Union tied a ranked Class AAAA team at Chattahoochee while suffering losses

to a pair of ranked schools in East Jackson and Class AAA's Coahulla Creek.

Union County's seniors make their fourth State playoff appearance, where they own a 7-3 record over their previous three trips.

The Panthers have not lost a first-round home playoff game since 2010.

Union County and Towers kickoff at 6 p.m. Friday.



Junior Antonio Solorio leads Union County into the postseason with 13 goals. Photo/Todd Forrest



Maggie Delatte (10), Zoe Crawford and the seniors closed their UCHS careers last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

Softball: Roxbury back at the helm

By Todd Forrest
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Union County hired a familiar face as its fifth softball coach in the program's rich history.

Robby Roxbury, an assistant for the last four seasons and former head coach during Union's initial foray into fast-pitch softball during the early 2000s, replaces Carissa Owenby ahead of the 2024 season, which opens in August.

As an assistant coach at UCHS since 2020, Roxbury was a part of two Elite Eight squads and one Region 8-AA Champion. In 2021, Roxbury served under then-head coach Stephen Mitchell during Union County's elite-eight run. A year later, Roxbury assisted Owenby during the Lady Panthers' region championship campaign, culminating in the program's second-straight Class AA Elite Eight appearance.

With four region titles and 13 postseason appearances since 2010, Roxbury understands he has some big shoes to fill during his second run as softball coach.

"The [softball] program has been really good for the last several years under coach [Jessica] Stewart, coach Mitchell, and coach Owenby, so I'm hoping we can see that program continue to go in that direction."

Things certainly will look different for the softball program this fall as Union prepares for life in Region 7-AA while replacing its head coach and five talented seniors (three inked college scholarships in November).

Before serving as an assistant from 2020-2023, Roxbury won two region championships as Union County



Robby Roxbury addresses the softball team during his announcement as head coach on Tuesday, April 9. Photo/Todd Forrest

head baseball coach during four seasons in charge between 2015-2018.

Roxbury also worked as head baseball coach from 2003-2007, while handling softball duties from 2002-2005. Roxbury graduated from UCHS in 1994.

"To be honest, I prayed a lot about this and I felt like this is the direction that I'm supposed to go," Roxbury said when asked about returning to the head coaching ranks for the fourth time in three decades. "I'm honored. We have a great bunch of girls and a great group of coaches

and I'm looking forward to it. I appreciate the opportunity and very humbled."

Roxbury's transition will be aided by the return of longtime assistant coach Kaitlyn Seabolt.

"We're excited about this," UCHS athletic director Mandy Hunter told the softball team during Roxbury's introduction on Tuesday, April 9. "You've all had coach Roxbury for several years and he's very excited. Coach Seabolt is going to continue helping and will play a big role with the team."

Track: Both UCHS teams second at White County; Region meet April 22

By Todd Forrest
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Cleveland - Both Union County teams placed second overall at White County's Mt. Yonah Invitational on Friday, April 12.

On the girls' side, Ava Lloyd placed first in the 100M and 200M races, clocking in at 13.19 and 27.86 seconds, respectively.

Taylor Whitehead took home gold in the boys' 100M and 200M races with times of 11.02 and 22.14. The boys' 4x100 relay team placed first with a time of 44.34. The guys' 4x400 relay team came out on top with a time of 3:36.01.

Girls' runner-up finishes included Nomi Nelson in the 100M at 13.67 and the triple jump with a distance of 31 feet, 8 inches. Hannah Kazmierzak

placed second in the 400M at 1:05.39 and Lola Hunter collected silver in the 3200M with a time of 12:08.45.

Reagan Covington was third in the 400M at 1:06.08; Katie Byers took home third in the 300M hurdles with a time of 53.91; the 4x400 relay team earned a bronze by clocking in at 4:41.12.

In boys' action, JT Neal was second in the 100M and 200M at 11.18 and 22.94. Benton Gregory's time of 2:03.08 earned a silver medal in the 800M event; Jacob Turner was second in the 110 hurdles at 17.15; the 4x200 relay team placed second with a time of 1:34.14.

Boys' third-place finishes went to Whitehead in the 400M (53.67) and Nolan Thompson in the 300M hurdles (45.23).

Coming in fourth place were Lola Hunter (girls'

1600M), the girls' 4x100 and 4x800 relay teams, Abby Barrett (girls' triple jump) and Leslie Rash (girls' discus).

Fifth-place finishes went to Izzy Anthos (girls' 100M), Ariel McCarter (girls' 200M), Noel Hyatt (girls' 400M), Kazmierzak (girls' 800M), Natalie Payne (girls' 3200M) and Rash (girls' shot put). The boys' 4x800 relay team also finished fifth.

Union County competed against Dawson County, Gilmer, Habersham Central, Hart County, North Hall, Stephens County, West Hall and host White County.

Union's final regular season meet before the Region 8-AA Championships will be Thursday, April 18 at Dawson County.

The region meet is Monday, April 22 at East Jackson High School.



The 4x100 relay team: (L-R) Tyler Parker, JT Neal, Cade Dockrey and Jonah Kluth. Photo/Beau Kelley

Baseball: East Jackson's sweep bumps Union County from postseason

By Todd Forrest
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The Panthers (5-15, 2-10) were dealt a three-game sweep at the hands of East Jackson, stretching their losing streak to 11 games and eliminating Union County from postseason play for the second straight year.

During last Monday's game-one loss in Nicholson, the Panthers nearly erased a 7-1 deficit but ultimately came up short in a 7-5 decision. Later in the week, Union dropped a pair of pitcher's duels in Blairsville by scores of 4-3 and 4-2. With the sweep, East Jackson joins Banks County, Providence and Athens Academy as Region 8-AA's four State playoff teams.

Between Friday's games, the Panthers paid tribute to their four seniors: Will Doyle, Eli Sosensky, Moses Stevens and Connor Swanson.

Union County hosted Andrews, North Carolina in a non-region contest on Monday, April 15, before traveling to first-place Banks County on Tuesday, April 16. The series and the season wrap up Friday, April 19 with a doubleheader in Blairsville.

Panthers 5, East Jackson 7 (GM 1) - The Union County bats woke up during the sixth inning on Monday, April 8, but it was too little, too late after the Eagles soared to early leads of 5-0 and 7-1.

Sophomore Bo Brown got the nod on the mound, lasting 4 1/3 while allowing 9 hits, 7 runs (5 earned) and 5 walks, along with 5 strikeouts in just his third pitching appearance of the spring.

East Jackson got on the board via an RBI double in the first inning and then added two in the second courtesy of a run-scoring single and an error. Later, a two-run single made it 5-0 in favor of the home team during the third.

Union broke through in the fourth when Stevens singled and scored on Eli Gwynn's one-out base hit, but East Jackson got the run back with a leadoff homer in the bottom half.

Two walks and a single made it 7-1 in the fifth when Brown gave way to junior Tyler Richards, who stopped the bleeding via a strikeout and a groundout.

The Panthers answered with three in the sixth after Stevens opened the frame with an opposite-field double. Sophomore Gunnar Akins reached on an error, and Gwynn singled up the middle to score both runners. After a single by sophomore Lane Haney, Swanson's groundout brought home Gwynn for a 7-4 score.

Junior Hayden Hughes replaced Richards and worked around a leadoff single in the bottom half before Hughes belted a solo homer with one away in the seventh, turning on a 76 mph fastball and sending it over the left field fence.

Gwynn finished 3 for 3 with 3 RBIs and a run. Stevens went 2 for 4 with a double and 2 runs; Hughes homered during a 1-for-4 game; Swanson drove in a run during a 1-for-3 day; Haney finished 1 for 1. Patton and Tracy added a walk each.



L-R: Seniors Moses Stevens, Will Doyle, Connor Swanson and Eli Sosensky with families during Friday's Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Hayden Hughes belted his first career homer Tuesday night at East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

Brown was hit by a pitch.

Richards tossed 2/3 of an inning with a strikeout. Hughes fanned three during the seventh.

Panthers 3, East Jackson 4 (GM 2) - A controversial missed call during the third inning awarded the Eagles a run, which proved to be the difference in a 3-2 game.

Trailing 2-0 with the Eagles threatening in the third, sophomore Gunnar Akins induced a routine pop-up to Stevens in front of the first-base bag in fair territory. As Stevens camped under the pop fly, the Eagles' batter ran into the senior first-baseman, preventing him from recording the third out. As a result, East Jackson's second run of the frame came around to score on the play, bumping the margin to 3-0.

After a lengthy discussion between both umpires and UCHS head coach Chris Robbins, the base runner was ruled safe and the score remained 3-0.

Union County fired back with a pair of runs in the bottom half when sophomore Maddox Patton was hit by a pitch and

junior Travis Tracy doubled him home. Akins made it 3-2 via a base hit to right field before advancing to second on a throwing error.

An error cost the Panthers a run in the fifth, but Brown's leadoff walk in the sixth moved Union within a run after courtesy runner Junior Davis stole home.

Richards replaced Akins in the seventh, allowing just a two-out single to keep the score at 4-3.

Down to their final out, the Panthers showed some life when freshman Bentley Rich doubled to the gap in right-center and Stevens drew a walk before both runners were eventually left stranded.

Akins allowed 5 hits, 4 runs (1 ER) and 3 walks while punching out four in 6 innings. Richards gave up a hit and fanned one in an inning of work.

Tracy went 2 for 4 with an RBI double, a walk and a run; Brown and Stevens each finished 1 for 3 with a walk. Akins was 1 for 3 at the plate; Hughes went 1 for 4; Rich doubled and stole a base during

his 1-for-1 debut. Patton was hit by a pitch and scored once while going 0 for 3. Davis and Haney added stolen bases for Union County.

Panthers 2, East Jackson 4 (GM 3) - Gwynn settled down after giving up 4 runs in

the first 2 innings but the Panthers' offense left 10 runners aboard during the loss.

Union made it a 4-1 game in the second when Brown's two-out walk and a Sosensky hit by pitch allowed Patton to plate the courtesy runner Davis

via a base hit to left.

Still trailing by three in the fifth, Tracy reached on an error and Gwynn's bunt single had the Panthers in business with no outs. Hughes' one-out single scored Tracy and an Akins' walk loaded the bases until a 6-3 double play kept the score at 4-2.

After leaving the tying run aboard in the sixth, Hughes' one-out double was all the offense Union could muster in the seventh.

Despite struggling to find a groove early, Gwynn went the distance, retiring 17 of the final 20 batters he faced, turning in a stat line of 7 IP, 8 H, 4 ER, 4 Ks and 1 BB on 107 pitches.

Hughes and Patton each went 2 for 4 with an RBI. Gwynn walked twice during a 1-for-2 evening; Akins went 1 for 3 with a walk; Brown drew a free pass during an 0-for-2 game; Tracy walked twice and scored; Sosensky finished 0 for 1 with a hit by pitch; Stevens went 0 for 3 with a walk.

Up next: Union County hosted Andrews, NC on Monday before opening its final series of the year by visiting Banks County on Tuesday at 5:55 p.m. The season concludes Friday with a doubleheader in Blairsville beginning at 5 p.m.

NASCAR 2024

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

ELLIOTT IS BACK ON TRACK

Chase Elliott won Sunday's Cup Series race at Texas the old fashioned way.

By racing hard and not giving up.

Elliott lost the lead on lap 245 of the scheduled 267-lap race to Denny Hamlin.

It didn't look good for him, because Hamlin had pulled away by several car lengths.

But then Ricky Stenhouse spun on lap 253 bringing out a caution.

Elliott was lined up on the outside of the front row as the cars took the green flag. When the field entered the backstretch, Kyle Larson, the polesitter spun, bringing out another caution.

Elliott had passed Hamlin on the restart, just before the caution, and this time he was lined up on the inside of the front row for the restart. When the race was restarted, Elliott was able to move ahead of Hamlin.

As the two leaders entered turn-3, Hamlin slipped up and spun, bringing out another caution.

This sent the race into a green-white-checkered overtime finish.

Elliott pulled away on the restart from Ross Chastain, Brad Keselowski, and his teammate William Byron, but before one lap could be completed, there was another caution.

On the second g-w-c restart, Elliott was able to get the lead, before another wreck behind him brought out the last caution and ended the race.

Elliott was back in Victory Lane after 42 winless races. "Oh, man, couldn't feel any better," said Elliott. Hooter's has been a partner of ours for a number of years now. It's been a dream of mine to pay respect to the late Alan Kulwicki. Driving this car to a victory and do a Polish victory lap, just really crazy how things came full circle there in that moment. It was pretty emotional for me. He beat dad back in the day. Here we are sharing his sponsor and having an opportunity to win today.

"It was just crazy. This place is so sketchy. I haven't seen a replay of Denny and us. I didn't feel like I did anything super crazy there any more than anybody's ever done to me. Just had to run forward. I want to look at it. I didn't feel like I did anything to crash him. I think just the circumstances. But nonetheless, apologies to him if so."

Brad Keselowski finished as runner-up..

"We didn't have a ton of speed," said Keselowski. "Honestly, I'm more frustrated than anything because I feel like we have a great team and we don't have the speed to go with it. We're doing all we can do to overcome that."

"The driver in me is frustrated because I feel like these are races I'm good enough to win, and we don't have the speed to do it. Only reason I am mad as hell is it's my fault for not making the cars faster."

Elliott's teammate William Byron was third, while the remaining top 10 finishers were: Tyler Reddick, Daniel Suarez, Chase Briscoe, Bubba Wallace, Austin Dillon, Kyle Busch, and Carson Hocevar.

MAYER WINS A CLOSE ONE

Sam Mayer pulled off a last lap pass of Ryan Sieg to claim his first victory of the season by just .002-seconds in Saturday's Xfinity Series race.



Elliott Gets Hard Fought Victory

urday's Xfinity Series race.

The outcome was so close officials had to review the tape before naming Mayer the official winner.

"That's absolutely unreal," the 20-year old Mayer said. "This team, the amount of adversity we've had to fight this entire year so far and to come to a mile-and-a-half that I want to say I'm good at, but it took a lot."

Sieg led 17 of the final 18 laps and raced off to the front in a pair of late race restarts. With nine laps remaining Sieg held a 1.2-second advantage over Mayer. But Mayer cut into that margin with each lap, trailing by only .25-second with two laps remaining and then catching Sieg's car on the back stretch on the final lap. They exchanged the lead briefly, racing door-to-door and then Sieg pulled alongside as they took the checkered flag in a photo finish, the closest ever for an Xfinity Series race at Texas.

"Awe, it sucks," said an obviously disappointed Sieg, who has two other career runner-up finishes.

"We had a really good car. I just got tight, so tried to change my lines, do everything. I saw him coming and I did all I could do and at the end I was just trying to run him up into the wall to try to win the race. We were so close."

Justin Allgaier, AJ Allmendinger, Cole Custer, Austin Hill, Ryan Truex, Sammy Smith, Jesse Love, and Anthony Alfredo were the remaining top 10 finishers.

Top 10 leaders after 8 of 33: 1. C. Smith-333, 2. Custer-314, 3. Hill-300, 4. Allgaier-277, 5. Love-257, 6. Herbst-232, 7. Allmendinger-229, 8. S. Smith-225, 9. Kligerman-215, 10. Creed-200.

"ROWDY" KYLE TAKES TEXAS TRUCK RACE

It was Kyle Busch's sixth win in a Texas Motor Speedway truck race, and ties him with Todd Bodine for most ever. Busch has won the last four truck races he's entered at the track. It is his 20th overall win at TMS, including four NASCAR Cup Series victories and 10 Xfinity Series race wins.

He led a race best 112 of the 167 lap race and won both stages.

Top 10 finishers of Friday's Truck Series race: 1. Kyle Busch, 2. Corey Heim, 3. Nick Sanchez, 4. Christian Eckes, 5. Zane Smith, 6. Daniel Dye, 7. Taylor Gray, 8. Tanner Gray, 9. Stefan Parson, 10. Ty Majeski.

Top 10 leaders after 7 of 23: 1. Eckes-287, 2. Heim-285, 3. Majeski-275, 4. Sanchez-260, 5. Taylor Gray-249, 6. Ankrum-244, 7. Caruth-233, 8. Crafton-195, 9. Tanner Gray-171, 10. Enfinger-167.

TRUEX NEEDS TO STEP UP THE PACE

Martin Truex Jr. has had some good moments, but overall, his team is operating on a sub par level.

He's led laps in all but two of nine races so far and led the third most laps (352) among series drivers, but has yet to win a race.

In fact, his 18th place finish two weeks ago at Martinsville is his worst finish of the 2024 season and the only time he's not been running on the lead lap at the end of the race.

The good news about Truex is, he believes his team is more than capable of making the transition from running well to winning.

"I feel good about where we are at," said Truex. "We've had a top-three to top-five car every week, every race, with the exception of Martinsville. We haven't quite capitalized on that over the course of some of these races, some of it in our control, and other stuff that just hasn't worked out."

"We've been really consistent. We've been working on cleaning up some mistakes in several areas. I know the guys have been busting their tails working on pit stops. If we can clean that up a bit and we can get some confidence and get consistently fast, our cars are great, and the team is doing a great job on clicking and working hard."

"Hopefully, we can get our first win of the season really soon."

Racing Joke: Ross was taking care of some business one afternoon in Charlotte. He had just entered the elevator when a girl stepped in with a telephone pressed to her ear. "I have to go," she told the person on the other end. "There's a cute guy standing here."

Before Ross could react, she turned to him and said, "Sorry for lying, I just wanted to end that conversation."

Weekend Racing: The Cup and Xfinity teams will be at the 2.66-mile Talladega Superspeedway, the fastest track on the NASCAR circuit. The Trucks do not race again until May 4.

Sat., Apr. 20: Xfinity Series race 9 of 33; Starting time: 4:00 pm ET; TV: Fox.

Sun., Apr. 21; Cup Series race 10 of 36; Starting time: 3:00 pm ET; TV: Fox.

Racing Trivia Question: What is the length of the Dover track?

Last Week's Question: How many Cup Series teams does Hendrick Motorsports have? Answer: They field four teams: The No. 5 driven by Kyle Larson, No. 9 (Chase Elliott), No. 24 (William Byron), No. 48 (Alex Bowman).



Union County sophomore Bo Brown congratulates youngsters during Saturday's UCHS youth baseball camp. The Panthers baseball team hosted a pair of camps: The first for ages 7-11 and the second for ages 11-14. The camp had lots of fun learning hitting, throwing, speed and agility from the Panthers baseball team and its coaching staff. Photo/Todd Forrest