

Sports

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Baseball: Panthers take two from Rabun, finish third in 8-AA

Hughes and Loyd propel Union past Towns County in five innings

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

A 13-2 victory over Towns County and consecutive wins over Rabun County allowed Union County (12-15, 5-7) to run its winning streak to seven games while securing the No. 3 seed in Region 8-AA during next week's Class AA State Tournament.

The week got underway with a revenge victory over the neighboring Towns County Indians on Monday. Junior southpaw Lake Hughes allowed just 2 hits over 4 innings, and senior Hunter Loyd lined a first-inning grand slam over the left-field fence to ignite the 13-run outburst.

Junior Thomas Dyer pitched out of a first-and-third in the fifth, allowing Union County to bring the mercy rule into effect with 6 runs in the bottom half of the inning.

State playoff positioning was at stake on Tuesday when the fourth-place Panthers traveled to Tiger for the first of three meetings with Rabun County. Trailing the third-place Wildcats by a game entering the series opener, Union County took game one 5-1 behind a dozen strikeouts from senior ace Zeke Swartz, who also turned in a 3-for-4 performance at the dish.

Back in Blairsville for Friday's doubleheader, Hughes kept Rabun County hitters off balance for 6 2/3 innings, limiting the damage to a Brody Jarrard 2-run homer as Union County prevailed 6-2.

The Wildcats eventually cracked the win column with a 16-8 victory in the finale despite blowing an 8-0 third-inning lead. After the Panthers stormed back to tie it with 8 unanswered runs, Rabun County closed the contest with 8-straight runs, ending a five-game losing skid to Union County.

Panthers 5, Rabun County 1 - Zeke Swartz perfectly executed his skipper's game plan on Tuesday night in Tiger with an overpowering performance on the mound.

"We hope that our pitching will set the tone early, then someone can deliver that big hit," Union County head coach Zach Odom told the *North Georgia News* earlier this month when asked how his Panthers would quiet a potent Rabun lineup and breakthrough against an experienced staff.

Swartz's first seven outs came via strikeout, en route to this second straight 12-K perfor-



Lake Hughes gets loose in the bullpen prior to the win over Towns. The junior left-hander won both of his starts last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

mance. In 5 innings, the senior left-hander surrendered just 2 hits and one walk while keeping the Wildcats off the board.

Meanwhile, Coach Odom wasn't forced to wait for a timely RBI as Union County jumped out front 2-0 after one before adding a run in the second and third innings for a 4-0 advantage.

A leadoff double by Hughes allowed Swartz to spot the Panthers an early lead with his first of two doubles on the night. After Loyd reached on an error, senior Damien Chitwood brought Swartz in to score with a base hit to center.

Junior Caleb Towe opened the second with Union's third double of the game. Towe moved up 90 feet on a passed ball, allowing Dyer to make it a 3-0 game on an infield single. Back-to-back doubles by Swartz and Loyd to start the third inning pushed the margin to 4-0.

Following a 1-2-3 bottom half of the frame, Union County stranded two on the heels of consecutive two-out hits from Hughes and Dyer.

A potential Rabun County rally in the fourth was quickly erased when Dyer cut down a runner from left field trying to stretch a leadoff single. And after retiring the next two batters to end the inning, Swartz started the fifth with a base hit to center. A one-out walk by Chitwood put two aboard, but Wildcats' reliever Linkin Wright slammed the door on Union County without yielding a run.

In his final frame of the contest, Swartz's night finished exactly how it began - by striking out the side in the bottom of the fifth. Still out front 4-0 in

the sixth, the Panthers turned to Isaak Mullanack and the senior tossed a 1-2-3 inning.

Mullanack sparked an insurance run in the seventh with a leadoff single and a stolen base. And after the next two batters failed to put the ball in play, Chitwood delivered his second two-out RBI of the night to build a 5-0 advantage.

The heart of the Wildcats' batting order made the final three outs a challenge, beginning with consecutive doubles from Brady Wilson and Jarrard to pull within four runs. Following a strikeout to the ensuing hitter, Mullanack granted a five-pitch walk that moved the tying run into the on-deck circle. But any comeback hopes were immediately thwarted when second baseman Bailey Brown fielded a grounder and flipped to shortstop Conner Shields, who fired to Swartz for a game-ending 4-6-3 double play.

Mullanack fanned two and gave up two hits, one walk and one earned in 2 relief innings. He finished 1 for 4 at the plate with a run and a steal.

Chitwood's night concluded with 2 hits in three at-bats while driving in two and drawing a walk.

Hughes doubled, scored and knocked in a run during a 2-for-4 game. Dyer finished 2 for 4 with a stolen base. Loyd went 1 for 4 with an RBI and a stolen base. He also reached base on an error.

Towe doubled and scored while going 1-for-3. Shields finished 1 for 4 and sophomore Hunter Fleming added a stolen base.

Union County pitching silenced the bottom of the order



A fired-up Hunter Loyd rounds third after lining a grand slam over the left-field fence in the first inning vs. Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

as the Wildcats' 5-9 hitters finished a combined 0 for 11 with 10 strikeouts.

Panthers 6, Rabun County 2 - Hughes struck out seven and didn't issue a walk over 6 2/3 innings before Swartz nailed down the series-clinching victory with the bases loaded and two down in the seventh.

Leading 1-0 in the second after Loyd walked and scored on an error, Hughes spotted himself a two-run margin with a two-out single that plated Towe.

Rabun answered in the third when a leadoff single came around on Jarrard's two-run shot to left. But Union quickly regained the lead on a one-out triple by Swartz and an E-6 off the bat of Chitwood.

Hughes stranded a two-out single in the Wildcats' half of the fourth, and Union County pushed its lead to 5-2 after Brown and Hughes singled to open the Panthers' fourth. Mullanack scored Brown with a one-out base hit, and Loyd drove home Hughes via a two-out single.

Shields added another run in the fifth when he scored on Hughes' sacrifice fly following a leadoff single. Rabun's aggressiveness backfired for the second-straight game when Fleming threw out a runner trying to take second on a single to right field in the sixth.

Still holding a 6-2 advantage entering the seventh, Hughes was awarded the opportunity to finish what he started, despite nearing his pitch limit during the previous inning.

With two down and a runner at first, Rabun's second single of the inning moved Jarrard into the on-deck circle as

the potential tying run while bringing Odom out of the dug-out to call upon Swartz. After a walk to Wilson loaded the bags, Swartz induced a chopper to the shortstop Mullanack, who flipped to Brown at second base for the win.

Hughes scattered 9 hits but Jarrard's dinger was the only one for extra bases. The Panthers also held Rabun County hitless (0 for 5) with runners in scoring position.

Hughes and Mullanack each finished 2 for 4 with Hughes driving in a pair and scoring once. Mullanack doubled and knocked in one.

Brown collected 2 hits and one run in three at-bats. Swartz walked, tripled and scored during his 1-for-3 day at the plate. Loyd finished 1 for 2 with a run, an RBI, two walks and a stolen base.

Shields scored once during a 1-for-3 game. Chitwood drove in a run and scored.

Panthers 8, Rabun County 16 - Both teams exchanged eight-run outbursts before Rabun landed the knockout blow with another 8-0 onslaught. As a result, the Wildcats ended a five-game slide to Union County and picked up their first victory in Blairsville since 2014.

Despite the loss, Mullanack extended his hitting streak to nine games while Loyd has hit safely in eight straight outings. The Panthers have also won 10 of the last 15 meetings in the series, dating back to Coach Odom's senior season of 2013.

Mullanack got the nod and immediately ran into trouble, giving up 4 runs in the first

on two singles, a walk, a hit batter and an error. Trailing 5-0 in the second, Wilson made it 7-0 with a 2-run homer to center.

Three walks and a passed ball allowed Rabun County to build an 8-0 advantage in the third, bringing Swartz back to the mound with two down in the frame.

To make matters worse, Chitwood exited during the second inning after the senior catcher suffered an apparent upper-arm injury.

Union County had its opportunities to keep pace but stranded three runners over the first two innings. They finally broke through with 4 runs in the fourth - all coming with two outs. Mullanack sparked the rally when he doubled and scored on a Swartz single. Following a Loyd single and a walk to Chitwood's replacement, freshman Brayden Sweat, a 3-0 pitch plunked Shields to plate Swartz.

A balk made it 8-3, then an infield error off the bat of Towe cut the margin in half at 8-4.

Union tacked on two more in the fourth after Swartz sat down the Wildcats in order. Hughes was hit by a pitch and Dyer walked to start the frame. A Swartz walk packed the bases with one down and Loyd scored Hughes on a sacrifice fly. Swartz was thrown out trying to steal second but forced a run-down that allowed Dyer to pull Union within two runs.

Still trailing 8-6 in the sixth, Hughes and Mullanack drew bases on balls to bring the go-ahead run to the dish, and Loyd knotted the score at 8-8 with a two-out opposite-field double.

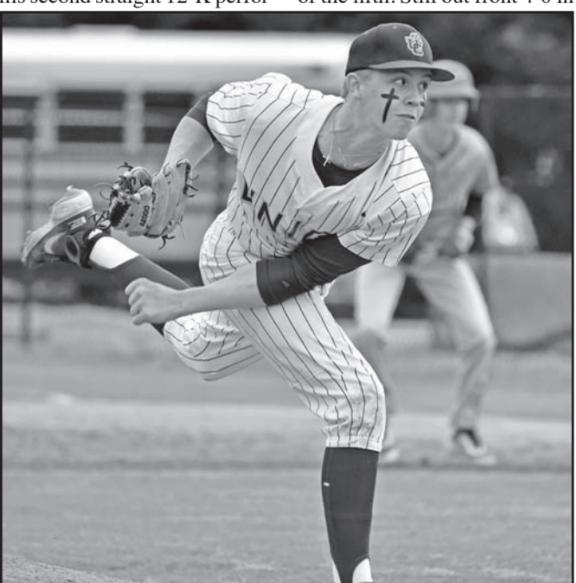
After throwing 72 pitches on Tuesday, followed by seven more in game two and 86 total in game three, Swartz ran out of gas in the seventh inning. Three hits and three walks resulted in an 11-8 Rabun County lead, forcing Odom to give his senior the hook.

Dyer took over on the hill and gave up 4 earned runs, bringing in Towe to stop the bleeding with a ground out to second.

Loyd finished 2 for 3 with 3 ribbies, a double and a run. Mullanack also doubled and scored twice during a 2 for 3 game.

Shields went 2 for 2 with one run; Swartz was 1 for 2 with an RBI, a run and a walk. Hughes scored two runs; Dyer and Sweat each walked and scored.

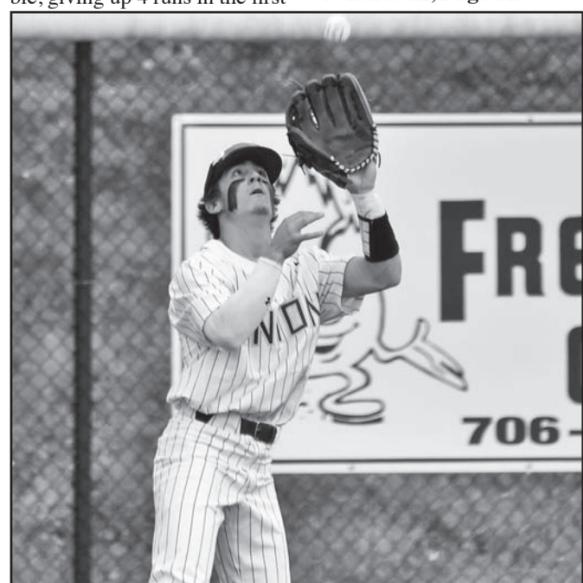
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Senior Zeke Swartz secures the game-two victory in relief after fanning 12 Wildcats in his game-one start. Photo/Todd Forrest



Isaak Mullanack just misses a HR in the first inning of game two vs. Rabun, lining a double off the top of the left-field fence. Photo/Todd Forrest



The glove-work of junior outfielder Caleb Towe took away multiple extra-base hits from Rabun County last week. Photo/Todd Forrest