

Sports

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Panthers sweep Rabun County, will open State tourney at Bremen

Union County ends regular season at 10-4 in region play after starting 0-4

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngenews.com

A two-run, two-out double by senior Ean Harkins in the bottom of the sixth inning powered the Union County Panthers (14-10, 10-4) past Rabun County in game one of last Thursday's 8-AA doubleheader.

Union's late rally propelled them to an 8-1 game two victory, capping off the two-game, Senior Night sweep of the Wildcats and closing the 2019 regular season with 10 consecutive region victories.

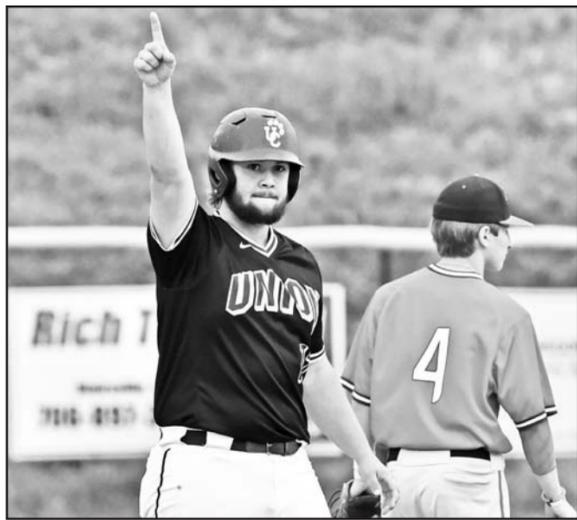
"I think these guys are trying to see how fast they can give me gray hairs," joked Union County Head Baseball Coach Zach Odom regarding his team's penchant for late inning, two-out drama. "But really, I don't know. I think they just like the adversity and thriving in big moments. But I'm proud of them and they've been doing it all year so why change now?"

The Panthers wrap up the regular season tied for third in Region 8-AA but will enter the state playoffs as the region's No. 4 seed after Social Circle won the region title and Elbert took second.

Previously, Banks County was atop 8-AA until Elbert County took two games from the Leopards on Saturday, dropping Banks into a third-place tie with Union County. Unfortunately, a struggling-at-the-time Panther squad was swept in Homer on March 1 -- the sixth and final loss of an 0-6 start to the season -- awarding the Leopards the tiebreaker.

As a result, Union will travel to 3rd ranked Bremen -- the 5-AA Region Champions -- for a Wednesday doubleheader beginning at 4:30 p.m. Thursday's "if necessary" game in the best-of-three series will begin at 5:30.

Last week's regular-season finale, however, was expected to carry playoff implications. Instead, Rabun County limped into Blairsville, three games out of fourth and mathematically eliminated from the postseason. But that didn't matter once the teams hit the field. With Union County looking to improve its playoff positioning and the Wildcats playing for pride and bragging rights, game one provided another instant classic in a rivalry that settled the Region 8-AA title in 2015 and 2016.



L-R: Coleson Daniel tallied three hits and two runs in two games vs Rabun. Ean Harkins gives UC the lead with a sixth inning double. Photos/Todd Forrest

Panthers 3, Rabun County 2 - Trailing 2-0 after four, Union County scored one in the fifth before Harkins delivered his go-ahead double in the sixth.

Prior to his late-inning heroics vs Rabun County, Harkins, who's remained steady on the mound, was in the midst of a season-long slump at the dish that limited him to just two hits and one RBI in 39 plate appearances.

Coach Odom, however, never lost faith in Harkins, and as a result, the 40th time was the charm.

"He got off to a slow start this year and I don't think he was ever able to get comfortable with himself so he started to press," Odom said. "He's been working hard and we've been giving him opportunities during the mid-week (games) but he finally came through. Everything he's been working for paid off and he deserves it."

Meanwhile, sophomore Isaak Mullanack worked a complete game, two-hitter for the Panthers, striking out four while not allowing a walk. Although, Mullanack did hit three batters, including the leadoff man which allowed Rabun to grab an early 1-0 lead. A solo homer by Brody Jarrard to leadoff the fourth pushed the Wildcat advantage to 2-0, while Grayson Carver, Mullanack's counterpart, took a three-hit shutout into the fifth.

The Panthers' luck began to turn when they escaped the fifth thanks to an unassisted double play following a one-out error. With the runner at first on the move, Mullanack snagged a soft, off-the-end-of-the-bat bloop on

the first-base side of the mound and then won the foot-race back to the bag to double-up the Wildcats and end the inning.

Senior Jonathan Everett would battle his way aboard on a seven-pitch walk with one down in the fifth. Once again, the baseball gods smiled on Union County when Mullanack grounded out to shortstop, but with the hit-and-run on, Everett was able to reach second safely with two down, allowing them to get on the board when Alec Scott smacked a base hit back up the middle to cut the Rabun lead in half at 2-1.

Mullanack got out of trouble in the sixth after plunking Gunnar Stockton with a 2-2 breaking ball to open the inning. A stolen base and a sacrifice fly advanced the runner to third with two outs but a bounce to senior third baseman Coleson Daniel kept Rabun off the board.

Senior Hunter Kelley doubled to leadoff the Union half of the sixth but consecutive ground outs put the Panthers in danger of leaving the tying run at second. A hard hit single to left by Austin Garrison put runners at the corners when Coach Odom held up Kelley at third with two down and Harkins stepping to the plate.

With the go-ahead run on first, Harkins lined a 0-1 pitch over the head of the Rabun centerfielder, bringing both runners around to score.

Leading 3-2 and the bottom of the Rabun order due up in the seventh, Mullanack surrendered just his second hit of the day -- a two-out single to Kasin Odom. Moments later, after falling behind 2-1 to the No. 9 hitter, Mullanack induced a slow roller to short that



Scott fielded cleanly before firing across his body to get the runner by a step at first.

"With it being Senior Night, these seniors came through," Odom said. "They've led us all year. They could have quit but being the senior leaders that they are, they kept pushing and wouldn't let the young guys give up, and as a result, they've put us in a very good situation."

"I have to thank Coach (Robbie) Roxbury for bringing them along and letting me have them this year. It's been huge having (these seniors) and their leadership."

Scott and Daniel each finished with two hits apiece for the Panthers while Scott drove in one and Harkins knocked in two during a 1-for-3 performance. Garrison and Kelley each went 1-for-3 with a run and Everett walked and scored.

Panthers 8, Rabun County 1 - Union County exploded for six runs in the fifth -- four coming with two down -- to blow things open in game two of Thursday's twin bill.

Sophomore Zeke Swartz yielded just one hit and one unearned run over six innings during an efficient 62-pitch outing. The southpaw fanned four Wildcats and didn't walk a batter while throwing 47 of 62 pitches for strikes.

Alec Youngblood and Mullanack each turned in a two-hit performance for the home team and Kelley drove in a pair as the Panthers pulled away late in an 8-1 victory.

A caught-stealing ended the Union County threat in the first but the second inning saw

the Panthers grab an early lead. A one-out double by Daniel was followed by a run-scoring single from Youngblood.

They would load the bases when Garrison was hit by a pitch and Harkins was walked but Rabun got out of trouble on a 6-4-3, inning-ending double play, despite a questionable call at first when Everett appeared to beat the throw.

Instead, the Wildcats caught a break in the third inning when the leadoff man reached on a dropped third strike. With one down, Rabun used a Panther error to put runners at the corners. From there, a bunt scored the runner from third, tying the game at 1-1.

Two-and-a-half scoreless innings ensued before Union County exploded in the fifth, doing most of its damage with two down. A one-out, RBI single by Mullanack scored Harkins, who led off the frame with a standup double. Back-to-back walks loaded the bags for Kelley, who brought home Mullanack with an RBI groundout.

A two-out grounder to second off the bat of Daniel resulted in a short-hopped throw to first that bounced into the dugout, bringing Scott and Swartz home. Youngblood kept the inning alive with a base hit to center, scoring Daniel, then Garrison followed suit with an RBI single up-the-middle to spot the Panthers a 7-1 advantage.

Kelley's bases-loaded sacrifice fly in the sixth tacked on an additional Union County run and Garrison took the mound in the seventh, holding an 8-1 lead.

Garrison's only blemish

was a one-out walk as he struck out one and induced a pair of groundouts in relief of Swartz.

Panthers 0, White County 11 - The Warriors got a little pay-back on Wednesday in Cleveland as they ended the game with a six-run sixth inning on Senior Night.

Scoreless entering the third, White County produced four unearned runs off the starter Harkins, who was effective in three innings, surrendering three hits and walking one.

Union County churned out seven hits to the Warriors' eight but defensive miscues were too much to overcome. Daniel provided the Panthers' only extra-base hit of the day while Mullanack, Scott, Swartz, Youngblood, Everett and Matthew Kelley each finished with one single.

Sophomore JJ Littles replaced Harkins and worked a scoreless fourth but ran into trouble in the fifth and sixth before Daniel spelled him following 2.1 innings.

Up next - The Bremen Blue Devils await the Panthers as they enter the postseason ranked No. 3 and sporting a 23-5 record.

At home, Bremen has been near-unbeatable with its last home loss coming on Feb. 15 to an eventual 24-win South Paulding squad from Class 6A.

The Blue Devils are an upperclassmen-heavy squad with nine seniors and six juniors. Like Union County, Bremen is coming off two sub-par seasons in Class AAA. After finishing 6-12 in region and 10-16 overall in 2017, the Blue Devils bounced back with a 17-11 record in 2018 but just missed the playoffs with a 10-8 mark -- good enough for fifth place in Region 6-AAA.

Bremen features a deep, experienced pitching staff anchored by five seniors - Carson Cook, Brant Ivey, Ethan Brock, Ben Barrow and Jack Allen.

The lineup includes plenty of power, most notably junior Jimbo Brown and seniors Brody Parkerson and Ivey.

Atop the order are a pair of spark plugs in juniors Cooper Cartwright and Brooks Hardie -- who also have long ball capabilities if you make a mistake over the middle of the plate.

Game one is slated for Wednesday at 4:30 p.m. with game two to follow. Thursday will start at 5:30 p.m. if necessary.

The field is located at 1500 Mangham Drive, Bremen, Ga. 30110.

(Box scores on Page 3C)



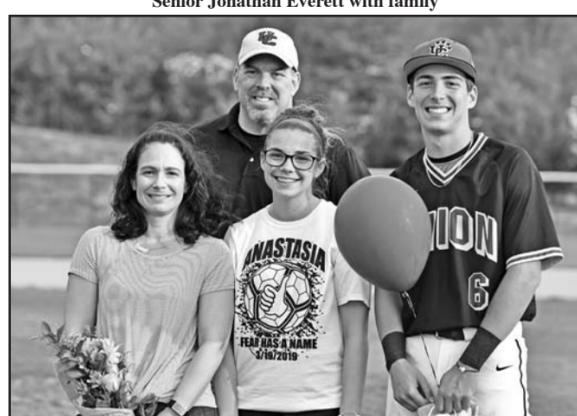
Senior Coleson Daniel with family



Senior Jonathan Everett with family



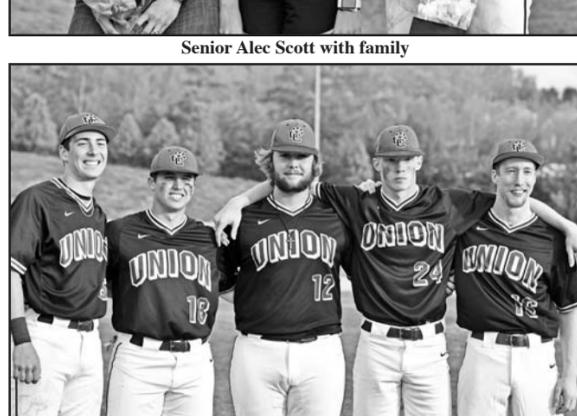
Senior Hunter Kelley with family



Senior Alec Scott with family



Senior Ean Harkins with family



Union County baseball Class of 2019 (L-R): Alec Scott, Hunter Kelley, Coleson Daniel, Ean Harkins and Jonathan Everett. Senior Night photos by Todd Forrest

Union County baseball season statistics (Through end of regular season)

#	Roster	GP	PA	AB	H	1B	2B	3B	HR	RBI	R	HBP	ROE	FC	CI	BB	SO	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS
44	Damen Chitwood	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1.000	1.000	1.000	2.000
1	John Mancuso	6	18	15	6	6	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	1	0	2	3	.400	.471	.400	.871
9	Isaak Mullanack	23	95	72	26	23	3	0	0	9	25	2	8	4	0	20	5	.381	.505	.403	.908
22	Zeke Swartz	23	87	75	27	25	2	0	0	16	15	3	4	9	0	8	7	.360	.437	.387	.823
11	Cayden Rich	19	68	56	20	15	3	1	1	16	16	4	3	4	0	7	13	.357	.456	.500	.956
6	Alec Scott	24	97	79	27	20	5	2	0	14	23	0	4	4	0	15	18	.342	.438	.456	.893
16	Hunter Kelley	22	82	61	19	13	5	1	0	16	11	8	4	7	0	11	9	.311	.463	.426	.880
12	Coleson Daniel	20	65	58	15	11	4	0	0	7	8	0	4	7	0	6	18	.259	.328	.328	.656
27	Alec Youngblood	21	76	65	16	13	3	0	0	10	3	2	1	12	0	6	12	.246	.320	.292	.612
30	Austin Garrison	23	82	73	16	15	1	0	0	11	11	4	10	15	0	4	7	.219	.293	.233	.526
15	Matthew Kelley	9	21	19	3	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	8	.158	.238	.158	.396
16	Jonathan Everett	17	53	44	6	5	1	0	0	6	5	1	3	5	0	7	12	.136	.269	.159	.428
24	Ean Harkins	15	43	39	4	2	2	0	0	3	2	1	0	1	0	2	18	.103	.163	.154	.317
5	Mason McCamb	6	13	12	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	4	.083	.154	.083	.237
31	Payton Ivester	11	17	12	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	0	0	4	6	.083	.353	.083	.436
19	JJ Littles	9	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	.000	.000	.000	.000
4	Jonah Daniel	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
Totals		24	821	682	188	154	29	4	1	114	132	27	44	71	0	95	141	.276	.380	.334	.714

#	Roster	IP	GP	GS	W	L	SV	SO	BS	SV%	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HBP	ERA	WHIP
22	Zeke Swartz	56.0	11	9	5	1	0	0	0	.000	34	11	6	7	71	3	.750	.732
9	Isaak Mullanack	46.1	10	8	4	1	0	0	0	.000	44	31	20	15	42	11	3.022	1.273
24	Ean Harkins	21.1	9	5	0	0	0	0	0	.000	18	18	11	13	21	4	3.609	1.433
30	Austin Garrison	18.0	7	1	1	0	0	0	0	.000	18	10	5	10	19	0	1.944	1.556
12	Coleson Daniel	8.1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	10	12	7	11	4	3	5.880	2.920
11	Cayden Rich	7.2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	4	0	0	5	10	0	.000	1.174
3	Keston Henthorn	5.0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	.000	3	2	2	2	4	2	2.800	1.000
19	JJ Littles	4.1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	6	7	5	0	1	2	8.077	1.365
Totals		167.0	24	24	10	2	0	0	0	.000	137	92	53	63	172	25	2.222	1.198