

Sports

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Soccer: Mancillas, Panthers stun No. 3 Walker in Sweet 16

Union County men to play in fourth consecutive Elite Eight on Tuesday

By Todd Forrest
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Marietta - Excluding the canceled 2020 season, Union County entered last week's Sweet-16 matchup riding a streak of three straight Class AA Elite-Eight appearances dating back to its runner-up finish in 2019.

Now, courtesy of a stellar defensive performance and Zuriel Mancillas' late-game heroics, the Panthers have made it four straight trips to the round of eight.

On Thursday, April 20, Union (11-3) survived a double-overtime thriller at Class AA's 3rd-ranked Walker School (12-5), escaping with a 1-0 victory and setting up a quarterfinal showdown with an old-region nemesis in Putnam County on Tuesday, April 25.

After surviving a handful of near-misses by Walker in the first 40 minutes, the Panthers were the aggressors for most of the second half and two overtime sessions. But with both teams still scoreless through 93 minutes, junior Zuriel Mancillas outran two defenders to a free ball inside the penalty area, finding the net courtesy of sophomore Antonio Solario's nifty header assist. Setting up Solario's game-winning feed was a long pass by junior Benton Gregory from beyond the center line near the opposite sideline.

"[Gregory] kicked it to Antonio and he flicked the ball [up ahead], so I ran for it, and the keeper ran out, but I got there first and just chipped it in," Mancillas said after the game.

"It's a good feeling being back in the Elite Eight, but now we have to win, because our goal is to get back to the State



Junior Zuriel Mancillas (left, No. 10), senior Wilson Walker (center) and sophomore Antonio Solario (right, No. 14) celebrate Mancillas' game-winner at The Walker School as the distraught Wolverines keeper lays on the field after surrendering the game's only goal. Photo/Todd Forrest

Led by senior Isaiah Ortiz, the Union County defense delivered its second clean sheet of the postseason after fending off an attacking Walker School in the early going.

The Wolverines flicked a header over the crossbar via a corner kick in the 10th minute, then sent a free kick high in the 11th. After a pair of offsides negated scoring opportunities in the 13th and 16th, the Union faithful were left holding their collective breath in the 26th when The Walker School appeared to get on the board.

Panthers' senior goalkeeper Trent Baker deflected a laser that bounced off the crossbar and back into play for a rebound goal. Fortunately for the visitors, the shot nicked the

out-of-bounds football crossbar after grazing Baker's fingers, taking the point off the scoreboard.

Union County turned the tide after halftime, beginning with a corner kick in the 46th, a free kick in the 48th and an Evan Bohms shot that drilled the post during the 49th minute.

Seth Rutan's shot was stopped moments later, Mancillas' free kick was saved in the 50th and Wilson Walker missed wide in the 54th. Gregory missed in the 69th ahead of two unsuccessful free kicks by the Wolverines.

Following a Walker School corner kick attempt in the 75th, Solario's shot misfired in the 77th and Wilson Walker's header went wide during the 79th.

The Wolverines' final scoring opportunity of regulation came when Baker snagged a corner kick with 38 seconds on the clock.

In the first minute of overtime, Gregory appeared to break the 0-0 tie with a deep shot that caught the inside of the right post and ricocheted behind the keeper. However, no whistle sounded and play continued with Kooper Ashcraft's shot-on-goal in the 82nd minute.

"I thought Benton's shot went in, and it may have, but it was a difficult angle for the official," Union head coach Tim Hunter said. "But Zuriel made it happen when we had to have it. What an exciting night for these guys. Before we left today, I told the guys, 'no matter what,

come down here and leave this field excited and with the joy of how hard you played,' and they did every bit of that."

Baker stopped a corner kick during the 84th, but Union was tagged with an offside penalty and Mancillas and Bohms each missed moments later. The Wolverines missed two shots over the final two minutes of the first 10-minute OT period.

The Walker School earned two free kicks to start the second-and-final overtime, but Mancillas delivered with 7:09 on the clock.

Not content with a 1-0 advantage, Bohms and Mancillas continued firing away, setting up a scary moment in the 97th minute via a frustrated Wolverines' player.

As Baker dropped to

one knee to collect an errant pass that over-shot everyone, a Walker forward continued past Baker, stomping on the Union keeper as he went by. Baker laid on the field, clutching his leg for a few moments before staying in the game. The player's antics earned a red-card ejection with 3:08 remaining, but that didn't result in smooth sailing the rest of the way for Union County.

During the final minute, the Panthers failed to clear a loose ball directly in front of their own goal, leading to a tense few seconds in the 1-0 game. The Walker School eventually got off a shot attempt that went high over the bar, all but securing the Union victory.

"I'm just so proud of these guys," Hunter added. "They come out here and they battle all the time, they've had three coaches in four years, and they've been the absolute best guys to have. I wouldn't trade them for anyone in the world."

Up next: The 7th-ranked Panthers travel to No. 6 Putnam County on Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. to face the unbeaten War Eagles (10-0-2). During the 2019-2020 seasons, Union and Putnam reigned over 8-AA as the region's top-two squads. However, the Panthers never defeated the War Eagles in those two years. An injury-hampered Union squad fell 5-1 in Eatonton in March 2020 - the final game before COVID-19 prematurely ended the season. The year before, Putnam County took a 3-1 victory in Blairsville in March 2019 before the Panthers hit their stride and didn't lose again until falling on PKs in the State finals.

The Union-Putnam winner will advance to the Final Four to face the winner of No. 2 Fellowship Christian vs. No. 4 Tattnall County on Friday, April 28.

Local Racing Report: Jones family in the hearts of Tri-County drivers, fans

By Blake Lynch
North Georgia News
Racing Reporter

Brasstown, NC - On Friday, April 21, Tri-County held its final race of the season.

The last two races were canceled due to weather, but the night was action packed.

The night was also a roller coaster of emotions. One of our own racer's family was involved in a terrible car accident. Shannon Jones' daughter was in a car accident with her children, so what better way to start the night than passing the helmet around the track for donations.

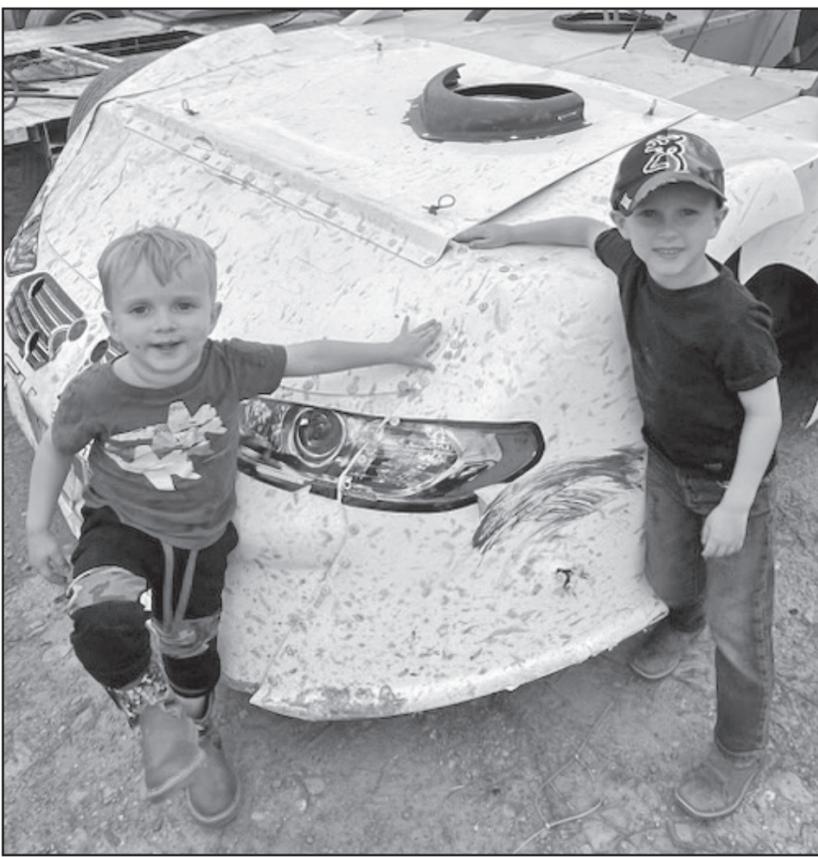
There is also an account set up at Nantahala Bank. The wonderful fans and racers raised over \$5,000 in one night.

This was the Vol-Heel Spring ShootOut. Plus King Ford Limited Late Model and Interstate 602 Late Model.

Open Wheel: No. 73 Chris Dickerson was the winner. Followed by No. 95 Steven Clark in second. No. 22 Matt Sandefur was third. No. 4 Brawley Stillwell was fourth. No. 27 Jamie Cross was fifth.

Pony: Fans are very excited to see this class back in action. No. 88 Aidan Fortson was the winner. No. 01 Tweedy Chin was a close second. No. 73 Jason Lowe was third. No. 2 Colby McColli was fourth. No. 15 Ryan Crawford was fifth.

Street Stock: No. 95 Alex Vance leads from green flag to checkered flag. No. 4 Roger Beavers was second. No.



Samuel and Parker Brewer enjoy their first race.

01 Jacob Lynch was third. No. 81 Dylan Hannah was fourth. No. 192 Robby Lynch was fifth.

FWD: No. 232 Jim Exum was the winner. No. J3 Josh Deese was second. No. F3 John Fulford was third. No. 59 Matt Cordin was fourth. No. 27 Eric Farnham was fifth.

During the American All-Star Series race one of the scariest wrecks in recent memory happened when Logan Walls flipped off of the track.

We are happy to report that Logan was able to climb out of the car on his own. This brought out the red flag and portable

light had to be put up to finish the last 3 races of the night.

Limited Late Models: No. 4 Danny Ledford took the win. No.7 Jason Deal was a close second. No.12 Drew Deaver was third. No.03 Dante Curtis was fourth. No.116 Jonathan Cope was fifth.



Logan Walls' No. 14 car left the track during the American All-Stars race.

602 Late Models: No. 50 Charles Devine was the winner. No.44 Bobby Elkins was second. No.117 Dylan Beavers was third. No. 56 Colton Berrong was fourth. No.88 Ricky Smith was fifth.

I would like to thank all the fans that come out and

support this track and the local drivers. All of the drivers work very hard on their cars so they can put on a great show for the fans. I got to see the smile on two boys that were at the track for the first time.

The next race is Friday, May 5.

Panthers defeat Banks County to close out 2023; Odom steps down

By Todd Forrest
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The Union County Panthers wrapped up the 2023 season last Thursday with a 10-6 win over Banks County to avoid a three-game sweep. But approximately 12 hours removed from the final out of their 3-26 campaign, Panthers head coach Zach Odom announced his resignation after five seasons at the helm.

Panthers 10, Banks County 6 - Union County scored five in the fourth to grab an 8-4 lead before adding one apiece in the sixth and seventh to close out the season with a victory in Homer on Thursday.

Freshman Gunnar Akins fanned eight over 6 1/3 innings before sophomore Hayden Hughes retired two of the three batters he faced to nail down the win.

Eli Gwynn, Lane Haney and Maddox Patton each went 2 for 4 with Haney driving in three runs. Patton scored twice and stole a bag; Gwynn added a run. Hughes walked three times and knocked in one on a sacrifice fly.

Following a 1-2-3 first, Akins ran into trouble in the second when the first three Leopards reached to load the bases. The Panthers limited Banks to only one run via an RBI fielder's choice, a caught stealing and a pop-up.

Hunter Fleming's single scored Jordan Gilliam as Union's first four hitters reached in the third. Hughes made it a 2-1 game courtesy of a sac fly and Fleming came around to score on a passed ball.

The Panthers couldn't hold the 3-1 lead as Banks got three in the bottom half of the third via a run-scoring triple, a base hit and an RBI ground out.

Union County scored five in the fifth when Patton wore a 2-1 pitch to lead off the frame. Fleming moved him to second and Gwynn put runners at the



Fifth-year head coach Zach Odom resigned his position last Friday morning, leaving UCHS in the hunt for a new coach for the first time since 2018. Not counting the canceled-2020 season, Odom's teams reached the playoff three times in four years Photo/Todd Forrest

corners with a base hit. Hughes eventually walked, Patton tied things up on a passed ball and senior Will Duncan put his team out front with an infield single.

Akins' grounder to second brought in Hughes, and Moses Stevens was hit by a pitch to keep the inning alive with two away. That's when Haney made the Leopards pay with a two-run double - extending the advantage to 8-3.

Akins pitched around a double to begin the bottom of the fifth and Patton's lead-off single went to waste in the sixth.

Banks cut the margin in half when a two-out error was sandwiched between two singles during its half of the frame. The Panthers responded in the seventh when Haney scored Akins, then came around

to score on Gilliam's groundout.

Akins fanned the first batter of the seventh but the next three Leopards reached - cutting the lead to 10-6. After giving up an RBI single that was charged to Akins, Hughes punched out the ensuing hitter then Eli Sosensky threw out a runner at home trying to take the extra base on a Panthers' error.

Fleming went 1 for 3 with a run and an RBI. Duncan drove in one and scored during a 1-for-4 day. Akins finished 1 for 4 with one RBI; Gilliam scored and plated a run during his 1-for-4 game. Holton Fleming stole a base.

Panthers 5, Banks County 8 - A four-run second sparked Banks County's victory on Thursday afternoon in the second game of last week's

three-game set in Homer.

Union County got two in the third inning before Banks answered with three in the fifth and one in the sixth.

Hughes went 2 for 3 with 2 RBIs; Hunter Fleming tripled during a 1-for-3 performance; Gilliam went 1 for 3 with a run.

Gwynn allowed six earned runs over four innings and Hughes was touched for five hits and two earned over two innings of relief.

Each of Banks' four runs in the second came with two away, courtesy of four singles, a double, a walk and a hit by pitch. Gilliam and Patton singled to spark Union's two-run third and Fleming's bunt resulted in a Leopards' error. Gwynn scored Patton with a sacrifice fly but consecutive strikeouts stalled

the Panthers' rally.

A lead-off homer kicked off Banks' three-spot in the fifth. In the Union sixth, courtesy-runner Holton Fleming stole a base and came around on Haney's grounder to short.

Banks' RBI double made it 8-3 in the bottom half, and Hughes' two-out, two-run single in the seventh brought the final tally to 8-5.

Patton went 1 for 4 with a run; Gwynn walked, scored and drove in one; Holton Fleming added a run and two steals. Connor Swanson and Hunter Fleming also swiped a bag for Union County.

Panthers 3, Banks County 20 - The Leopards pounded out 16 hits, took advantage of four Union errors and used a 12-run seventh to

blow things open Tuesday in Blairsville.

Trailing 20-0 in the bottom of the seventh, the Panthers scored three runs on Patton's RBI single and two passed balls.

Patton went five innings in the start, giving up seven hits, three earned runs, three walks and striking out seven.

Duncan, Holton Fleming, Hughes and Hunter Fleming combined to work the final two innings of relief.

Hughes and Akins had two hits apiece; Gilliam went 2 for 3 with a run. Gwynn doubled during a 1-for-4 game; Holton Fleming scored a run and finished 1 for 1; Patton drove in one and scored during his 1-for-4 game. Hunter Fleming went 1 for 4 with a stolen base.

Odom: On Friday morning, head coach Zach Odom officially stepped down as skipper. After serving one year as an assistant, Odom took the job ahead of the 2019 season and led Union County to three consecutive state playoff appearances, finishing third each season with the exception of the canceled 2020 COVID year.

During his first season in 2019, Union County just missed a region title, rattling off 10 straight wins late in the year to finish within a game of the top-spot. During the streak, the Panthers swept the eventual Region 8-AA champion, Elbert County on the road.

During his head-coaching tenure, Odom saw six players attend college on a baseball scholarship.

Between 2014-2017, Odom was a four-year starter at Young Harris College after holding down the shortstop position for four seasons at UCHS.

In 2013, the Odom-led Panthers won the program's first playoff series since 1995 when they took two of three from Bowdon under first-year head coach Brandon Bradburn.

Annual Run Above the Clouds attracts 93 runners to state's highest 10K

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Suches - At more than 2,800 feet above sea level, Suches' annual Run Above the Clouds road race has offered its participants one of the most grueling courses in Georgia to raise money for a worthy cause.

For 23 consecutive years, the RATC has awarded scholarships to outgoing seniors and postgraduates of Woody Gap School.

On Saturday, 93 runners participated in the 2023 race, with winners receiving medals in the 5K and 10K events in their respective age divisions. In addition to the winners, raffles were drawn for prizes donated by local businesses and artists.

With a time of 29:12, Caddi Bounce placed first in the women's 5K, and Alexander Holcombe was the men's winner at 23:39. Terri Hilchie placed first among the female runners in the 10K race, finishing in 55:14. On the men's side, Paul Anderson took home the top honors with a time of 47:08.

The female 10K winners by age group were Alysa Miles in the 20-29 division, crossing the finish line at 56:01.

In the 30-39 group, Mar-kie Foscaldi came in first at 59:31. Alison Greene placed first among the 40-49 runners with a time of 58:10; the 50-59 gold medal went to Luanne Macelsaac at 59:57; Robin Adkins finished first at 1:08:30 in the 70-plus division



10K winners Terri Hilchie and Paul Anderson. Photo/Todd Forrest

For the men, Michael Dempsey's 1:12:43 was first in the 14U age group. Jake Robinson placed first in the 15-19 division at 48:01; Eric Sullivan's 50:44 was good enough for first among the 20-29 runners and Daniel Dixon took home gold in the 30-39 group with a time of 47:18.

Kris Robinson's 54:40 was first in the 40-49 division. Thomas Karisny clocked in at 52:17 to take the 50-59 group; Todd Herrett's 1:02:31 placed first among the 60-69 runners and Bill Griffith won the 70-plus division with a time of 1:11:24.

In 5K action, Emelia Davenport was victorious among the 14U females at 35:03. Lilli Dempsey was first in the 15-19

group at 40:32; Haley Sosebee won the 20-29 division with a time of 36:51.

Nora Van Vorris' time of 36:34 topped the 30-39 age group; Emma Craik earned gold in the 40-49 division at 31:38; Vanessa Bernstein-Goldman's 30:34 was first among the 50-59 runners.

Denise Robinson (38:22) and Linda Evans (36:01) won the 60-69 and 70-plus divisions, respectively.

Men's 5K winners included Brent Wehunt (55:28) in the 40-49 group; Tim Powell (27:56) for the 50-59 runners; Patrick Conarro (35:04) in the 60-69 division and 80-year-old Paul Evans (1:03:33) in the 70-and-up category.

Soccer: Lady Panthers seasons ends with 6-1 loss at Mt. Paran in Sweet 16



Junior Lara Turner (21) is greeted by teammates Ali and Alana Franklin after scoring Union's lone goal at Mt. Paran Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Kennesaw - Lara Turner's briefly trimmed the Union County deficit to 3-1 early in the second half but Mt. Paran answered with two quick goals, then added a sixth during the final minutes to knock the Lady Panthers from the round of 16.

Turner's score came during the 48th minute, courtesy of senior Italia Salazar's assist, but fifth-ranked Mt. Paran responded in the 52nd for a 4-1

advantage. The Eagles got on the board in the 13th minute after backup goalkeeper Avary Smith-Foot turned away four shot attempts.

Union attempted to equalize but sophomore Ariel McCarter missed in the 14th and Mt. Paran denied two Lady Panthers' corner kicks in the 16th and 19th.

Mt. Paran pushed its advantage to 2-0 in the 24th minute and 3-0 in the 32nd.

A Maggie Delatte free kick was stopped in the 37th.

Despite its 5-8-2 record, Union County finished the year as the third best team in a brutal region that included Fellowship Christian, who is considered by many as the best team in Georgia regardless of classification.

The Lady Panthers also faced Athens Academy, possibly the second best team in Class AA, without three key players.

When close to 100% of Union County flashed its potential when they battled Class AAA's then-No. 3 Dawson County to a draw.



Runners, two-legged and four-legged, tackled the scenic course last weekend in Suches. Additional RATC photos will be included in next week's North Georgia News. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Ariel McCarter advances the ball at No. 5 Mt. Paran Christian Academy during last Wednesday's Sweet 16 matchup. Photo/Todd Forrest