

Sports

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Panthers, Lady Panthers cruise into Sweet 16 showdown vs. Lovett

Kaylee Helton and Zach Jackson spark UCHS soccer past first-round opponents

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County soccer swept the first round of the Class AA State Tournament, outscoring its Region 5 opposition by a combined total of 13-2 at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

However, the competition takes a significant leap forward in round two -- going from average to elite -- as both Union County clubs take on private-school powerhouse Lovett on Wednesday and Thursday.

The round of 16 gets underway this week when the Lady Panthers travel to West Paces Ferry on Wednesday to face the second-ranked Lions at 5:30 p.m..

The seventh-ranked Union County men will host No. 4 Lovett in a top-10 fixture at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Thursday. Kickoff is scheduled for 6 p.m.

Panthers 10, Haralson County 1 - Union County needed only 27 minutes to seize a 6-0 advantage before turning it over to the junior varsity during last Friday's opening-round blowout.

Coming off a loss to Pickens on April 12, and a too-close-for-comfort region victory on April 1 at Riverside Military Academy, Union County senior Zach Jackson quickly silenced any questions surrounding the Panthers' recent struggles with a hat trick in the first 18 minutes.

"It felt amazing to come out and set the tone for the [state] tournament," Jackson said after the match. "We really want to win this tournament. We have a great group of players and we've worked very hard to be in this position."

A corner kick in the 5th minute put Union County on the board when freshman Zuriel Mancillas found Jackson for the match's first point. Junior Kyler Robbins connected with Jackson in the 8th minute for a 2-0 lead, then he fed Mancillas in the 12th for his second helper in under four minutes.

Jackson's third goal put the Panthers up 4-0 when senior Malachi Patrick found his classmate in the 18th minute.

"The key was to come out swinging right away," Union County soccer coach Chris Robbins said following the win. "Whenever you're playing an active sport, the key is to come out immediately and get the nerves out. And that's a



Sophomore Kaylee Helton scored twice in under 80 seconds, building a three-goal advantage in the first-round match vs. Temple. Photo/Todd Forrest

battle we face this year, it's a battle we face every year and it even happens to pro teams, but it roughly takes about seven minutes for the game to develop a flow. The key is getting into a flow quicker than your opponent because giving up an early goal can take the wind out of your sails."

Junior MJ Delatte and Mancillas combined for the hockey assist on Robbins' lone goal of the evening - extending the margin to 5-0 in the 24th. The final goal of the half came just over three minutes later when freshman Benton Gregory played Mancillas' pass off his chest and into an open goal from point-blank range.

"You can measure up your opponent pretty quick, and we knew right away we had more horsepower than [Haralson]," Coach Robbins said. "And like I told the guys, this will be the last time we have that kind of advantage. The rest of the tournament will be all No. 1 and 2 seeds. Hopefully we enjoyed it and had fun because that's what it's all about."

Coach Robbins began working his junior varsity players into the match late in the first half after starting freshman Ethan McBride at goalkeeper during the first 40 minutes.

With senior Aaron Helton in goal to start the second half alongside the Panthers' JV squad, Haralson County took advantage of a free-kick to get on the board in the 42nd.

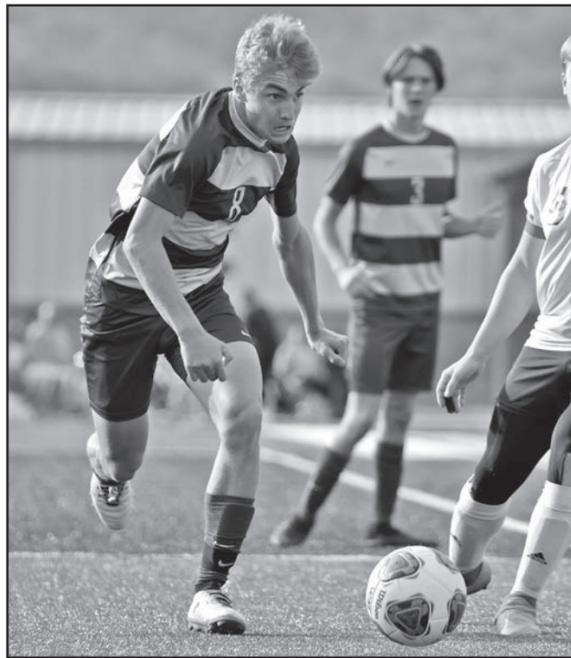
But freshman Wes Seiler notched his first varsity goal in

the 59th off a feed from another 9th grader Joel Mendoza. Noah Spillane's first goal came courtesy of a penalty kick during the 66th minute, then his first helper came 11 minutes later when he found fellow freshman Zach Depalma for a 9-1 advantage. Sophomore Trent Baker capped off the scoring with an unassisted goal in the 79th minute.

"I'm not going to lie, I was surprised, but I'm also ecstatic," Coach Robbins said regarding his JV squad outscoring a state playoff team 4-1 during the second half. "Right before the second half, I told them, 'don't revert back to your old habits. Use the things you've learned this year through our coaching and trust it. It's like novocaine, eventually, it will work.' And it did. They made a lot of the right runs and directional passing, and we had four people score who haven't scored a goal this year."

"I really wanted to get those guys in. I promised them if we got up, I would put them in. Those guys have been kind of jipped this season because of all the COVID stuff so I am very happy for them. Their parents got to see them on the field and see them score, so it was a win-win. I might catch some flak from the armchair quarterbacks for not [putting Haralson County] away, but whatever, I'll take it."

Lady Panthers 3, Temple 1 - Sophomore Kaylee Helton scored two second-half goals and freshman keeper Kyra McKechnie turned away



Led by senior Zach Jackson's 18-minute hat trick, Union County was determined to prove its best soccer is not in the rearview. Photo/Todd Forrest

a late push by the third-seeded Tigers on Thursday at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Freshman Lara Turner provided Union County a 1-0 lead in the 23rd minute off an assist from sophomore Haleigh Helcher. The Lady Panthers extended the margin to 2-0 during the 55th when junior Lorelei Skinner found Helton, who pushed the right-footed shot past the Temple keeper.

Union seemed to put the game away 78 seconds later when sophomore Madison Torres fed Helton for a 3-0 lead with 24 minutes to play.

"I thought that would be enough for us, but it proves why you never want to let up," Coach Hunter said. "Our team is like a diesel engine. It takes some time to get warmed up, but once we start firing, we score multiple goals in a really short period of time. So I knew that wave was coming, but it's just wandering, when's it going to get here?"

After two stops by McKechnie in the 59th, the Tigers found the net in the 63rd when a shot deflected off a defender and beyond the outstretched arms of the Union goalkeeper.

"That's a goal that Kyra would save a million times, but the ball hit off one of our defender's feet," Coach Hunter said. "That's not a goal you can blame on her, because she made two huge saves for us earlier. But the biggest thing about our team is, the girls have been practicing well enough and hard enough to deserve that win."

really stepped up and became the leaders that they need to be. And the young girls all play club [soccer], so they've been in big games and they understand what they need to do.

"We still have speed with [Helton and Turner], but the speed of Reagan and Melia can change the whole dynamic of a game and everyone needs to be aware of them," Hunter continued. "As a result, I think Temple watched film on us (before the injuries) and that's why their back four [defenders] were playing so far back."

Sweet 16: Lovett or leave it - Union's second-round opponent, the No. 4 Lovett (13-3) men, spent most of the season as Class AA's No. 1 squad before a surprising loss to No. 3 Pace Academy (ranked 10th at the time) dropped the Lions to second in Region 6-AA.

"We'll get back to work like we always have and we also have a couple tricks up our sleeve, so I don't want to say too much," Coach Robbins said regarding this week's match. "(Assistant coach Jon) Krieger and I have gone over some things with the team and they're sold on them. So I expect us to come out ready to play on Thursday. It's going to be exciting."

Lovett knocked off Region 7-AA's No. 3 seed Coosa 4-0 in round one. Coosa split its two matches with Fanning County this season - both ending in 2-0 scores.

"We have to continue getting better with our ball control and not panicking in certain situations," Jackson said when asked about the Lovett matchup. "Sometimes we freak out and [pass] the ball before we need to. We just need to remain calm in those situations."

Meanwhile, the No. 2 Lovett girls (9-4-1) have been a mainstay in the top two of Eurosport.com's Class AA rankings. Unlike the men, the Lady Lions knocked off No. 7 Pace Academy 2-0 in the de facto region title match on April 7 to lock up the No. 1 seed.

Lovett is coming off a 10-0 win over Region 7-AA's No. 4 seed Coosa. Union and Lovett have no common opponents but Region 7-AA's No. 2 seed Fanning County defeated Coosa by a combined two-match tally of 7-1.

"The thing about Lovett is, they may not be ranked No. 1 anymore, but everyone knows who the best team in the state really is," Hunter said.



Freshman Lara Turner provided Union County a 1-0 lead at the intermission with her first-half goal vs. Temple. Photo/Todd Forrest



Panthers' freshman Wes Seiler (28) is encouraged by his older teammates and the coaching staff during the second half of Union County's 10-1 state playoff win over Haralson County. The Union County JV players outscored Haralson 4-1 after halftime. Photo/Todd Forrest