

Sports

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Both soccer teams advance to Sweet 16; girls will host, boys at GCHS

Madison Yost makes history with 100th career goal in rout of Temple

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Union County soccer went two-for-two in its opening round playoff games after making its first postseason appearance in three years.

Awaiting both squads in round two is Calhoun's Gordon Central High School. The Lady Panthers will host Wednesday's match-up while the boys head back out on the road Thursday.

The top-seeded and sixth-ranked Lady Panthers were dominant during an 8-0, round one victory over a 12-win Temple squad on Thursday, April 25.

Winners of seven-of-eight, including a four-game win streak entering the postseason, Temple was unable to survive an early onslaught that saw the Tigers surrender four goals in the first 22 minutes.

"Getting off to such a great early start was huge for us," Lady Panther head coach Tim Hunter said. "It wasn't just about getting the win, it was about making a statement. And I think we had a big statement win in the first round of the state tournament."

Union County senior forward Madison Yost entered the state playoffs just four goals shy of the century mark. And after her teammates provided a 2-0 cushion, Yost took over, scoring the final three goals of the first half.

With a Union victory all but guaranteed, Yost was able to focus on her personal milestone in the second half, and after bouncing three shots off the post, she finally converted No. 100 in the 89th minute off a Maddie Sutton assist.

"She had a couple fly off the post and another two or three goals that are usually automatic goals so I think she was just waiting until the last possible second for dramatic effect," Hunter said, as he laughed and put his arm around Yost.

According to Yost, she didn't expect to have a shot at 100 in the first round, but when she went into halftime only needing one goal, that resulted in a change of her mind set.

"I really thought (100



L-R: Madison Yost (right) celebrates following her 100th goal in last week's playoff win. Freshman Dalton Allen during a recent match Photos/Todd Forrest

goals) would happen in the second or third round," she said. "Going back to my freshman year, I never thought I would be setting the school record (88 goals) so breaking it earlier this season was incredible, but getting to 100 was always in the back of my mind. Now that I've finally gotten here, it's just an incredible feeling."

Whether or not Yost would reach 100 goals was the only drama in the second half of Thursday night's Lady Panther victory. That wasn't the case for the guys, however, as they entered as the No. 4 seed and scored the program's first road playoff win in six years and its first ever victory as a 4-seed.

Winners of seven-in-a-row, Union County entered the playoffs as perhaps the hottest team in Region 8-AA and head coach Leland Sarrell knew a 4-seed wasn't an accurate representation of his squad's level of play over the last month.

"I think our confidence level was higher than a normal 4-seed and we didn't feel like underdogs going into the game," he said. "As a team, we really hit our stride during the back half of the regular season and our boys feel like they can go out there and play with just about anyone right now."

Panthers 2, No. 5 Lamar County 1 (OT): BARNESVILLE - One day removed from watching the Lady Panthers punch a ticket to the Sweet 16, the Union County men traveled to Lamar County to face the 5th-ranked Trojans. And after falling

behind 1-0 in the first half, the Panthers rallied to force overtime, where freshman Dalton Allen scored the go-ahead goal off a feed from junior Kobi Robbins less than 90 seconds into the extra session.

Midway through the first half, Lamar County took advantage of an injury stoppage free kick from the top of the penalty area to grab a 1-nil lead. But that would be the only point allowed by goalkeeper Aaron Helton as the sophomore went on to save four shots in the match, allowing his offense to race ahead.

"We were reassured (that we could play with anyone) during the first half," Sarrell said. "Even though we went down 1-0, we controlled possession and created several opportunities."

"We always had confidence but I think the turning point was when a bit of doubt crept into the Lamar County team. Our boys really went out there and took the game to them."

Still trailing 1-0 early in the second half, an Allen corner kick found fellow freshman Kyler Robbins, who headed home the equalizer in the 55th minute.

Missing its leading scorer Brian Smith, Union County was unable to grab the lead over the final 25 minutes of regulation.

While the Panthers dropped their only overtime contest of the regular season (March 5 at Rabun County), they clearly had the edge in experience over a Trojan squad making its first



OT appearance in 25 months (March 2017).

That experience advantage quickly came to fruition as Allen scored the would-be game-winner 84 seconds into overtime.

"We mainly tried to calm everyone down a bit and remind them that what they were doing out there was clearly working," said Sarrell regarding his message to the team heading into overtime. "A few little talks about tactics and spacing, along with a reminder that passing and moving predictively is much easier than doing so reactively."

With almost 14 minutes between themselves and the Sweet 16, the Union defense clamped down and didn't allow Lamar County any good looks at the potential game-tying shot.

"Overtime is always pressure packed for both sides, but considering the flow of the game was in our favor for most of the second half, I'm sure (Lamar County) felt said pressure a bit more," Sarrell added.

Up next: The Panthers will travel to 10th ranked Gordon Central in Calhoun on Thursday for a 6 p.m. start. The Trojans are currently sporting a 13-6 record and are fresh off an 11-1 shellacking of No. 2 seed South Atlanta in the opening round.

As the No. 3 seed from Region 7-AA, Gordon Central finished 10-4 in region play behind the top two teams in the most recent Eurosport.com rankings: No. 1 Coosa and No.

2 Pepperell.

"Gordon Central comes out of one of the strongest regions in AA so earning the third seed, as they did, is no small feat," Sarrell said. "That was emphasized by their dominant win in the first round of the state playoffs this year. With that said, we have given every team we faced a run for their money this year and are playing our best soccer of the year at the perfect time."

"If we can stay healthy this week and show up Thursday fired up I do not see any reason that we cannot 'upset' another higher seeded at their home field and extend our season."

Injury update: Union County senior Brian Smith was injured during a collision in the early stages of Friday's match. As of Monday, the coaching staff is confident its leading scorer will be ready to go Thursday.

Lady Panthers 8, Temple 0 - An early goal by Desaray Patterson from beyond the penalty area sparked a five-goal, first-half outburst that propelled Union to the easy victory.

Yost would finish with four goals -- giving her 100 for her career -- and Isabella Nottage added two more to lead the Lady Panthers into the Sweet 16 for the third time since 2015.

"This time has been fantastic all season long," Hunter said. "They really got robbed of a couple of these opportunities by being in (Class) AAA (in 2017 and 2018) but the main thing that happened in AAA was that it really sharpened our steel. We

came back out this season and were more than ready to go."

In the fifth minute, a Yost assist set-up Patterson's goal. Eight minutes later, Patterson found Nottage for a 2-0 advantage.

The next three goals all belonged to Yost, coming in minute 15, 22 and 32 with Patterson (2), Mattison Ruff, Sheyenne Dyer and Ellie Garrison getting credited with the assists.

Yost picked up another assist when she fed Nottage for a goal in the 54th minute. Nottage returned the favor when she found Ruff 12 minutes later, spotting Union a 7-0 advantage.

Yost finally struck in the 89th minute after just missing on multiple second half shot attempts. Sutton was credited with the assist on that historic shot as Yost was swarmed by teammates before heading to the sidelines to be greeted by Coach Hunter, who presented her the game ball.

"Truth be told, I did not expect this to happen today, but when I got three by halftime, I was just really anxious to start the second half," Yost said.

"I want to thank my family for supporting me, they've driven countless hours to come and watch me," she added. "It's been an incredible journey"

Up next: Union hosts the runner-up from Region 7-AA, Gordon Central at 6 p.m. Wednesday. The Lady Panthers enter with an 11-7 record and a 9-5 region mark.

Like Temple, Gordon Central enters on a four-game winning streak and have come out on top in eight of its last nine games.

As for Yost, she might have two region championships and 100 goals on her resume, but that doesn't mean she's ready to pack it up and go home. Her one remaining objective is to devote as much time as possible to her fellow Lady Panthers before putting on the cap and gown later this month.

"I'm looking forward to getting to spend another week with my teammates," she said. "I'm not ready for this season to end and to have to say goodbye to everyone."

"We're going to come out, play hard and hopefully get the win and a little more time together."

Baseball: Bremen uses the long ball to power past Union County at State

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BREMEN - Union County baseball saw its season come to a close at third-ranked Bremen during the opening round of the Class AA State Tournament, following a pair of one-sided losses to the Region 5-AA Champion Blue Devils on Wednesday, April 24.

Making its first postseason appearance in three years, Union County jumped on Bremen, 3-0 in the early stages of game one before a seven-run fourth inning tipped the scales in favor of the Blue Devils, and a sixth-inning grand slam opened the flood gates in an 11-3 loss.

The momentum from game one carried over as Bremen scored two in the first and third innings to take a 4-0 advantage in game two. The Panthers answered with two in the fourth, highlighted by a Coleson Daniel homerun, to cut the margin in half but the Blue Devils were too much, tacking on three more in the fifth and two in the seventh to take the game and the series by a 9-2 score.

Panthers 3, Bremen 11 - Entering last week's state tournament, the Bremen lineup was scoring at a clip of 8.3 runs per game but sophomore Isaak Mullanack held them in check until the fourth inning when a leadoff error and an infield single provided enough of a spark to ignite the potent Blue Devil offense.

When the dust settled on the bottom half of the fourth, Union County found itself in a 7-3 hole that was too deep to dig out of against a quality opponent.

"I think it was just a case of a good team making adjustments," Union County



The Union County battery of junior catcher Alec Youngblood and sophomore right-hander Isaak Mullanack during game one of last week's doubleheader at Bremen. Photo/Todd Forrest

Head Coach Zach Odom said of Bremen's seven-run inning. "Our plan coming in was to keep them off-balance with breaking balls because we knew they would crush the fastball. The first time through the order, Isaak did a good job but the second time, the middle of their lineup adjusted to what we were doing and proved why they're such a great team."

The Panthers, however, had plenty of opportunities early on, beginning in the first when they stranded two runners. Mullanack would work a perfect first that came to a close when senior centerfielder Ean Harkins made a home run-saving catch, leaning out over the short outfield fence to make the backhanded grab.

Harkins' defense provided a pick-me-up for the Panthers as Alec Youngblood and Austin Garrison opened the second inning with back-to-back singles before a Harkins bunt, resulting in the only Bremen error of the game, loaded the bases with nobody out.

Following a strikeout, Mullanack lined a double down the left field line, scoring Garrison and courtesy runner Pey-

ton Ivester. An RBI groundout by Alec Scott brought home Harkins to spot Union County a 3-0 advantage.

The three-run lead would hold until the fourth thanks to some timely damage control by Mullanack, who pitched around a one-out single in the bottom of the second and a rare catcher's interference ruling in the third that put the sophomore right-hander in a two-on, nobody out jam that he eventually escaped with consecutive fly outs and a pop-up.

After a caught-stealing ended the Union half of the fourth, Bremen began the bottom half by reaching on a throwing error and an infield single. Following an RBI single, a hit-by-pitch and a sacrifice fly, the Panthers were clinging to a 3-2 lead when another run-scoring single and an RBI groundout to first gave the Blue Devils a 4-3 lead.

With two down, and trailing by only a run, Union County was unable to get out of the inning as a base-hit made it a 5-3 game and a two-run blast to right-center stretched the margin to 7-3 and closing the book on Mul-

lanack. Harkins took over on the hill and brought the fourth to a close but before the Panthers found themselves trailing by four.

Union had a chance to get back in the game during the fifth but left the bases loaded after a leadoff single by Scott and walks to Zeke Swartz and Youngblood brought the tying run to the plate with two down.

Harkins would retire six-straight batters before running into trouble with two-down in the sixth. After two walks put Bremen in business, the Panthers elected to load the bases with an intentional walk that backfired in the form of a two-out grand slam that blew things open at 11-3.

Panthers 2, Bremen 9 - Swartz allowed eight hits and six earned over six innings as Union County was unable to recover from an early 4-0 deficit.

The Blue Devils used an RBI double and a two-out wild pitch to jump in front 2-0 in the first before a pair of fourth-inning doubles sandwiched around a two-out walk made it a 4-0 game.



Senior Ean Harkins makes a home run-saving grab over the short deck in right-center field at Bremen. Photo/Todd Forrest

Daniel led off the bottom of the fourth with a solo homer - the first of his varsity career - and Youngblood followed with a double that would trim the deficit to 4-2 when his courtesy runner, JJ Littles scored later in the inning.

"I was happy for Coleson," Odom said. "He's had an up-and-down year on the mound so I was extremely happy for him. He really stepped up for us the last two weeks after Cay-bo (Cayden Rich) went down."

Bremen responded immediately, using a bases-clearing double in the fifth to open up a 7-3 advantage.

Daniel spelled Swartz in the seventh and a leadoff error and a two-run homer with two down tacked on some insurance for the Blue Devils.

The Panthers finish the season at 14-12, its first winning record since 2016. The future looks bright for Coach Odom and crew as Union was led by a solid nucleus of sophomores with a few juniors and seniors sprinkled in.

Daniel, Harkins, Hunter

Kelley, Scott and Jonathan Everett each played a significant role in the success this season. The Panthers will return juniors Youngblood and Cayden Rich.

Rich, unfortunately, would the final two weeks of the season due to injury.

Highlighting a deep sophomore class was Mullanack, Swartz and Garrison, who along with Rich, will give Union County a solid foundation to its 2020 pitching staff.

Meanwhile, Littles, Ivester, Damien Chitwood and Matthew Kelley each stepped up and played a pivotal role during a Panther victory at some point during the season and should all see an increased role next season.

"It was a great learning experience for us," Odom said. "I told the underclassmen after the game that we might see Bremen again in the future and they're an example of the level we hope to reach. And if we do, we can expect to see that team again somewhere in the playoffs."