

# Sports

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## Soccer: Union County's historic playoff run continues at home

Lady Panthers cruise to 5-0 victory; Panthers rally from two-down with three late goals

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County soccer pulled off a Sweet 16 sweep in last week's Class AA State Tournament in a pair of games that were polar opposites of each other.

The 6th ranked Lady Panthers opened play by taking care of business at home in a 5-0 shutout of Gordon Central on Wednesday, May 1. Senior Madison Yost finished with three goals, including two in the first half that swung the momentum in Union's favor entering the break.

A day later, the self-proclaimed "comeback kids" were at it again when the Panther men scored three goals in the final 24-plus minutes, erasing a 2-0 second-half deficit at 10th ranked Gordon Central to record their eighth-straight victory.

The game-winner came on a Kobi Robbins header-goal with 34 seconds left that set off a memorable celebration and capping off one of the most thrilling victories in UCHS history.

"We all pressed up, Brian (Smith) throws it in and I jump up and flick it in the back corner for the win," Kobi Robbins said after the game.

"There was less than a minute left so I just wanted to get (the throw-in) into the mix and hope that someone was able to get a head on it," Smith said when asked about his game-winning assist. "Luckily everything worked out."

Following the Panthers' victory at Gordon Central on Thursday, May 2, the Class AA field was whittled down to eight teams in both the boys and girls brackets. The Lady Panthers will defend its home turf first when they host top-ranked St. Vincents at 5 p.m. Tuesday.

The Union men will host Jeff Davis County (14-5-1, 6-3) on Wednesday at 6 p.m. in a clash of No. 4 seeds, guaranteeing at least one bottom seed will reach the final four.

**Panthers 3, No. 10 Gordon Central 2** - While the Lady Panthers have won their first two matches by a combined total of 13-0, the Panthers, however, have yet to score a first-half goal and trailed at the intermission of both contests.

Down 1-0 at the break in the opening round, Union County drew even in the second half before winning it in overtime. The same scenario would play out in round two as the Panthers allowed themselves to get backed into a corner before flipping a switch late.

Tenth-ranked Gordon Central (13-7, 5-2) would take advantage of a penalty kick in the 19th minute despite a diving save by sophomore goalkeeper Aaron Helton. However, he was unable to secure the shot and the Warriors tapped the deflection into the net for a lead in minute 19.

Things began looking bleak for Union County and its rope-a-dope strategy when Gordon Central sailed a shot from beyond the penalty arc over the fingertips of Helton for a 2-0 lead, less than five minutes into the second half.

Still looking at a 2-0 deficit 11 minutes later, the Panthers took advantage of a free kick when freshman Dalton Allen blasted a kick from the wing past the outstretched arms of the Warrior keeper.



L-R: Junior Kobi Robbins celebrates his game-winning header-goal with 34 seconds remaining at 10th ranked Gordon Central, sending the Union County men to its first-ever Elite 8. Senior Anzly Sherman battles a Lady Warrior defender during the first half of Union's 5-0 victory. Sherman went on to score two goals with one assist in the Sweet 16 victory. Photos/Todd Forrest

Finally on the board in the 56th minute, Union began to loosen up and went on the offensive, striking 113 seconds later on a rebound goal by sophomore Malachi Patrick when Gordon Central was unable to gather a Kobi Robbins shot attempt.

Union continued its onslaught over the final 22 minutes but solid keeper play and a few unlucky bounces kept the game all square at 2-2.

After the Warriors were unable to take advantage of a free kick in the 76th minute, Kobi Robbins almost delivered the game-winner with two minutes remaining but his kick missed wide.

He would get one more chance with under a minute to play when a perfectly placed throw into the box by Brian Smith set up the game-winning header with 34 seconds left. As soon as the ball found the net, Kobi Robbins made a shirtless victory lap around the field, resulting in a yellow card from the official.

But he wasn't letting anyone or anything ruin his moment.

"I told the guys that if we score (in the final seconds) I was doing it, I was going to take my shirt off, I don't care if I get a card, I was doing it," Kobi Robbins said following the win. "They gave me a yellow card but it doesn't matter. It doesn't carry over to the next game so it was worth it."

Gordon Central was able to get off one last desperation shot that was easily scooped up by Helton with under 14 seconds left. In no hurry to get off the goal kick, Union watched the clock hit zero as Helton booted the ball high into the blue skies over Calhoun.

"This was by far the best win," Smith said when asked where the Gordon Central victory stacks up against other wins. "This is the best one. It was better than last week (at Lamar County) and I'm just happy we got the win."

**Up next:** The Panthers will host the Jeff Davis Yellow Jackets, the 4-seed from Region 2-AA, who entered the postseason with just one win in its last four regular season games. In round one, they survived overtime at Dodge County, coming out on top after connecting on all five penalty kicks following a 1-1 tie. In the second round, the Jackets shutout a Berrien County squad that entered the postseason with a 4-8 record and placed third in a four-team region.

The Jeff Davis offense

enters Wednesday's showdown averaging 3.6 goals per game but were shutout in both of its losses to end the regular season. The Jackets feature a balanced scoring attack led by seniors Jose Gonzalez (No. 7), Hector Huerta (No. 6) and Cesar Andablo (No. 13), along with juniors Orlando Payan (No. 29) and Josh Ratliff (No. 17).

**Notes:** Union County's 11 wins is the most since 14 in 2011.

Prior to last week's victory, the Panthers were 0-4 in Sweet 16 games this decade and winless all-time.

With goals by Allen, Malachi Patrick and Kobi Robbins, more than half (21) of the team's 40 goals belong to underclassmen. Meanwhile, 17 of the team's 24 assists belong to underclassmen with Kobi Robbins (9) and freshman Kyler Robbins (6) leading the way.

Allen's free kick goal at Gordon Central gives the Union County freshmen eight goals on the year.

Other than Union, the Johnson-Gainesville boys are the only northeast Georgia team that remains alive in at this point of the season. The 3rd ranked Knights will host unranked Fayette County on Wednesday.

Region 8-AA's Putnam County is also still alive in the quarterfinal round.

**No. 6 Lady Panthers 5, Gordon Central 0** - Leading 1-0 in the latter stages of the first half, senior Madison Yost scored her second goal of the day, providing Union a 2-0 cushion at the intermission.

Early on, the Lady Warriors were able to get off the first shot of the match resulting in a Sadie Underwood save in the fourth minute. The Lady Panthers, on the other hand, found an opening in the seventh minute when Anzly Sherman had a 1-on-1 opportunity with the Gordon Central keeper, who made a nice save on the shot, but a trailing Madison Yost punched in the rebound for a 1-0 advantage.

"The goalie moved too far to one side so I tried to just chip it in but it ended up going to Madison (Yost) so I was like, 'well, whatever works,'" Sherman said, smiling from ear-to-ear.

Union County remained on the offensive but an Ellie Garrison free kick in the 11th minute and a Yost shot attempt in minute 25 were both turned away by the Lady Warrior keeper.

Coming in the 36th minute, the Lady Panthers' second goal turned the tide after Gordon

Central appeared to withstand the early onslaught and were less than five minutes away from regrouping at the half in a 1-0 contest.

"That second goal was big because not only did (Gordon Central weather the early storm) but because you started to see the cracks form," head coach Tim Hunter said after the match. "When we got that goal, if you looked at their players, their body language really changed."

As a result, Union County was able to put the game away with an Anzly Sherman goal 11 minutes into the second half. Six minutes later, Yost recorded the hat trick before Sherman tacked on one more for good measure in the 67th minute.

"I wanted to get a goal today because I didn't get one in the last game," Sherman said. "It was a very physical game but I had it in my mind that I was determined to score."

Desaray Patterson finished with three assists, Sherman added two and Yost had one.

"(Gordon Central) is a little bit inexperienced soccer-wise but they're very athletic," Hunter said. "They are very quick, they were always fighting for the ball and their kids played very hard. Top-to-bottom, they have about as much speed as anyone we faced this year outside of Lumpkin or White County. I believe the 5-0 score was a result of us being a more complete team and I don't think it reflects anything negatively at all about (Gordon Central)."

**Up next:** The Lady Panthers are looking to end its losing skid in the Elite 8 but it won't be easy as the top-ranked team in Class AA, St. Vincent's Academy (13-5, 8-1) visits Blairsville at 5 p.m. Tuesday.

The Lady Saints are coming off a 10-0 rout of Washington County in round one, followed by a 4-0 win over Thomasville in the Sweet 16. Unlike Union County's previous Elite 8 opponents (Pace Academy in 2016 and Lovett in 2015, who were both victorious at Union by a combined total of 15-0), St. Vincent's doesn't appear invincible, as reflected by their five losses.

Although, the five losses didn't come at the hands of any cupcakes.

The first defeat was a 3-1 loss to a 9-6 Cambridge squad from Class 6A; the second came at region-rival Vidalia -- the second-ranked team in Class AA with an 18-1 record -- by a score of 2-1. However, St. Vincent's would avenge that loss later in the season with a 6-3 home win,



Top: Lady Panther keeper Sadie Underwood vs Gordon Central. Bottom: Freshman Dalton Allen's free kick goal at Gordon Central. Photos/Todd Forrest

handing Vidalia its only loss and securing the region crown.

Up next was a 2-1 loss to Savannah Private's No. 8 team, who fell 5-4 to Lakeview Academy in the first round. The fourth loss came to unbeaten Glynn Academy (17-0-2) - the fourth-ranked team in Class 6A - by a score of 5-0.

The final loss was a 1-0 shutout at Richmond Hill - a 12-win, Sweet 16 team from Class 6A.

"St. Vincent's is very good but we also faced some

very good competition in Class AAA," Coach Hunter said. "Our plan is to set 'em up, knock 'em down and just see what happens. You don't come this far and then start changing what you did to get here."

Sherman echoed her head coaches' sentiments on facing the No. 1 team in the state. "We need to play to the best of our ability and come out with the drive and the confidence that we can do this if we continue to play like the team that we are," she added.



Top: Lady Panther keeper Sadie Underwood vs Gordon Central. Bottom: Freshman Dalton Allen's free kick goal at Gordon Central. Photos/Todd Forrest