

Sports

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Track: Union County qualifies seven for State Championships

By Todd Forrest
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Nicholson - Union County High School qualified for this week's Class AA State Championships in seven events during last weekend's State sectionals at East Jackson High School.

The girls' 4x800 relay team led the way for UCHS on Saturday, May 6 with a third-place finish against competition from regions 1, 3, 4 and 8-AA. As expected, Athens Academy set the pace at 10 minutes, 16.21 seconds. Second-place Washington County finished nearly 30 seconds back of the Spartans at 10:45.64. Union County, meanwhile, crossed the line at 10:57.35.

Other state qualifiers in the girls' 4x800 included fourth-place Jeff Davis, fifth-place Banks County and sixth-place Worth County. The final two spots went to Providence Christian and Fitzgerald.

Union County logged three fourth-place finishes, but as head coach Beau Kelley reminded his athletes throughout the day, the goal of sectionals is advancing to state, not placing.

"They don't hand out medals at sectionals, you're only here to qualify for state," he reiterated.

Headlining the fourth-place finishers was freshman Lola Hunter, who picked up two state-qualifying times in the 1600 and 3200-meter races.

Savannah Arts senior Ava Coffey placed first in the 3200M with an 11:45.28. Athens Academy's Maya Davis (11:52) and Sarah Harrison (11:58) took home second and



Ellie Adams hands off to Noel Hyatt to begin the third leg of the girls 4x800 relay event on Saturday afternoon at East Jackson. The team finished third at Sectionals and will compete for a State title Thursday evening. Photo/Todd Forrest

team posted a 3:32.54 to place fourth -- 3.7 seconds back of first-place Appling County.

Athens Academy's 3:30.39 was good enough for second; Pierce County came in third at 3:31.38.

The last four spots went to Vidalia, East Jackson, Fitzgerald and Banks County.

Cooper Kluth came in seventh in the 110 hurdles with a time of 16.93 seconds, edging Thomson's Jayden Ivey (17.07) and ninth-place Ja'Kylon Paulk (17.34) of Appling County.

Vidalia's Nahvie Berry led the way at 15.28; Jeff Davis' Kaleb Ryals came in second at 15.59. The remaining state-qualifying times went to Josey's Altravion Simmons (15.95), Toombs County's Erick Stevens (15.97), Vidalia's Sirmarion Oglesby (16.43) and Cook County's Kyle Davis (16.92).

Union County's two eighth-place finishes belonged to senior Mattie Brookshire in the shot put and Zander Rotko in the 400M.

Brookshire's distance of 32 feet, 11.75 inches eliminated ninth-place Shaylin Stringer of Toombs County, whose best toss measured 32-03.25.

Banks County's Shelby Speed had the top throw of the day at 40-08. Athens Academy's Veronica Abbott posted a 38-07.50; Shantie Lewis of Jeff Davis fired a 35-11; Josey's Kayla McCord went for 35-06.50 and Sumter County's Ariel Aldridge placed fifth at 35-05.75.

Sixth and seventh went to Ryleigh Nunn (34-00.25) of East Jackson and Jewell Spell (33-08.50) of Appling County.

Last but not least, Rotko crossed the line in 51.52 seconds, fending off Fellowship Christian's Evan Haynes

(51.95) for the final spot in the 400M State championships. Cook's Javarius Seabrooks edged Rotko with a 51.49 to come in seventh.

Appling Camden Hickcox set the pace at 49.50, narrowly edging teammate William Solomon by less than a hundredth of a second. Fitz's Da'tavion Lawson clocked in at 49.95 and Richmond County Tech's Keyon Bailey rounded out the top five with a 51.23.

Athens Academy's Preston Darden finished sixth at 51.32.

The girls 4x400 relay team missed the cut in 10th with a time of 4:33.13, finishing nearly 5 seconds back of eighth-place Vidalia.

Kluth ended up 11th in the 300 hurdles, as did the boys' 4x200 relay team. Linley Jones came in 12th in the triple jump; Katie Byers (100M hurdles) and Ava Loyd (100M) each finished 13th.

Nolan Thompson (300 hurdles) and Taylor Whitehead (400M) both came in 15th.

The State championships get underway Thursday at McEachern High School in Powder Springs. Brookshire will take the field first at noon in the Class AA shot put event. The 4x800 relay teams will race at 7 p.m.

Hunter's first action will be in the 1600M on Friday at 1:20 p.m. Rotko will hit the track at 2:20 p.m. for the 400M prelims, and the 4x400 prelims are at 5:50 p.m.

Kluth's 110 hurdles race is noon Saturday. The 400M finals fire off at 2:20 p.m. Hunter's 3200M race is at 4 p.m.; the 4x400 finals begin at 4:30 p.m. -- concluding the day and the 2023 season.

Football: Panthers to wrap spring practice with Friday's Purple-Gold Game

By Todd Forrest
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Weather permitting, Union County football will host an intersquad scrimmage Friday at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The "very-scripted scrimmage," as dubbed by head coach Michael Perry, is expected to kickoff at 5 p.m. Friday. And while the weather forecast is looking good for Friday -- as of Monday, at least -- should rain force any practice cancellations throughout the week, Friday's game won't take place.

Any game cancellations or changes will be posted on the *North Georgia News* Facebook page.

"If we miss more than a day or two of practice, we will just have a regular practice on Friday," Perry said. "But if we're able to get everything in this week, we'll have our intersquad game. Right now, we're still planning on having the game."

"Originally, the weather was looking pretty bad for this week but that's changed. So who knows, we'll just see how it goes."

Friday's scrimmage will see the team split into two even groups, allowing the younger players a chance to show out.

"We'll do everything to make sure the teams are as even as we can," Perry said. "We'll also match them up as best as we can so the young guys can get a chance to shine."

Other than that, regular scrimmage rules apply, e.g., no contact with the quarterbacks and no live special teams.



Union County head coach Michael Perry with quarterbacks Caiden Tanner (left) and Cade Dockrey (right) during last Thursday's practice. Photo/Todd Forrest

The game will conclude two weeks of spring practices that saw a turn-out of more than 70 kids. During the spring, coaches are looking to see which players are ready to step up and fill the spots left by the outgoing seniors.

"The biggest thing is, we're looking for guys to get noticed," Perry said. "We have some really good players that

are graduating so we're looking to fill those roles. So the main thing we've been harping on, is who's going to get noticed making plays."

"We're off to a good start, but I'm glad we have another week to see who else can get noticed."

Despite the Panthers bringing back the bulk of their 22 starters, Perry and staff are

attempting to fill a handful of openings, particularly on the offensive line, at linebacker and safety.

"Linebacker is a big one and we have some [defensive back] spots open," Perry said. "Offensive line is a big one with two spots up for grabs. We're also looking for someone to fill [Griff Young's] position at receiver."

One of the outgoing seniors is center Alex Godinez, but Perry hopes that shifting guard Cody Meeks to the middle will pay off, leaving an opening at guard and tackle.

"Two guys I want to mention, who have done very well, are Cade Dockrey and Carter Deal," Perry added. "Cade has been playing quarterback and running back since

Connor (Schuknecht) and (Braylen) Rader are banged up a little bit, but nothing serious. Then he plays DB for us too and he's really stood out at all those different positions. He's like our Swiss army knife."

"Defensively, Carter Deal has given a tremendous effort and has really stood out during the first week."

Basketball: Underwood signs with Truett-McConnell University

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The heart and soul of Union County basketball's 2022-23 squad, Eli Underwood, accepted a scholarship to continue his playing career at Cleveland's Truett-McConnell University (TMU) during a signing ceremony at UCHS on Wednesday, May 3.

With all of Underwood's Panther teammates in attendance, their love and respect was on full display as they bid farewell to their big man in the middle. The 6-foot-4 post graduate high school later this month after collecting 23 double-doubles as a senior and leading the program to its first Sweet 16 appearance in seven years.

"Anytime I get asked to talk about Eli, I'm going to take that opportunity, cause I know that opportunity is going to bring nothing but positive energy to the room, cause that's exactly what Eli does," Union County head basketball coach Corey Garrett said during the ceremony. "I love the dude to death, I'm so proud of him, and I know [his teammates] look up to him so much. All the success he's had on the court can't even touch what he does off the court."

Underwood's journey to the next level began when he reached out to Truett-McConnell head coach Jon Yeh during his senior season, prompting Yeh to attend Union's home win over third-ranked Providence, earning Underwood an invite to Truett's game the following day.

"I went and got intro-



Alongside his parents, UCHS basketball star Eli Underwood inks a scholarship with Truett-McConnell University last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

duced in the locker room and we kind of worked things out after that," Underwood said. "[Truett's] assistant came to the region championship game, I went back over for a workout and they offered me [a scholarship] and I committed about a month ago."

Underwood wrapped up his senior year as the team's leading scorer and rebounder at 14.3 points and 12.6 rebounds a game. Additionally, his 53.4% shooting percentage and +5.9 plus/minus led the squad, while

Underwood's 1.1 steals a night placed him tied for second on the 2022-23 Panthers. He shot 65.3% from the foul line to rank third on the team.

Underwood logged a career-high 27 points on 13-of-19 shooting in the Jan. 10 win over Banks County while pulling down 17 rebounds. He grabbed a career-best 23 boards in an early-season loss to White County before finishing the year with 10-straight double-digit rebound performances -- nine resulting in double-

doubles.

On Dec. 2, Underwood picked up six steals in a win at Fannin County. He went 9-for-10 at the line in the home win over Fellowship Christian, shot 7-of-8 from the floor in the Providence Christian thriller on Jan. 20 and tallied a +33 plus/minus in a Feb. 3 victory at East Jackson.

Underwood will join former Panther Caleb John at Truett. John appeared in seven games for TMU during the 2022-23 season. Another famil-

iar freshman on this past year's Bears' squad is Banks County's Bradley Lewis.

"Caleb John played a pretty big part in [choosing Truett]," Underwood said. "He told me about the school and said they are good people. I played against their coach's son (Jadon Yeh - White County) and he's a good guy, just like Coach Yeh and all of his family, so that's what attracted me to Truett. Plus I have some family and friends that went there and graduated."

Underwood plans to major in exercise science and could see himself returning to Union County as a coach.

"I'm going to miss everyone [at UCHS], especially my teammates," he said. "I'll never have people like that again, they are awesome, but so is everyone else here."

"I will always remember the relationships and all the fun I had. Not necessarily the things that happened on the court, and we had success on the court, but it's moments from the locker room and going out to eat before the games -- those are the moments that will stick with me for a long time."

Underwood added that he considered the University of North Georgia but didn't receive a scholarship offer. In closing, Underwood credited those that helped him along the way.

"Obviously, I want to thank God most of all," he said. "My family, friends and Jaycee (Seabolt) - my girlfriend, my teachers and of course, my teammates. Definitely Coach Garrett, Coach (Anthony) Payne and Coach (Kevin) Hughes. Those three have believed in me since I came into the program. Without them, none of this would be possible."

UCHS college signings

Later in the week, outgoing seniors Hunter Fleming (baseball) and Kaylee Ashcraft (volleyball) signed scholarships with Truett and Piedmont, respectively.

Full stories, interviews and photos will be featured in next week's edition of the *North Georgia News*.

Photos: UCHS Quarterback Club 'Mountain Made' Golf Tournament

Photos by Todd Forrest



UCHS head coach Michael Perry (right) participated in Friday's fundraiser tournament at Butternut Creek Golf Course. A complete story and additional photos will be in next week's *North Georgia News*.



Local Racing Report: Tri-County, Sugar Creek

By Blake Lynch
Racing Reporter
North Georgia News

Tri-County Race Track was able to get in Friday night's race despite the ominous looking clouds.

The track honored Myles Godfrey's life one last time as his twin brother Kyle and grandfather Shannon Jones carried the American flag around the track.

Josh Smith followed in his car with Myles's picture on the hood of his car. The family wants to thank everyone for their prayers, support and understanding in this difficult time.

The Schaefer's Oil Spring National featured a \$7,553 top prize in super late models. What a show at the "Tiger Pit".

Street Stock: No. 4

Roger Beaver took home his first win of the season. No. 95 Alex Vance was second. No. 91 Clint Watkins was third. No. 21 Troy Turner was fourth. No. 81 Dillon Hannah was fifth.

Pony: No. 15 Ryan Crawford took home the win. No. 01 Corn Bread was second. No. 68 TJ Hooper was third. No. 2 Colby McCullough was fourth. No. H19 Josh Smith was fifth.

602 Feature: No. 56 Colton Berrong took home his first win of the season. No. 88 Rick Smith was second. No. 44 Bobby Elkins was third. No. 100 Copper Twigs was fourth. No. 117 Dylan Beaver was fifth.

Open Wheel Modified: No. 22 Matt Sandefur was the winner. No. 88 Brad Sosbee was second. No. X Brawley Still-

well was third. No. 27 Jamie Cross came in fourth.

FWD: No. J32 Shannon Jones took won the win. No. 32 Jim Exum took second. No. M06 Michael Rayburn was third. No. F3 John Fulfore was fourth. No. 11 Cane Walls placed fifth.

Super Late Model: No. 93 Carson Ferguson took home the win and an extra \$ 7,553. No. 17M Dale McDowell was second. No. 1C Kenny Collins was third. No. 55 Benji Hicks was fourth. No. 22 Will Roland rounded out the top five.

Sugar Creek Race Track: Dirt track races and fans have a busy week with an open practice at Sugar Creek. The track is under new management. The promoter is Rick Norton.

The first race is May 13.

