

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Track: Men's 4x100 closes 2024 as State Runner-Up

UCHS collects four top-five finishes at Class AA State Championships

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Nicholson - The Union County men's 4x100 relay team of Jonah Kluth, JT Neal, Tyler Parker and Taylor Whitehead turned in the second-fastest time in Class AA during last weekend's State Championships at East Jackson High School.

After logging the fastest time during Thursday's prelims (42.44), the 4x100 team clocked in at 42.57 on Saturday. Meanwhile, their runner-up finish marks UCHS' best state performance since 2019 — Zoe Sanchez's 3200M State title.

Drew Charter took home first in the 4x100 at 42.26, and Landmark Christian placed third at 42.92.

In other events, Whitehead placed fourth in the 200M race with a time of 21.65, trailing third-place Christopher Swint (21.61) of Davidson Fine Arts, runner-up Simeon Adams (21.43) of Drew Charter and winner Austin McGee (21.38) of Athens Academy.

McGee took home the State title in the 100M event, where Whitehead (10.86) placed fifth, with a time of 10.55. Adams came in second at 10.58, Booker T. Washington's Kamren Warren (10.64) was third and Swint (10.79) placed fourth. Neal finished in eighth place at 10.97.

On the girls' side, Lola Hunter came in fifth in the 3200M race with a time of 11:44.44. Athens Academy's Maya Davis took home gold



Union County's 4x100 relay team (third team from left) matched the program's best finish in a boys' track and field event since 1974. The team consists of seniors Jonah Kluth, JT Neal, Taylor Whitehead and sophomore Tyler Parler. Senior Zander Rotko (not pictured) also competed on the 4x100 squad, helping Union County qualify for the State Championships during the Class AA State Sectional meet.

at 11:15.29, Fannin County's Lindsey Holloway (11:22.01) was second, Karli Sams of Fannin placed third at 11:29.04 and Savannah Arts' Leah Nyce (11:35.40) came in fourth.

Hunter placed seventh in the 1600M race at 5:28.79 behind sixth-place Anna Griffin (5:27.72) of Davidson Fine Arts. Davis earned gold with a

time of 5:02.99, while Fannin's Holloway and Sams placed second and third, respectively, with times of 5:14.77 and 5:18.00.

The girls' 4x800 relay team of Hunter, Ellie Adams, Noel Hyatt and Hannah Kazmierzak finished seventh at 10:34.22. Fannin came in first with a time of 9:46.00, pulling

away late from second-place Athens Academy (10:02.02).

Jack Wilson's throw of 130 feet, 9 inches ended up eighth in the discus behind State Champion Jerimias Heard's (Model) 161-11. Fannin's Cooper Born was third at 141-3; Banks County's Austin Camp placed fourth at 139; East Jackson's Jacob Collins

was fifth at 138-4.

Other Union County athletes who competed in the prelims but didn't qualify for the finals were Sofia Foster (shot put), Ava Lloyd (200M), Neal (200M), Nomi Nelson (triple jump) and the girls' 4x400 relay team.

The 4x100 finish marks the highest finish by UCHS in

a men's track event since the program restarted in 2014.

Other Panthers to log a top-three at state since 2014 are: Emma Garrison (second in 800M) in 2016; Sanchez (first in 3200M, second in 1600M) in 2019; Luke Gambrell (third in 3200) in 2019; Noah Underwood (third in shot put) in 2021.



Senior Jonah Kluth leaves the starting block during the first leg of Union's 4x100 runner-up finish. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Lola Hunter during the first leg of the 4x800 championship. In all, Hunter logged three top-seven State finishes. Photo/Todd Forrest



Seniors Taylor Whitehead (L) and JT Neal (R) cross the finish line 5th and 8th, respectively, in the 100M State Championship. Photo/Todd Forrest

Gilbert scores hole-in-one



Blairsville's Old Union Golf Course congratulates 13-year-old Peyton Gilbert of Waynesville, NC on his recent ace at the Par 3 6th hole.

Union County Recreation Department Meeks Park Pool 2024 Information

Pool Parties

The Union County Recreation Department will begin taking reservations for pool parties on Monday, May 13th at 8 a.m. for UC Residents only. We require you to be here in person May 13th to reserve a pool party, as many people are wanting the same days. After May 13th, you may call to reserve the pool for a party for the dates we have left. Booking for non-residents will be June 3rd. The fee for pool parties is \$160. This includes use of the splash pad, pool, and 2 lifeguards for up to 40 people in the water. You must pay a non-refundable fee of \$25 the day you book your party. Parties are Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m. beginning, 6/1 and ending 8/6 then only weekends 8/10, 8/11, 8/17, 8/18, 8/24, 8/25.

Swimming Lessons

Swimming lessons will be offered at Meeks Park Pool. Group lessons will be provided for ages 3-12. Sessions last 1 hour, 4 days a week, 8 a.m. -9 a.m. Fee \$65 per child. You MUST register in person at the

Union County Sports Center. SPACE IS LIMITED!

Dates of Lessons:

June 3rd - 6th (ages 3-5) Parent/Guardian required to be in the pool with child. June 10th-13th (ages 3-5) Parent/Guardian required to be in the pool with child. June 17th-20th (ages 3-5) Parent/Guardian required to be in the pool with child. June 24th - 27th (ages 6-9). July 8th-11th (ages 10-12).

Pool Passes

Family Passes and individual passes will be available for purchase at the Union County Recreation Department beginning May 13th. Prices are as follows: Resident of UC Single Membership \$70. Resident of UC Family Membership up to 5 people in the household \$130. Non-Resident of UC Single Membership \$80. Non-Resident of UC Family Membership up to 5 people in the household \$155. For each additional person added on to membership after 5 is \$25.

Gate fee is \$5 per person. Children 5 and under are free. 706-439-6074. NC May 15 2024

Spring Football: Dockrey handed keys to Panthers' new-look offense

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County football answered its biggest question during spring practice, but more remain as the Panthers prepare for summer workouts ahead of the Aug. 16 season opener at Gilmer.

Rising junior Cade Dockrey enters the summer at QB-1 after triumphing in the spring quarterback battle over rising sophomore Chetley Cox and rising freshman Kamden Kendrick.

"Cade is going to run the show," Union County head coach Michael Perry said. "That's not a knock on Chetley, but Cade is so dynamic in the run game that he's going to really help our offense. He did a lot of good things for us in the spring but we still have a long way to go."

However, Coach Perry added he expects Cox to be a significant contributor this fall on both sides of the ball at wide receiver and safety.

As for the offense, expect some changes in personnel and schemes this fall following heavy graduation losses at the skill positions. Panther fans will no longer see the no-huddle, hurry-up offense that lit up north Georgia scoreboards over the last 20 years as Union County embraces a more conservative approach.

"It's going to look a lot different compared to what we've been," Perry said. "We're going to have a lot of guys playing both ways, so offensively, we're going to be huddling and running the clock. We're going to be a run-first



Rising junior Cade Dockrey was named the starting QB during the second and final week of spring practice. Photo/Todd Forrest

offense. If everyone is healthy, you can expect a lot more multiple backs and multiple tight end sets. We're just trying to get our best guys on the field."

Rising senior Connor Schuknecht will handle the bulk of the carries in the backfield, along with rising sophomore Bentley Rich, who stood out during the spring.

"Bentley had a very good spring, he showed a lot of maturity and did some good things for us," Perry said. "Connor will get most of the snaps at running back with Bentley backing him up."

Additionally, the em-

phasis on the ground attack stems from a talented O-line, which Perry complimented as a strength of the offensive unit.

The Panthers return three starters up front, led by all-region guard and rising senior Kaden Combs. Union also returns its two freshman tackles from its 2023 Sweet 16 run, Easton Shumaker and Jaxon Totherow. Rising junior Kye Burnett saw a few spot starts in 2023, as did rising senior Beau Webster. Unfortunately, Webster is dealing with a knee injury that places his 2024 status in limbo.

Others vying for playing



Rising senior Maddox Young pulls down a deep ball from Cade Dockrey during the final week of UCHS spring football. Photo/Todd Forrest

time in the trenches are rising sophomore Alex Godinez and rising junior Trent Webster.

The Panthers might not air it out as much this fall, but that doesn't mean there aren't potential game breakers on the outside.

Rising senior Maddox Young showed out during the spring after returning to the football program. Rising junior Tyler Parker will take on a larger role after catching four passes for 75 yards and a TD last fall.

The void at the tight end spot, previously manned by Tyler Grasty, could be filled

by rising seniors Dusty Aaron and Ethan Lester, who will play both ways after their breakout 2023 defensive seasons. But Aaron suffered a knee injury in the spring that could cost him some prep time this summer, and Lester is still recovering from a pair of injuries suffered last November at Rockmart.

Elsewhere on defense, Perry expects Combs, Shumaker and Totherow to fill in the gaps on the D-line and at linebacker.

"I'm really proud of those guys," he said. "They played both ways [this spring], and I know they aren't used

to that. But like I said, we're trying to get the best guys on the field."

Combs and Shumaker are the favorites to take over as the inside linebackers. Lester and Schuknecht are both returning starters and will play on the outside. Rich is also competing for playing time at outside linebacker, as is returning safety Braden Plott.

"Braden is going to start, obviously," Perry said. "We just don't know if it's going to be at safety or linebacker, but right now, it looks like linebacker."

"Connor and Bentley will play the other outside linebacker because they are kind of the same player," he continued. "So if Connor is gassed, Bentley will be ready to go."

With Dockrey moving to quarterback, the Panthers lose an all-region safety in their secondary, and Perry made it crystal clear his signal caller will not see any action on the defensive side.

"Our quarterback is the one guy that will not play both ways," he said.

Rising junior Daniel McPhee and rising sophomore Paxon Legatt lead the way at cornerback, while Cox, Young and rising senior Carter Deal compete for the safety positions.

On special teams, rising sophomore Grant Smith is the current front-runner to handle kicking duties.

The Panthers are off for the remainder of May before returning to the field in June. Union County begins its summer 7-on-7 sessions by hosting Andrews, NC on June 6.



Seniors Connor Schuknecht (top) and Dusty Aaron (B) will play on both sides of the ball. Photo/Todd Forrest



Top: Head coach Michael Perry. Bottom: Union lineman going through spring drills Photo/Todd Forrest

Track and Field: Taylor Whitehead takes two UCHS records to Reinhardt

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County track-and-field star Taylor Whitehead, the 100M and 200M school record holder, signed with Waleska's Reinhardt University on Tuesday, April 30.

Whitehead is coming off a remarkable 2024 senior season where he earned three top-five finishes at the Class AA State Championships, including a runner-up performance as the third leg of Union's 4x100 relay team.

And in a sport where speed and success are synonymous, Reinhardt's promptness proved vital in landing Whitehead.

"Reinhardt was the first to reach out [to me], and I really appreciated that," he said. "I took a few visits and they took me in really quick. They knew I could fit in somewhere on the team and I really trust their coaching. They are in the NAIA division, and I'm excited about what they can do to help me grow as an athlete."

According to Whitehead, Reinhardt expects him to compete in the 100M, 200M, 4x100 and 4x400 events.

Whitehead was also a starting cornerback on the



Senior Taylor Whitehead with his dad, Jim, during the signing day ceremony. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers' football team, where assistant track coach Paul McBride serves as wide receivers coach.

"I recruited him [to track], and since his sophomore year, his 200 times have dropped from 25.2 seconds to 22.9 last year and 21.7 [this year]," McBride said. "A lot of this is because of Taylor's hard work and because we have a new track, so the kids aren't practicing on asphalt. But it's obvious he's put in the work to cut his times down to one of

the fastest in the state in the 200 and the 100.

"I just want to add that it doesn't start and stop with [his athleticism]. He's helped every other kid along the way. Whether it's with the [starting] blocks or form, we trust him enough to say 'Taylor, show them what to do.'"

UCHS Athletic Director Mandy Hunter echoed McBride's comments.

"He has really developed into a great leader on the football team and the track team,"



Taylor Whitehead with track and field coaches Beau Kelley (L) and Paul McBride (R). Photo/Todd Forrest

she said. "He is a great example for others to follow, and I think that will carry him a long way. We expect great things. Not only on the track but academically."

Whitehead chose Reinhardt over Western Carolina, Oglethorpe University and others.

"I wanted to stay pretty close to home so I can visit family and see friends," he said. "I know some people that go [to

Reinhardt], so that helps. The campus is really beautiful, and I just loved everything about it."

In closing, the senior thanked his dad, his coaches and his friends for their support.

UCHS Assistant Athletic Director Thomas Nelson added, "I'm extremely proud of him, and he's the fastest kid to ever step through the doors of Union County High School."

The praise didn't end there as head coach Michael Perry offered a few words of encouragement to Whitehead.

"It was a pleasure to coach you," Perry said. "You went through a lot of adversity with injuries and all that, but you are one of the most dependable kids and one of the better kids that we've had. No matter what, we knew we could always count on you."