

Sports

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Turner returns home, joins UCHS strength & conditioning program

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Incoming strength and conditioning coach Curtis Turner has rubbed Howard's Rock in 'Death Valley' and followed the Ramblin' Wreck onto Historic Grant Field, but now the Blairsville native is 100% "Union United."

"Home is home," Turner said. "My mom and dad's number in my phone still says 'home,' and Union County has always meant something to me. I've always thought I might come back and coach at Union County, but this felt like the right time."

"I know 'Union United' is the slogan right now at the school, and that's an incredible mindset that I want to be a part of," he said. "In Atlanta, I had my circle of friends within the athletic department, but at the end of the day, everyone clocks out and goes home 30 minutes away. But when I'm home, it feels like the support is there and people have your back."

Turner credits long-time friend and Union County School Superintendent John Hill as a significant component of his return. Although, Turner admits the rapidly-changing landscape of college sports played a role in his move to high school.

"Knowing John Hill was a big factor in it and he gave me a heads up on the possibility and that really got my mind spinning," Turner said. "As far as college athletics, I've accomplished most of my major goals, and with the way college athletics are moving right now, it just feels like something is missing. [College athletics are] evolving really quickly and I'm



Blairsville's Curtis Turner during pregame warmups ahead of the Miami at Georgia Tech football game in November 2018. Turner has coached at Georgia State since 2019. Photo/Todd Forrest

at the point where I can be considered old school, and I'm not excited about evolving with it."

Turner's new job officially commences June 5, following the Georgia High School Association's mandatory dead week of May 29. Initially, he expects to work with the football team and other fall sports.

"The high school setting is incredible," Turner said when asked what thrills him about training high school athletes. "Some of the best coaches I've ever been around were in a high school setting. And what makes the Union County job unique is -- that's where I cut my teeth on

training and fell in love with the idea of being a strength coach. And when I've been on campus [at UCHS], I see students who remind me of myself and that excites me."

During the school year, he will join the UCHS physical education department alongside current weight-training coaches Corey Garrett and Thomas Nelson.

"I'll be considered a health and physical education teacher and strength coach, but the strength and conditioning and weight room side is where I'll spend most of my time," he said. "I'll be partnering with Corey Garrett and Thomas Nel-

son for the majority of my time."

"I'll also be available outside of normal school hours to provide opportunities for students to come and train, particularly in the summer. We hope to make it more of a year-round process for the student-athletes and the students in general. I'm just as excited about working with the non-athletes as I am about the athletes."

After two-plus decades of training Division I college athletes and assisting their goals of reaching the professional ranks, Turner provided some insight into what his background brings to the high school level.

"With my experience, I've seen what it takes to get to the college level, and I think that will be a big help to the [UCHS] athletes," he said. "But they need to realize that a scholarship isn't guaranteed, and I'm just providing time and opportunity. It's up to the athletes to fight for it, make the sacrifices and put in the work, and when you do that, [good things will] happen naturally. Hopefully, I can push them to do things they didn't think they were capable of on their own. That's the essence of a strength coach and what excites me about [working at] the high school level."

The reaction to Turner's return has been positive, and being around Blairsville has awarded the 1998 UCHS graduate the chance to rekindle relationships with family and friends.

"I know my family is excited about me being back until I get on their nerves at some point," Turner joked. "But seriously, that's something that excites me about coming back is being able to reconnect with old friends and being somewhere that feels like a community."

Turner's resume as a strength and conditioning coach began at Clemson, where he served as a student assistant before following his mentor John Sisk to Vanderbilt. Turner left Nashville for Midtown Atlanta in 2013, remaining at Georgia Tech through 2018-19, eventually moving downtown to Georgia State in 2019-20.

Turner starred on the Panthers' offensive line under former coaches Chip Kell and Brian Allison. He was also a member of the UCHS baseball team under then-head coach Larry Turner.

As a junior lineman during year one under Coach Allison, Curtis Turner's 1996 Panthers team finished 5-5, marking the program's first non-losing season since 1988. From 1995 to 1997, Curtis Turner played alongside future Georgia Tech quarterback Robby Brown.

During his time on The Flats, Curtis Turner coached Towns County Indian-turned-Yellow Jackets kicker Shea Underwood while working under ex-head coach Paul Johnson. Curtis Turner also coached former UCHS standout Blake Gowder at Vandy.

Perry 'pleased' with injury-free spring despite questions at OL and LB

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For 90 minutes on Thursday evening, Union County football treated the community to a brief fall preview during the Purple-Gold spring scrimmage game.

Overall, head coach Michael Perry considered the two weeks of spring practice a success after escaping without any significant injuries. Additionally, a few individual performances stood out to the coaching staff, most notably for Perry, it was the usual suspects that shined, rising-senior receiver Jensen Goble and rising-senior quarterback Caiden Tanner.

"No injuries was the biggest positive [of the spring], I was very pleased with that," Perry said. "And I thought Jensen Goble had a really good day [during the scrimmage], and Caiden Tanner did some really good things as usual."

"[Rising-senior tight end] Tyler Grasty had a very good spring. [Rising-sophomore] Cade Dockrey has proven he can play just about any position for us and is going to be a real weapon for us on both sides of the ball. And [rising-senior linebacker] Seth Rutan, he had a great, great spring. He's played a little running back, and we weren't able to get him the ball during the game on Thursday, but I know he's going to be one of our main guys defensively."

Two areas of concern remain at linebacker and along the offensive line, where the



Rising-senior Jensen Goble with a TD catch in front of rising-freshman Chetley Cox. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers leaned heavily on incoming freshmen Jackson Totherow at left tackle and right guard Easton Shoemaker during the spring.

"We've lost some really good players at those positions, but we have all summer to try and sort that out," Perry said. "Also, losing two guys like Wilson Walker and Sam

Page in the secondary will be tough to replace."

Behind Tanner, the quarterback position saw both backups, Dockrey and incoming freshman Chetley Cox, each throwing a touchdown pass on Thursday. Cox also spent time at safety, picking off a Dockrey pass early in the game.

Union County will take some time away before kicking off three-day-a-week summer workouts on Tuesday, June 6. The Panthers will host 7-on-7 action on three consecutive Thursdays beginning June 8.

"I'm really pleased where we're at right now," Perry said. "We still have a long way to go with putting



Rising-senior defensive end Lane Lance (wearing No. 88 this year) applies pressure during the spring scrimmage. Photo/Todd Forrest

in a new defense. I know those defensive coaches, [new defensive coordinator coach Mark] Wade and [first-year defensive backs coach Justin] Byers are working extremely hard to put in our new defense."

UCHS will also add Athyn Thurmond to the defensive staff this summer. A stand-

out at East Hall through 2018, Thurmond played defensive line at Cumberland University after starring on both sides of the trenches for the Vikings.

Thurmond faced the Panthers three times during his high school career, beginning with a pair of 7-AAA meetings in 2016 and 2017, and one non-region contest in 2018.

Track: Girls 4x800 take fourth, Hunter places sixth in two events

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Powder Springs - Union County Track and Field collected three top-six finishes during last weekend's Class AA State Championships at McEachern High School.

The girls' 4x800 relay team turned in a fourth-place performance with a season-best time of 10 minutes, 28.54 seconds. Elsewhere, freshman Lola Hunter logged a pair of sixth-place finishes in the 1600 and 3200M races.

The relay team crossed the line eight seconds back of third-place Landmark Christian (10:20.16) and 17 ticks back of runner-up Fannin County (10:11.52). State champion Athens Academy ran away from the field, posting a season-best time of 9:59.65.

At 5:23.86, Hunter turned in a career-best in the 1600M race, barely missing a top-five finish by less than a second to Savannah Arts' senior Ava Coffey (5:22.99).

Fannin sophomore Lindsey Holloway was fourth at 5:22.10; Athens Academy senior Sarah Harrison earned a top-three with a time of 5:20.45; Landmark sophomore Shari Brown placed second at 5:17.24, and Athens Academy sophomore Maya Davis pulled away at 5:04.73.

Coffey dominated the 3200M event, taking home first with a time of 11:38.15. Holloway finished seven seconds back (11:45.24), and North Cobb Christian senior Elizabeth Shaylor rounded out the top three at 11:57.55.



Union County 4x800 girls relay starter Hannah Kazmierzak passes the baton. Photo/Todd Forrest

Davis came in fourth at 11:57.81, while Harrison finished 10 seconds ahead of Hunter (12:12.99) in third, clocking in at 12:02.56. Hunter ended the race nearly 16 seconds better than seventh-place Molly Smith (12:28.38) of Athens Academy.

The guys' 4x400 relay team placed seventh with a season-best 3:28.24, less than a half-second back of sixth-place Athens Academy (3:27.78), and under 1.5 seconds behind fourth. South Atlanta came in fifth with a time of 3:26.90, and BEST Academy was fourth at

3:26.78.

The 4x400 team earned a spot in the finals via a 3:28.69 in the prelims.

Senior Mattie Brookshire finished 13th in the shot put with a distance of 32 feet, 1.5 inches.

Cooper Kluth's season-best 16.26 in the 110M hurdles was good enough for 13th in the prelims but a half-second short of earning a spot in the finals.

Zander Rotko placed 15th in the 400M prelims at 52.88 - more than 2.6 seconds off a spot in the State finals.



Lola Hunter finished as the top freshman 1600M and 3200M runner in Class AA during last weekend's State Championships at McEachern High School. Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Ashcraft signs with Piedmont after rewriting Union Co. record book



Kaylee Ashcraft (center) with family during her signing day ceremony at Union County High School on Friday, May 5. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County outside hitter Kaylee Ashcraft holds nearly every school record imaginable for aces, plus the single-season kills mark, and now the outgoing senior is taking her skills to Demorest as a member of Piedmont University's volleyball program's incoming freshman class.

Ashcraft's journey to Piedmont began when she started researching potential colleges that would allow her to continue her volleyball career.

"I wanted to stay close to home, but also have a little distance, so Piedmont was a good choice," she said. "So I sent an email to the coach, and he emailed me back and asked me to come down to meet the team and see the campus."

Ashcraft quickly fell in love with the campus, particularly the academic side.

"I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do, but as of now, my major is applied health science," she said.

After moving to Union County from Utah ahead of the 2021-22 school year, Ashcraft

joined the fifth-year volleyball program fresh off its first area championship and final-four appearance.

As a junior in 2021, Ashcraft exploded onto the scene with a school-record 86 aces while finishing second on the team with 113 kills. Union County went on to finish unbeaten in Area play for the second straight year, advancing all the way to the Class AA Final Four.

"I had the joy of being the welcoming coach for Kaylee and it says a lot about her character for a player with her talent to come in and not utterly disrupt the team dynamic," said former coach Anna Chapman, who coached Ashcraft during her junior year. "She came out for the first time, and I remember her taking her first swing and me and [assistant coach Seth] Merritt were all like, 'okay. She's good."

"But I think her character is something that everyone talks about for good reason. She came in as a supporting player, and not somebody trying to steal the show. That was huge."

"I think having such a loving team played into it," Ashcraft said when asked

about first arriving on campus. "We became like a family and there was no pressure on any one individual. We all worked together to try and continue that success and get back to another final four.

"I'm just grateful for everyone that has supported me during my time at Union County," she added. "I'm thankful to my parents for always supporting me no matter what, my teammates and all of my coaches."

During her senior campaign, Ashcraft's aces dipped to 55, but her 170 kills shattered former teammate Morgan Fussell's single-season record of 136. Despite only playing two seasons at UCHS, Ashcraft departs just 19 kills shy of Fussell's four-year career mark of 302. However, her 141 career aces are a Union County school record -- broken during her inaugural campaign in 2021.

Ahead of her senior year, first-year head coach Megan Brown arrived at UCHS and immediately started to hear rumblings about the player nicknamed after her former home state.

"This was my first year, but as soon as I got here everyone was telling me, 'Utah, just wait until you see Utah play, you're not going to believe it,'" Brown said. "She truly was probably the most amazing volleyball player I've ever seen."

"They all told me, 'you are going to love her and she's a wonderful person.' She has great values, she's a role model, and she's going to add so much to Piedmont's program. Not just on the volleyball court, but in general, she's a joy to be around. She's fantastic."

Along with her brother Kooper, who recently reached the semifinals with the soccer team, the Ashcrafts are one of the rare sets of UCHS siblings to each play in a final four in different sports.

Baseball: Fleming picks Truett, earns praise from Union Co. coaches, admin



With his family watching, Union County senior Hunter Fleming (second from right) signs a scholarship with Truett-McConnell University on Friday, May 5. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County baseball standout Hunter Fleming inked a scholarship with Cleveland's Truett-McConnell University (TMU) during a signing ceremony at UCHS earlier this month.

"I've known Hunter since he was little, and there hasn't been a better leader for our program in these last four years that signifies everything that we ask for," outgoing UCHS baseball coach Zach Odom said. "He shows up early, he stays late and we never have to repeat ourselves when it comes to Hunter. I know those things will take him much further in life than college baseball will. Truett-McConnell is gaining a great student-athlete."

Fleming landed on Truett's radar after attending a college showcase, prompting the Bears' coaching staff to reach out. However, that initial phone call went unanswered by Fleming, who had a pretty good excuse for letting it go to voicemail.

"I couldn't answer him at first because I was at practice," Fleming said. "But I ended up calling him back and he offered me a spot and said it was mine if I wanted it. After talking it over with the family, we decided it was best that I went there, so I called him back and accepted."

Fleming visited TMU, where the family atmosphere immediately piqued his interest.

"The team, the coach, it all just felt like family," he said. "Everyone was nice, the teachers were nice, it was more like a family than a school. That's what I will miss most about Union County, the friendships and the way it felt like family."

Before earning an offer to Truett, he considered attending Young Harris or Piedmont for

engineering.

"I don't know what I want to major in [at Truett] because they don't offer engineering, so right now I'm focusing on getting more core classes out of the way and go from there and take it one year at a time," Fleming said.

UCHS assistant athletic Thomas Nelson also spoke a few words regarding Fleming.

"I don't know of maybe one or two kids in this school, or in this whole area, that are as nice as this young man," Nelson said. "That carries as much weight to me as any ball, bat, football helmet, glove or anything like that. Whenever someone represents Union County High School, this young man is what I like to see."

UCHS Principal C.T. Hussion added, "I coached Hunter when he was young, and we won the league one year, but you kind of knew back then he was a good person, a good soul, and a pretty good baseball player, too."

The speedy centerfielder departs Union County after leading the 2023 Panthers with 13 walks and finishing a team-best 10-of-12 in the stolen base department.

As a junior in 2022, Fleming logged a .400 on-base percentage and was successful on four of his five steal attempts -- finishing 18 of 21 (86%) over three varsity seasons.

When asked what he would have liked to accomplish at Union County, Fleming replied that he wished the team could have won more games, but looking back, he's satisfied with how his high school career played out.

"A region championship, a playoff series win, all of that," he said, not missing a beat. "We only wanted to do one thing and that's win. But at the end of the day, I wouldn't change anything."

In closing, Fleming thanked God, his family and all his coaches and teammates over the years.

Union County Recreation Department Tackle Football and Cheerleading Classes

Colby Jones
Athletic Director
Austin Brown
Athletic Coordinator
Susan Stalcup
Girls Athletic Coordinator



Registration is now open for tackle football and cheerleading.

Fee: Football \$115/Cheer \$115
NEW this season, KINDERGARTEN-6th grade. Grade you will be going into for the 2023-2024 school year.

Practice will begin mid-July. Season can run to early November. Registration ends May 25th. Late registration with a fee will end June 2nd. Uniform fittings will be June 3rd from 9 AM - 5 PM. You may register online at union-countyga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center, located at 519 Industrial Blvd. 706-439-6074.

Summer Fun Days 2023 at the Union County Recreation Department

- June 6th-8th Golf**
3 PM - 6 PM, Ages 8-17... \$25
- June 12th-14th Pickleball**
5:30 PM - 7:30 PM, Ages 8-15... \$20
- June 20th -22nd Ultimate Frisbee**
4 PM - 7:30 PM, Ages 8-14... \$25
- June 26-28th Dodge Ball**
1 PM - 4 PM, Ages 8-14... \$25
- July 1st and Aug 5th Baseball**
9 am - 1 PM Must be age 7-10 as of 9/1/2023... \$15

Skill levels will range from beginner to advanced. SPACE IS LIMITED and you must register in person at the Union County Recreation Department located at 519 Industrial Blvd. More info will be given at registration. Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions. Our office is open M-F 8 AM - 4:30 PM, closed for lunch 12 PM - 1 PM.