

# Sports

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## Panthers fall on penalty kicks in State Championship

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**MACON** - Eighty minutes of regulation plus 15 minutes of overtime wasn't enough to settle the Class AA State title game between Union County and 7th ranked Thomasville last Friday, May 17 at Mercer University's Five Star Stadium.

Still even at one goal apiece after 95 minutes of edge-of-your-seat action between the two best teams in the state, penalty kicks were needed to determine a champion.

During the penalty kick shootout, freshman MJ Delatte and senior Colby Ives connecting on their shots but 2-for-4 wasn't enough as Thomasville made all four of its attempts to take the PK session by a 4-2 score -- ending the shootout before either team's fifth-and-final attempt.

"You hate to see it go to penalty kicks, you really do, and even the Thomasville coach agreed," Union County head coach Leland Sarrell said following the game. "We were talking about the possibility of it on the way down here and you almost wish you could have co-winners if it goes to PKs."

"You hate to play 95 minutes with kids cramping and putting their hearts and everything on the line only to have it come down to kicks from 12 yards out and all you can do is hope you guess the right way."

Tied at 1-1 at halftime following a Brian Smith goal in minute 14 and Thomasville's equalizer in the 36th minute, neither team was able to find the net thanks to stellar goal keeper play on both sides.

Early in the second half, a diving save by the Bulldogs' senior keeper Marc Davis turned away Smith's bid for the brace and kept the match all square.



The Union County soccer team following its penalty kick shootout loss in the Class AA State Championship game last Friday, May 17 at Mercer University in Macon. The Panthers made history with its win in the Sweet 16, Elite Eight and Final Four -- winning their first playoff game in program history in each of those three rounds. Photo/Todd Forrest

A shot attempt by junior Kobi Robbins missed wide in the 50th minute before Thomasville sent one off the post in the 53rd minute.

Helton answered with an acrobatic save of his own just past the midway point of the second half but moments later the Bulldogs were unable to take advantage of scoring opportunity, sending a shot from point-blank range sailing over the post.

With the heat starting to take its toll on both teams, Helton and his counterpart delivered one last stop during the final 10 minutes to force overtime.

"Both teams had players cramping, we had a player get knocked out with a concussion in the middle of the game, another had his ankle busted up but at the end of the game, you're just proud that your boys are here and have gotten this far."

"When you get this far in the season, heat can be an issue; it was an issue in the last game," Coach Sarrell said. "In this case, we only got three days

off between games so you can't condition. You have one recovery day, one good practice then another recovery day."

"I was very unhappy, and it was simply the luck of the draw, that we didn't get a Saturday game. We had some players banged up but to our credit, I don't think we were the less-fit team tonight. They are from Thomasville, almost in Florida, and they were cramping up too but they're probably used to this kind of weather a lot more than we are."

The first 10 minutes of overtime were relatively quiet until both sides started to press the action realizing a penalty kick shootout was a possibility.

After Helton denied Thomasville the lead in the 90th minute, the Panthers were unsuccessful on what was most likely their best scoring opportunity of the second half.

In the waning moments of the extra session, a Bulldog defender was tagged with a yellow card, awarding Union County a free kick from just beyond the penalty box.

Freshman Kyler Robbins' free kick was turned away but in the ensuing scramble in front of the goal, the ball bounced to Smith but the senior forward's kick rolled wide left.

Penalty kick shootouts are one of the most thrilling spectacles in all of sports. But that's when you come out on top. When you're on the wrong end, especially in a State Championship game, it's one of the most heartbreaking moments you can witness.

"As much as we practice (penalty kicks) and work on them all year, when it comes down to it, it's a little bit of skill and whole lot of chance,"

Coach Sarrell commented regarding the postgame remarks spoken to his distraught squad. "Aaron (Helton) guessed the wrong way and had a tough time on a couple of the PKs. The other keeper guessed the right way and was able to make a couple of saves. It was just tough luck. We tried to remind them of that but it's tough, especially for the seniors. But I asked them one question, 'did you leave it all out there?' If you leave it all out there, there's not much you can do."

"I feel so terrible for (Helton), he is a great PK keeper. I don't think the moment got the better of him but he didn't look like himself and you can say the same thing for our PK takers. I would love to say we gave it our best effort, and we did for 95 minutes, but that was not our best effort on PKs and that's what's so hard to stomach. It just kicks you right in the gut."

"But (Helton) and the seniors are all pretty tore up about this and you just want to hug him and tell him you 'love him' and just say, 'hey man, as a keeper you're not supposed to stop penalty kicks but he's comparing himself to the (Thomasville keeper) who got lucky and guessed right.' I've been telling all my keepers for years that 'your job is to block one and your team should make theirs.' He was put in a situation where he was forced to stop two just to tie it up and that's an impossible situation."

"I'll just keep reminding the young guys of what this feels like and I'll tell the seniors how much I love them and how proud I am of them of the way they fought here today and the way they fought during the entire 11-game winning streak. That's about all you can tell them at

this point."

**Panthers 3, No. 6 Vidalia 0** - Three days prior to taking the field in its first State Championship game appearance, Union County took care of business in the in the Class AA Final Four, handing Vidalia its first shutout of 2019.

Smith got the scoring underway with an unassisted goal in the 16th minute. Both teams continued to fire away with the Indians out-shooting Union 4-3 over the first 20 minutes.

Still leading 1-0, Smith scored his second goal in the 52 minute. Later in the half, with under 15 minutes to play,

Helton came up with an incredible stop to preserve the shutout allowing Kyler Robbins put the match away with a goal in the 70th minute.

The 3-nil win gave Helton and the Panthers back-to-back shutouts for the first time all season. Union County would go on to surrender just one goal over its final three contests -- its lowest three-game stretch of the season.

"I want to thank all of our fans that have traveled to the games and supported us," Sarrell added. "I also have to thank my assistant coaches. I couldn't do this without them."

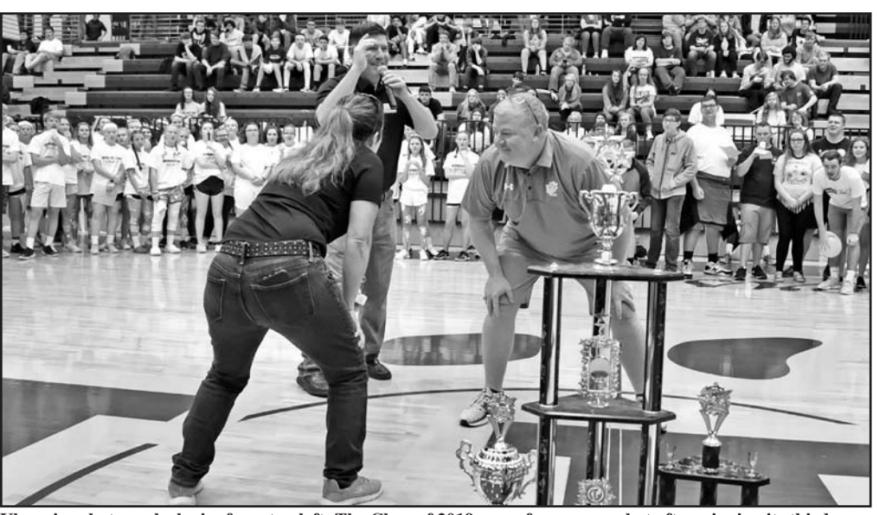


Sophomore keeper Aaron Helton shows off his flexibility and proves why the Panthers don't reach the State Finals without him. During the finals, Helton stole multiple goals from Thomasville. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Brian Smith celebrates his goal during the first half of the state title game. Smith finished with six goals in his final three playoff games. Additional championship game photos on Page 3C. Photos/Todd Forrest

## UCHS Class of 2019 builds dynasty with Ulympics three-peat



Ulympics photos - clockwise from top left: The Class of 2019 poses for a group shot after winning their third straight Ulympics; Principal CT Hussion presents the individual awards; even class sponsors participated in a little friendly competition; The Class of 2019 celebrates immediately hearing its name called as the winner. The Ulympics is a year-long class competition based on academics, athletics, school spirit, attendance, behavior and other factors. Photos by Todd Forrest

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