

Sports

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Football: Panthers make a splash with defensive coordinator hire

Thomas Nelson brings a half dozen state titles and college experience to coaching, admin duties at UCHS

By Todd Forrest
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Incoming Union County defensive coordinator Thomas Nelson is bringing a championship pedigree to his side of the ball in 2021 to complement new head coach Micheal Perry's stellar offensive resume.

Before his first practice with the Purple and Gold on Monday, Nelson spent 15 years coaching his alma mater Murphy (NC) Bulldogs, where he was a part of six North Carolina High School Athletic Association state championships -- five since 2006 as a coach, one as a player in 1991.

Nelson's responsibilities at UCHS aren't limited to guiding the Purple Swarm during the upcoming school year. Additionally, he will serve as the school's assistant athletic director while teaching health, P.E. and weight training. Ultimately, the freedom to take on a more expansive role, both academically and athletically, is what attracted Nelson to Union County.

"I've always heard positive things about the Union County school system, [combined with] the opportunity to work at a larger school and taking a step up to be the assistant athletic director," said Nelson, listing the primary factors in his decision to depart the Tarheel State. "[As athletic director], I hope I'm able to work with the student-athletes that are interested in going on to play sports in college. Hopefully, after [getting settled], I can move on to where I can help all the students that are interested in attending college."

Upon graduating from Murphy in 1993, Nelson continued his football career at Emory and Henry College (E&H) in



A graduate of Murphy (NC) and Emory and Henry College, Thomas Nelson arrives with an impressive resume that includes five state titles as a coach and one as a player. Nelson's duties at UCHS include football defensive coordinator and assistant athletic director roles. Photo/Todd Forrest

Emory, Virginia. After graduating in 1997, he remained in southwest Virginia for another eight years as an assistant coach while working in the Emory and Henry Student Life office. In his latter years at E&H, Nelson taught an Introduction to College Lifestyle class and served as the fitness center director.

During his time at Murphy, Nelson served as head softball coach, the football program's defensive coordinator and its strength and conditioning director.

"At Murphy, I wore a lot of hats, even down to the little things like running the clock at home basketball games," he said. "It's a small community

and you end up doing a lot of different things."

Nelson will always treasure his decade and a half at Murphy, where he's most proud of having the opportunity to better the lives of his hometown's youth.

"Looking back, the fondest part of it is working with people you know in the community and teaching kids that it doesn't matter if you're the biggest or strongest, if you work hard, then hopefully good things will happen and you can develop a work ethic that you can carry [with you]," said Nelson, who moved to Murphy from Asheville, NC at the age of 4.

This week, the Panthers kicked off their summer workouts, where Nelson, who also coaches the secondary, caught his first glimpse of Union County's defensive personnel. Nelson missed Union's spring practice last month to help guide Murphy to its 10th state title.

Over the next 12 weeks, Nelson will attempt to mold the Panthers into his prototypical defense - a disciplined group that plays hard but under control.

"You're not going to win every game, but you can always play with sportsmanship and you can always get after it," he said.

Schematically, Nelson

remarked that he's prepared to diversify the defensive playbook this fall. In recent years, the Panthers' D leaned heavily upon a three-man front line. But according to Nelson, Union County will transition into more 4-3 and 4-2 formations without completely scrapping the three-down linemen looks of the past.

"I watched some [Union County] game film and they did a good job," he said. "Those kids worked hard in the 3-man front and we'll use that some, especially with the way teams pass so much in this [region]. But you have to be able to mix things up, so we'll dabble with some three and four-man

fronts."

Regardless of any potential similarities to his Murphy defenses, from an Xs and Os standpoint, the significant contrast on the offensive side of the ball could ripple over to Nelson's group.

With Perry verifying on day one that the spread offense is here to stay, Nelson will no longer benefit from well-rested defenses courtesy of Murphy's physical ball-control rushing attack. And he's also well aware of the quick turnaround that can result from a spread offense struggling to move the chains, or from one that's scoring too quickly.

"Oh yeah, that's definitely a factor," he said. "But most of the offenses that we face will also resemble college-spread systems, and not many teams simply line-up and smack you in the mouth anymore. Luckily the kids here are already used to [facing no-huddle spread offenses], now it's just a case of me getting used to it."

Nelson expects a bit of a learning curve on the field as he discerns his players' strengths and weaknesses. But most importantly, he aspires to become a positive role model and encourage his guys to develop into upstanding local citizens.

"In year one, I just want to get to know the kids and the community," said the father of two current college athletes. "I hope I can help the seniors go back out into the community as people who aren't getting into trouble and are viewed as respectable young men."

"So far, everyone in the community that I've come into contact with has been very nice and is excited about the change, and I'm excited too," he said. "I just want to thank everyone for everything they've done so far."



Brand new defensive coordinator Thomas Nelson works with the secondary on Monday, June 7 at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium during his first practice with Union County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Benton MacKaye Trail Association hikes for June 7th thru June 14th

The following hikes are sponsored by the Benton MacKaye Trail Association. The current social distancing and health rules are used by hike Leaders.

June 13 (Sunday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors an easy to moderate, 4 miles hike from Ocoee Whitewater Center and see the water release arrive from two miles upriver. Hike leader: Clare Sullivan. For more information, contact HikeleaderCS2@bmta-mail.org.

June 14 (Monday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a 6 mile easy hike on the Lost Creek section of the Benton MacKaye Trail. Dog-Friendly Hike (adult humans may bring a leashed dog). Beautiful walk along Big Lost Creek. Hike Leader: Ken Cissna. For more information, con-

tact hikeleaderKC@bmta-mail.org.

June 19 (Saturday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a moderate 6mile hike on AT/BMT double loop hike west from Three Forks - This covers the lower north flank and top of Rich Mountain. Hike leader George Owen. For more information contact hikeleaderGO@bmta-mail.org.

June 23 (Wednesday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a moderate 5 mile hike in the Gorges State Park near Sapphire, NC. Included Rainbow Falls and Whitewater Falls which are spectacular and one is a 411 foot fall. Good canopy on this trail and fairly high elevation so heat shouldn't be a major issue. Hike Leader Steve Dennison. For more information, contact HikeleaderSD@bmta-mail.org

Hurry - Registration ends at the Union County Recreation Department for Tackle Football and Cheer June 25th!

Fee: Football \$100 / Cheer \$105
Open to upcoming 1st-6th graders for the 2021-2022 school year.

You may register online at unioncountygga.gov or in person at the

Union County Sports Center, located at 519 Industrial Blvd. 706-439-6074



UCRD baseball, softball district tournaments underway this week

Union County a charter member of the MAC, rejoins GRPA for district, state competition

By Todd Forrest
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Local youth sports look a bit different this summer as post-season play opened last week for the Union County Recreation Department (UCRD) baseball and softball teams.

Not only is district and state competition steaming ahead after last summer's cancellations, the UCRD also enters year one of its transition from Dizzy Dean to the Georgia Recreation and Park Association (GRPA).

According to UCRD's Terry Plott, the GRPA move was slated for 2020, but due to last summer's shutdown, the 2021 season will now mark Union's first summer back in the GRPA fold.

After leaving Dixie Youth in the late 1980s, the UCRD remained affiliated with the GRPA for approximately 20 years before spending the last decade with Dizzy Dean Baseball, Inc. Additionally, Union and other local recreation departments from across the tri-state area have combined to form the Mountain Athletic Conference (MAC).

Unaffiliated with the GRPA (and with a few different counties than GRPA's District 7), the MAC spans the five-county Highway 515 corridor -- Pickens County to Towns County -- along with Dawson, Lumpkin and White counties. Copper Basin, Tennessee and Hayesville, North Carolina are members as well.

The recently concluded MAC tournaments allow local teams to pick up additional tournament games while serving as a tune-up for district competition.

Learn to play Pickleball

Free Beginners Classes every Thursday at 6 p.m. (weather permitting). All equipment is provided and there is no need to sign-up... just come. Courts are located on Chase Drive behind the Health Department.

For more info contact: blairsvillepickleball@gmail.com.

At last week's MAC baseball and softball tournaments, the 12-and-under and 14-and-under baseball teams took home first place prior to the upcoming GRPA District 7 tournaments.

The 14U squad clinched the MAC title over the weekend by defeating Fannin County 6-0 in a pool-play rematch (that Fannin won 8-3 on Thursday).

Hosted by Dawson County, the Panthers kicked off tournament play Friday by clubbing Gilmer 16-3. In the second game of the day-one doubleheader, Union took care of Dawson 10-2.

In other action, the 12U Panthers thumped Fannin County 10-2 to claim the MAC championship on Sunday.

Earlier in the tournament, Union blitzed Copper Basin 11-2 on the heels of a 13-5 rout of Hayesville to wrap up pool play. The Panthers also claimed a 6-3 pool victory over Fannin.

The 10U baseball team lost a pair of heartbreakers to Fannin and Hayesville by scores of 6-5 and 10-9, respectively. They were eliminated in a 13-8 loss to Gilmer.

Meanwhile, a 12-9 loss to Lumpkin eliminated the 10U softball team. The 10U district softball tourney opens Thursday, June 17 at Jackson County vs. the Dawson County-Jackson County winner.

The 10U baseball squad opens district action vs. Jackson County on Wednesday at 8 p.m. in Gainesville.

The 12U baseball team opens vs. the Jackson County-Madison County winner on Thursday at 6 p.m. in Madison County. The championship game is slated for 10 a.m. Saturday.

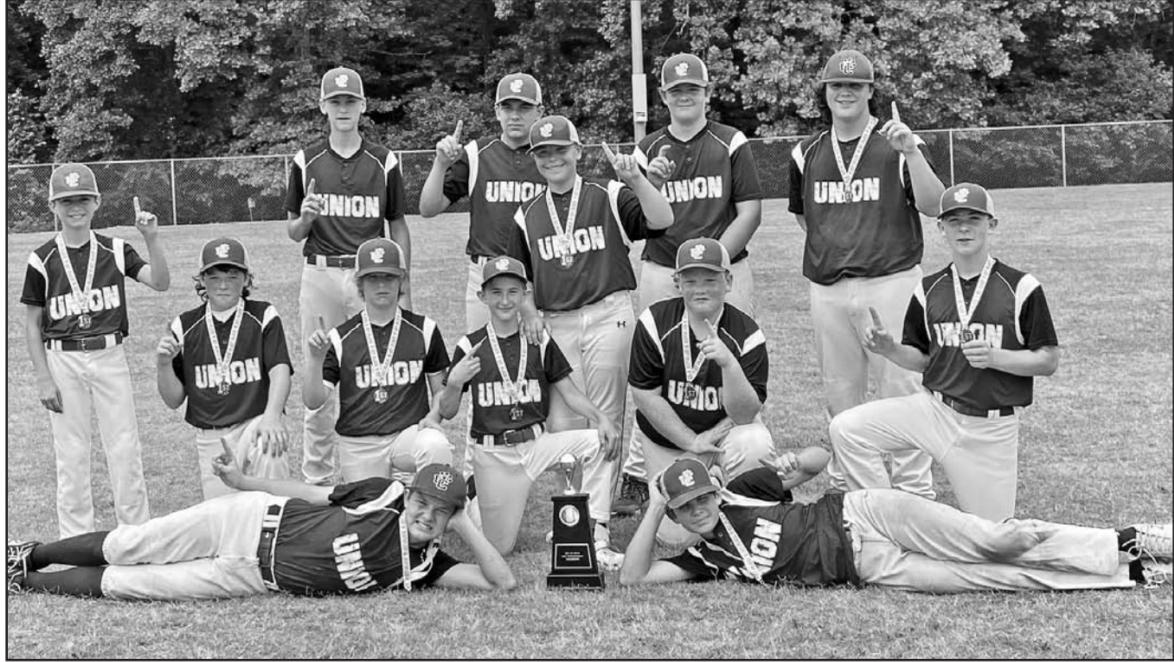
The 14U baseball tournament begins Thursday at 8 p.m. at Rock Creek in Dawsonville. Union will meet the winner of Towns County vs. Jackson County in round one. The title game is 11 a.m. Saturday.

The UCRD could not field a 12U softball team this summer.

Expected GRPA State sites are Jeff Davis County for 10U and 14U baseball. Tifton hosts the 12U baseball tournament; Rockmart is the 10U softball site.



The 12U baseball team finished first at last week's MAC tournament. The 12U district begins Thursday at Madison County. Photo/submitted



The 14U baseball team finished first at last week's MAC tournament. The 14U District tourney starts Thursday at Dawson County. Photo/submitted

Old Union welcomes 57 players for global Women's Golf Day event

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Last Tuesday, June 1 marked the worldwide Women's Golf Day (WGD) with Blairsville's Old Union Golf Course welcoming 57 female golfers that morning as one of the event's featured locations.

As the Peach State's lone WGD participating golf course located north of Interstate-985, Old Union attracted 35 newcomers from across north Georgia for the 18-hole tournament marking the occasion.

Catered by Chick-fil-A, the tournament featured prizes for the longest drive and closest to the pin competitions, as well as putting and chipping contests. Winners included Connie Dockery and Pam Hertrick - chipping; Jinna Wheeler - putting.

A special thank you goes to Karen Mussoline and Cynthia Panter of the Old Union Women's Golf Association (OUWGA), added Old Union General Manager Cameron Forrest.

For further details and OUWGA membership in-



The Women's Golf Day tournament at Old Union brought out the competitive drive in many of the participating players. Photo/Todd Forrest on site Tuesday offering lessons, and former UCHS stand-out and Columbus State golfer Megan Rowe assisted with tee shots on the ninth hole.

to engage, empower, and support women and girls through golf. As the fastest-growing female golf development initiative, the one-day, four-hour event, has now taken place at more than 900 locations in 68 countries since its inception in 2016 while introducing thousands of new golfers to the sport.

Women's Golf Day allows women to explore various options in their community including local facilities, lessons, leagues and other ways to get involved in golf. All vendors, teachers and other local golf resources will provide materials to engage the female golfer.

Women's Golf Day is unique, there is nothing like it in sports - a one-day sporting and community celebration event that unites women through golf across the globe for 24 hours straight, transcending race, religion, language, geography, or economic status, the website continued.

For additional info, you may visit www.womensgolfday.com.

Featured WGD sponsors include Titleist, FootJoy, Callaway, GolfTown and PGA Tour Superstore.

Union County 4-H Savannah Challenge Team places second in State Match Memorial Day Weekend

The Union County 4-H Trap, Skeet and Sporting Clays Shotgun Team placed 2nd at the State Match held in Savannah over the Memorial Day Weekend. Over 30 teams and 166 youth competed in Savannah for an opportunity to represent Georgia at the National 4-H Title in Grand Island Nebraska in late June.

Union County had two Senior Teams, and a Junior individual compete. Senior Team 1 finished in 2nd place, and Team 2 took 9th place honors. Gene Margelli, Head Coach said, "I'm extremely proud of our teams, we have to travel to Gainesville to Cherokee Gun Club, twice a month in order to practice because it's the nearest facility. Many teams practice 2-3 times a week. For us to finish 2nd in the State Match is a true achievement." Shooters began practicing last year in September, shooting every-other weekend, shooting 50 rounds of Trap, 50 rounds of Skeet and 50 rounds of Sporting Clays at the Cherokee Gun Club.



Union County 4-H Savannah Challenge Championship Edwards. Team 2 shooters included Travis Kerr, Caleb Bottinelli, Jeremy Stover and Nathaniel Johnson. Team Highlights: Alex Henson, shot as a Junior Individual and finished among the top 6 Junior Overall Individuals among the 38 competitors in his division. Specifically, in the Skeet division, Alex score was one of the top 3 in the Skeet division. Will Edwards shot 95 in the Skeet division, shooting two perfect rounds of 25, Hunter Young scored 94 with one perfect round of 25. In the Trap division; Caleb Bottinelli, Travis Kerr and Ella Martin all shot a 91, and Phillip Jones shot a 90. In the Sporting Clays division Ella Martin shot a 94 and Phillip Jones a 93. They both came in 2nd and 3rd individually in this division. Special thanks to coaches, Gene Margelli, Shannon Rankin, Stan Lunsford, and referees, Jennifer Kerr, Mike Bottinelli, Jason Henson, Tommy Martin and Gene Edwards who helped throughout the year and the weekend competition.



Hey, fellow Jeepers, come and join us! We're a happy bunch of folks who love getting together to ride, explore, and sometimes get muddy, check out local sights, such as waterfalls and backroad trails and swap stories over a picnic lunch.

Weather permitting, we ride once or twice a week, easy

Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery honors Cory Ingram

Cory Ingram received a 10 year recognition plaque and pin recently awarded by the U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service for his combined years of dedicated service to the American People as a Motor Vehicle Operator at Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery and previously as a Ranger with the U.S. Army.

Hatchery Manager Kelly Taylor stated that, "Cory's years of service are greatly appreciated."

pavement rides, forestry road rides, and more challenging rides such as Beasley's Knob. We participate in various parades around the area and enjoy holiday picnics at Meek's Park. Attending each event is optional; you only do what appeals to you.

If you own a Jeep, come and enjoy life with us. Our meetings are the second Friday of each month at Blairsville Skillet Cafe. Lunch is at 12 PM and the meeting starts at 1 PM. You can also review our event calendar and check out some of our recent rides on our website, www.blueridgemountain-jeepers.com.



Cory Ingram