

# Sports

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## Softball: Mitchell talks upcoming season, summer workouts

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Not unlike the rest of Union County High School's fall sports programs, the Lady Panthers softball team is making the best of a difficult situation as they participate in limited summer workouts ahead of the Aug. 7 season opener.

With questions still lingering around the 2020 softball season, Union County head coach Stephen Mitchell and staff have formulated a backup plan in the event regular practices are unable to resume in the next week or two. According to Mitchell, if the Georgia High School Association lifts its current restrictions on student-athletes following the current dead week (June 29-July 5), his Lady Panthers expect to compete in Franklin County's Summer League beginning July 14.

"My staff has done an excellent job helping me prepare for the unknown," Mitchell said. "We've developed multiple plans and scenarios for the multiple situations that could arise. We feel like no matter what gets thrown at us, we will be prepared. Regardless of whether



Union County head coach Stephen Mitchell gives instructions to his team during June base path drills at the high school. Photo/Todd Forrest

or not high schools receive the green light to resume normal athletic activities, Mitchell expects the GHSA's decision to come down the pike no later than next week. Unfortunately for the inquiring minds of Union County softball fans,

the timeframe of the verdict is the only query he's confident enough to take a stab at answering. When asked what kind of vibe he's getting locally or from fellow coaches across the state, Mitchell admitted that no one knows what to expect or which way the GHSA is even leaning. "I'm scared to say one way or the other, but I believe we'll get our answer at the end of the dead week," he said. In the meantime, the practice restrictions have allowed the coaching staff to focus on the little things. Without the use of bats and balls, the Lady Panthers' priorities have shifted to base running, defensive footwork, strategy, signs and signals. Mitchell's back-to-basics approach comes on the heels of conditioning and work out programs designed by UCHS boys basketball coach Corey Garrett.

"Coming into the season, we had our acclimation workouts, which Coach (Corey) Garrett did a really good job of putting together for us," Mitchell said. "And as much as I wish we could use bats or balls, working on things like baserunning has really been a blessing in disguise. During the first week, we were able to fine-tune our baserunning." In the second week, the Lady Panthers began honing their bunt coverages and other defensive details. "We couldn't field or throw, but we could focus on where they need to be, where they should rotate and their footwork," Mitchell said. "A big part of playing defense, in my opinion, is done with your feet, so this allowed us to watch their footwork and make sure they were in the right position. And I'll be honest with you, it has gone very well."

Luckily for Mitchell, his Lady Panthers return a plethora of experience from last year's Class AA Sweet 16 squad, most notably, a senior battery of Region 8-AA Pitcher of the Year Trinity Queen and First Team All-Region catcher Hannah Patton. Behind them are six additional underclassmen that made significant contributions in 2019, including rising juniors Lexi Sisum and Emma Roxbury - both earned all-region nods last year. Other returning starters include rising juniors Ansley Collins, Caley Davis and Rebekah Kelley.

are chomping at the bit to get on the field. They've worked really hard for the last two years and now they're ready to contribute."

With the GHSA's realignment shakeup, the schedule will look a little different this year with only four teams in Region 8-AA. Gone are Monticello, Oglethorpe County, Putnam County and Social Circle. Meanwhile, the only new addition to the region is Riverside Military Academy, a boys-only school that doesn't participate in softball. However, RMA recently announced they were canceling all fall sports due to COVID-19.

Leftover in 8-AA are the defending Class AA State Champion Banks County, along with Elbert County, Rabun County and Union.

With only four softball teams in the region, everyone plays each other twice (home and away, e.g., basketball). According to Mitchell, UCHS hasn't been forced to pick up many games since region opponents only played once in years past. However, when it comes to scheduling non-region games, Mitchell is keeping it local, adding Fannin County and White County to the 2020 slate.

"I'm a big proponent of playing teams close by," he said. "It's great for local rivalries, it's great for travel and it's great for revenue. I'm hoping we can continue this tradition because we like playing those teams."

The coaching staff also saw some minor tweaks as Carissa Owenby moves over from UCMS to serve as a high school assistant. Robby Roxbury will also serve as an assistant this fall, although it's unclear in what capacity. Unfortunately, long-time UCHS assistant Mark Vaughan will not be a member of the Lady Panthers staff in 2020.

Finally, former UCHS head coach Jessica Stewart (2006-2017) will replace Owenby at the helm of the middle school program.

"Some of those juniors



Rising-senior Trinity Queen runs to first base. Photo/Todd Forrest

## College signing: Zoe Sanchez - Mercer

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Three-time State Champion Zoe Sanchez will attend Mercer University this fall to run track and cross country.

Sanchez chose the Macon school after her senior track-and-field season was cut short due to COVID-19 fears. The defending Class AA State Champion in the 3200-meter event, and runner-up in the 1600-meter, Sanchez was denied the opportunity to finish her UCHS career with five state titles.

During the fall, Sanchez picked up her second-straight Class AA Cross Country State title, just nine days removed from recording consecutive Region 8-AA Championships.

Since joining UCHS cross country as a freshman, Sanchez finished as her team's No. 1 runner all four years. Unfortunately, Sanchez missed her shot at a cross-country three-peat with Union County's decision to move up to Class AAA during her first two years. As a sophomore in 2017, Sanchez's time in the Class AAA State meet would have been good enough for first place at the AA level.

As a result, the younger Sanchez cut her teeth at the AAA-level, allowing her to dominate Class AA cross country as a junior and senior. In 2018, Sanchez crossed the finish line with a time of 20 minutes, 4 seconds - more than 50 seconds better than second place. A year later, she clocked in at 20:06 - nearly 30 seconds ahead of the nearest competitor.

Her 2019 track-and-field state title in the 3200M came by eight seconds over second-place Austin Perez of Bleckley County. In the 1600M race, Sanchez finished second - six seconds back of Perez.

Last week the North Georgia News spoke with Sanchez about missing out on the track-and-field season and her odds of graduating with five state titles. She also discussed her college choices, her ath-



Zoe Sanchez on the medal stand in November following her second cross country State title. Photo/Todd Forrest

letic, academic and career goals plus much more.

NGN: What was your reaction when you learned your senior year was canceled and you wouldn't get a chance to win another championship?

ZS: My first reaction was to cry for about a week. But seriously, it was definitely emotional for me. Not because of the state championship but because of how hard myself and everyone on the team had worked. We had the best team that we've had since I started running track and I was excited to see how far we could go. I know we would've taken a whole lot of people to State this year.

NGN: I'll bet not seeing your friends every day was tough on you too.

ZS: It was. It was very tough. We even came up with our own workouts, but we weren't able to get together because of the guidelines. It would've been bad to get arrested just for running on the track or something.

NGN: How confident were you individually? Where were your times compared to last year? Despite only a handful of meets, how did you feel about the track season?

ZS: I could see ahead of time that the season was probably going to be canceled, which affected my motivation. It was just a roller coaster of emotion around that time. But I feel like I had become stronger at shorter distances, which hurt my long-distance times, which kind of scared me. But it was also very early in the season, so I had plenty of time to get my times down.

NGN: Having a cross country and a 3200 title in your pocket, did you place additional emphasis on the 1600 event this year?

ZS: Yes, I did have my sights set on it. I've never preferred the 1600, I've always preferred the 3200, but I was definitely excited to see how that would play out at State

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## College signing: Andelin Hill - YHC

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Union County hardwood standout Andelin Hill is staying close to home - taking her talents to the Enchanted Valley as a member of the Young Harris College women's basketball program.

A three-year starter and four-year contributor at UCHS, Hill is the second member of the 2019-20 Region 8-AA Champions to sign at the next level, joining Brenau's Kait McCarter. The 6-foot wing posted nine points and six boards a game during her senior campaign while chipping in two assists, two steals and one block a night.

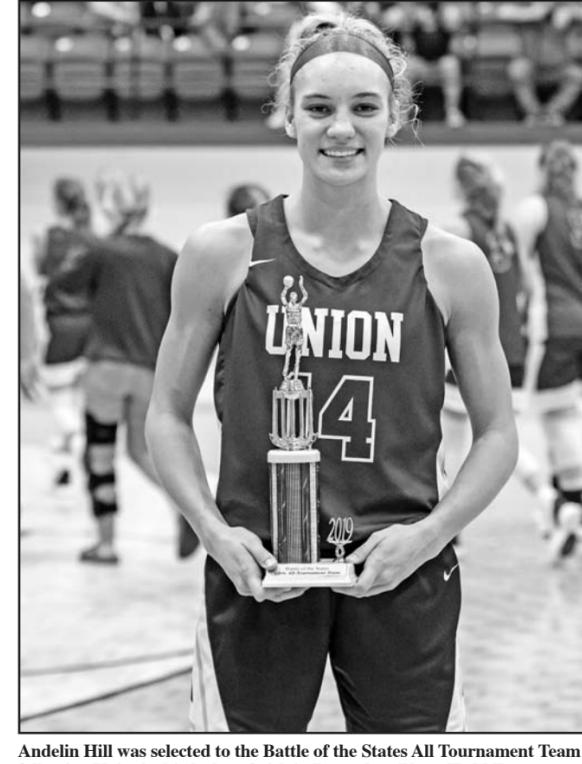
Hill hit 55% of her 3-point attempts during the State Tournament, finishing the season with a season-high 26 treys. She closes her career with more than 800 points, 500 rebounds and 140 assists. As a junior in 2018-19, Hill put up career-high scoring numbers at 10 points a game. Her 34% shooting from downtown, 43 made 3s and 77% shooting from the charity stripe were also career bests.

During her sophomore year, Hill's 193 total rebounds and 7.7 boards a night were career-high marks. She also recorded career bests with 129 defensive boards and 64 offensive boards.

Over her career, Hill's steal and block averages climbed each year after recording less than one a game in both categories as a freshman. In year two, she tallied 1.3 steals and swatted 0.6 shots. Those numbers rose to 1.4 steals and 0.7 blocks as a junior.

Hill joins a Mountain Lions squad under the direction of Peach Belt Conference Coach of the Year Lindsey Huffman, who finished her first season at YHC with a 15-14 record - the most wins since 2013-14.

"We are so pleased to have local star Andelin Hill join us," Huffman said in April. "Andelin is a 6-foot guard with incredible length and versatility. She will bring a lot of size and toughness to the wing spot for us. I believe



Andelin Hill was selected to the Battle of the States All Tournament Team following Union's third-place finish in December. Photo/Todd Forrest

her best basketball is ahead of her."

Hill is one of Young Harris College's two local joiners in the Class of 2020, joining Ball Ground guard Olivia Tucker (Holy Spirit Prep).

In addition to Hill and Tucker, YHC welcomes a pair of transfers in Lola Lovitt (Georgia Southern) and Grace Underhill (Chaminade, Hawaii).

On April 7, Hill announced her college decision on Twitter. It read: "I would like to thank God for giving me the ability to play this sport (and) for the time that I have."

"Thank you to my family for always believing in me and investing so much time and money to watch me become the athlete that I am today. Thank you to my friends and teammates for being the best supporters. A huge thanks to Coach Garrett, Coach Hunter, Coach Beach, Coach Pitts and Coach Ross for investing so much time in me, pushing me to be my best and believing in me every step of the way. Lastly, thank you to

Coach Huffman and Coach Harvey for seeing something in me and for spending time on me. I am super excited to say that I will be continuing my academic and athletic career at Young Harris College! I am super blessed for this new opportunity and to see what the future holds! #GoMountainLions"

Shortly after her signing, the North Georgia News caught up with Hill about her decision, future plans - both on and off the court - and more.

NGN: When did Young Harris first show an interest? How long have you been in contact with them?

AH: I've been in contact with Coach Huffman for probably a few months. But I didn't become seriously interested until a couple of weeks ago because I kept my options open.

So I reached out to her one more time and told her that I was more interested than before. After that, we got together and started talking a lot more, which led me to decide that Young Har-

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