

Sports

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UCHS fall sports begin Saturday, Aug. 6 with softball's Diamond Day

Union County volleyball hosts scrimmage match on Tuesday, Aug. 9

By Todd Forrest
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As the calendar flips to July, that means Union County High School fall sports are right around the corner.

Union County athletics officially get underway in a little more than three weeks when the Lady Panthers softball team hosts Lumpkin County and Commerce on Saturday, Aug. 6.

Opening day's first pitch is scheduled for 11 a.m. when Union County meets Lumpkin. The Indians and Commerce will meet at 1 p.m., followed by a Panthers vs. Tigers clash at 3 p.m.

Year one of the Carissa Owenby era continues on Monday, Aug. 8 at White County (6 p.m.). The first week of the 2022 campaign wraps on Saturday, Aug. 13 with a doubleheader at Prince Avenue Christian in Athens.

The Lady Panthers will face Alcovy, a playoff team from Class 6A, at 11 a.m., before squaring off against another playoff team in Prince Avenue (Class A) at 1 p.m.

With the exception of Lumpkin County, four of Union's first five opponents reached the 2021 postseason. The Prince Avenue contest will mark the fourth consecutive opponent coming off a postseason berth.

On Tuesday, Aug. 9, Union County volleyball begins its quest for a third straight Area title and final four appearance when they host Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina at 5 p.m.

Also under the direction of a first-year coach, Union County volleyball and coach Megan Brown officially begin the 2022 season on Saturday, Aug. 13 when they take part in the Chestatee Preseason Elite Invitational.

Four consecutive road contests follow the trip to Chestatee before the Lady Panthers host Rabun Gap and Rabun County on Aug. 22. The Eagles may have finished 2021 with a 3-15 mark, but in their



L-R: Rising-senior Sofia Swartz and rising-junior Gracie Gladding were both instrumental to their team's respective postseason runs. Photo/Todd Forrest

one match against an 8-AA opponent, they easily handled Rabun County in straight sets (25-10, 25-19, 25-16).

Speaking of the Lady Cats, after 22 years in the region, Rabun County is no longer a member of 8-AA after dropping to Class A.

Meanwhile, Union County football will scrimmage at Chestatee on Friday, Aug. 12, then open the year with a rivalry game at home on Aug. 19 vs. two-time defending Region 7-AA champion Fannin County.

Entering his second year, head coach Michael Perry and the Panthers have been holding

summer workouts four days a week since early June. Union County is currently breaking in new quarterback Cayden Tanner following the Panthers' eighth playoff berth in nine years.

Last but not least, the starting gun fires on Thursday, Aug. 18 for Union's Cross Country season. Both cross country teams begin the year at Rabun County, followed by a home meet at Meeks Park on Thursday, Aug. 25.

Since taking over for longtime head coach Jackie Hughes in 2016, Paige Dyer has guided both teams to six consecutive state berths, a pair



of individual state titles, one team state championship and a team runner-up finish.

However, the region schedule will look a lot different across the board for Union County athletics following the Georgia High School Association's recent reclassification.

Athens Academy, Fellowship Christian and Providence Christian are all making the jump from Class A-Private. East Jackson is dropping down from AAA while Banks County and Union are staying put.

Rabun County and Elbert County both departed 8-AA for Class A. Riverside Military Academy left the Georgia High

School Association for the GIAA (Georgia Independent Athletics Association).

Programs to watch: Despite moving up from Class A, Fellowship Christian will likely enter the fall as 8-AA's odds-on favorite in football after reaching the final four a year ago.

Fellowship's baseball program finished as State runner-up and both soccer teams advanced to the Sweet 16 during the spring. Volleyball and boys cross country also qualified for State in the fall.

Athens Academy won the girls State soccer title and the boys placed second in Class

A-Private. The volleyball program ended the year as State runner-up with a 42-3 record. The Spartans football team reached the second round and both cross country teams finished in the top five.

Baseball won 21 games and reached the Sweet 16. The girls basketball team lost in the first round.

Providence's boys soccer advanced to the Elite Eight in Class A-Private. They reached State in softball but lost in the opening round. The boys basketball team fell in round two.

The volleyball team won 29 matches during the regular season before suffering an early loss during the Region 5-A tournament to miss the State playoffs.

East Jackson's girls basketball team went 23-4 but were upset by Ringgold in the first round of State. Their boys soccer team finished 11-3-1 with a Sweet 16 berth; the girls finished the year 7-5 with a first-round loss.

Both cross country teams finished among the top-15 and wrestling sent multiple qualifiers to the postseason.

As for 8-AA's other returner, Banks County, the Leopards lost in the Sweet 16 of the baseball State tournament. The girls basketball and softball teams also reached the second round.

Banks County's wrestling program claimed two state titles in February along with two additional top-five finishes. In all, the Leopards qualified seven wrestlers for the State Championships in Macon.

Banks County's boys cross country and track programs also had successful runs in 2022 behind senior Buck Ledford, who logged three top-fives at the track State finals and a State runner-up at the Cross Country State Championships.

The boys cross country team finished fifth overall and the girls were 16th.

Banks County's football, volleyball and boys basketball teams were all bounced in the first round.



Rising-sophomore running back Connor Schuknecht is expected to be Union County's featured ball carrier in 2022 following a freshman campaign that saw Schuknecht average 4.2 yards per carry. Photo/Todd Forrest



With his team's No. 1 runner on the shelf, then-sophomore Benton Gregory placed 36th to lead Union County to a 14th place finish at last November's State Championship meet in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest

Football: Panthers begin regular season prep following two-week break

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The Union County Panthers were back at work on Monday morning as summer workouts and practices take on a more-serious tone over the next month-and-a-half.

For the rest of July, the Panthers will carry over June's four-day (Monday-Thursday) schedule of hitting the weight room at 8 a.m. before heading over to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium for their 2-3 hour practice sessions.

"All of our 7-on-7 stuff is out of way; it's done," said Union County head coach Michael Perry. "Now it's time to focus on real football for the next six weeks."

Following 7-on-7 sessions at Chestatee and White County during the week of June 20, the Panthers took a 16-day break, allowing them to mend some of the bumps and bruises accumulated over the first month of workouts.

Most notably, linebacker Elijah Helton is back after suffering a hamstring injury on June 9 during a 7-on-7 contest, putting the rising-senior on the shelf for the next four weeks.

Meanwhile, rising-juniors Cayden Tanner (QB) and Jensen Goble (WR) continue their recovery from knee surgery. According to Perry, both are still on schedule with Tanner expected to have the reins removed by early-August and Goble hoping for clearance by



Rising-junior Tyler Grasty makes a juggling catch in the endzone during Union's practice at White County. Photo/Todd Forrest

the end of the month. Despite the team's recent hiatus, Perry doesn't expect his players will need any time to get reacquainted.

"We're going to jump right back into it and pick up where we left off a couple weeks ago," he said. "We don't have any more camps or 7-on-7 so we're going to be at the football field working and getting ready for the season."

While Union County's final 7-on-7 came Thursday, June

23 at White County, the Panthers also traveled to Chestatee on Tuesday, June 21 for another joint practice and 7-on-7.

The morning began with one-on-one drills between the two squads, followed by a 7-on-7 competition.

"Chestatee went really well," Perry said. "I was really proud of the guys and their effort, considering how many of our guys never come off the field because they're going straight from offense to defense



Rising-junior quarterback Cayden Tanner continues to impress the coaching staff. Photo/Todd Forrest

or vice versa. "Cayden Tanner looked really good and we had some great plays by Griff [Young]. So yeah, it was a good day."

The Panthers and War Eagles will see each other again on Friday, Aug. 12 when Union County travels to Murrayville for a preseason scrimmage at 7:30 p.m.

The regular season opens with consecutive home games, beginning with Fannin County on Aug. 19 and Lumpkin County

on Aug. 26.

The Panthers haven't met Lumpkin County since a 31-24 Union victory in 2017 - when both schools were members of Region 7-AAA. As for the Fannin County matchup, the Panthers are looking to avoid their first three-game skid to the Rebels since 2006-2008. Furthermore, Union hasn't dropped consecutive home games to Fannin County since 1990 and 1994.

The Union County ju-

nior varsity plays its first game of 2022 at Fannin County on Thursday, Aug. 25.

The JV home opener is currently scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 1 vs. White County. The varsity hits the road on Sept. 2 when they make the short drive to Hiwassee to renew their rivalry with the Towns County Indians.

Union County and Towns County last met in 2019 - a 60-7 Panthers' victory in Blairsville.



Sam Page is greeted by Wide Receivers Coach Paul McBride after the rising-senior caught a touchdown pass at White County during last month's 7-on-7. Photo/Todd Forrest



Coach Perry addresses the team after the 7-on-7 at White County, letting them know its time to get serious when they return from the two-week break on July 11. Photo/Todd Forrest



Rising-senior (LB/DB) Wilson Walker has drawn praise from the coaching staff this summer regarding his leadership and non-stop motor. Photo/Todd Forrest

North Georgia Rapids Swimming Team: Back-to-back division champs



Gainesville - Fifteen teams, over 530 swimmers, proved no match for the North Georgia Rapids Swim Team.

The Rapids competed in the North Georgia Swim League's Championship meet during a two-day competition in Gainesville June 25 and 26th.

Our local team again was one of the smaller teams attending, competing in the league's small team division. The team's 16 members earned a first place standing in their division bringing home the league's first place trophy. (Technically, they were fifth overall among the league's

15 teams)

The team's top performers earning individual high point trophies were as follows: First place girls - Senior age group: Hannah Sheffield.

Second place boys - 13-14 age group: Hunter Yancey.

Third place boys - 13-14 age group: Andrew Nush-tayeva.

Second place boys - 8&U age group: Sawyer Yancey.

Other team members earning medals with strong showings: Tanner Simpson (2), Wyatt Nichols (2), Henry Kazmierzak (3), Nicholas Nushtayeva (4), Clara Kazmi-

erzak (2), Brooke Yancey (4) and Lily Helton (2).

Strong performances by team members earning ribbons and team points include: McKenley Simpson, Conner Whitney, Kimberly Simpson, Wyatt Chandler and Wyatt Yancey.

The North Georgia Rapids Swim Team practices year round and includes members from surrounding counties.

The team is limited in size but does have periodic openings. If you would like additional information about the team, contact Barry Gay at (706)835-1662.