

Sports

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Softball: Class of '22 preps for one final swing at elusive Region title

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With the start of the regular season less than a month away, Union County softball opens summer league action this week with four games over two days at Banks County High School.

The Lady Panthers enter their 2021 campaign with a deep and talented senior class whose arrival at Union County High School coincided with the hiring of fourth-year head coach Stephen Mitchell, who has led Union to three consecutive postseason appearances.

Despite the return of seven starters from last year's regular-season region winner, Coach Mitchell's squad has two significant question marks entering the fall that he plans to address over the next four weeks.

How will he replace ace right-hander Trinity Queen and her battery mate, four-year starter Hannah Patton?

Although, finding someone to take the place of Queen - a two-time Region 8-AA Pitcher of the Year - seems the more manageable dilemma following the emergence of freshman Sierra Burnette in 2020.

"When you lose two players the caliber of Hannah and Trinity that were multi-year starters, you're going to have to work to fill their shoes," Mitchell said. "But we have some very talented kids that are ready step in. We're really blessed."

After entering her freshman campaign not expecting to see any meaningful varsity innings, Burnette was thrust into action on opening day, which quickly led to a promotion into the role of Union's second starter. In 30 2/3 innings last fall, Burnette posted a 1.83 ERA and a team-best 0.85 WHIP. Additionally, she led the pitching staff in opponents' batting average (.183), hard-hit ball rate (15.6%) and K/BB ratio (5.2).

Unfortunately, Burnette will no longer benefit from Patton's calming influence behind the plate. And according to Mitchell, the job of Union County backstop is still up in the air with senior Emily Byers and junior Jaycee Seabolt likely battling it out right up until opening day.

Down the stretch, Seabolt became one of Union's hottest bats off the bench in 2020, finishing with a .308 average and hitting .400 with runners in scoring position.

Byers primarily saw action as a pinch runner/runner last fall, scoring 4 hits with an RBI in 17 plate appearances.

"Both [Byers and Seabolt] have worked really hard to get themselves ready and they know what the situation is," Mitchell said. "We're going to let those two compete and just see how it falls. They're both going to play a role on our team for sure."

"That's a position that will [be up for grabs going] into the season, I believe. They both have their strengths and we're going to try and utilize them as much as we can. They're both great kids with a great work ethic, and we're excited about both of them."

Infield - While the Lady Panthers may undergo a few growing pains in the circle and behind the plate, there is no shortage of experience in the field with all seven position players returning from a year



Head coach Stephen Mitchell enters his fourth season at Union County High School with a senior-laden squad hungry for a Region 8-AA title. The program's last region crown came exactly one decade ago when the Lady Panthers won the second of back-to-back 8-AA championships in 2011. Union County just missed ending the drought with region runner-up finishes in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2019. Photo/Todd Forrest

Caley Davis returns for her fourth season at the hot corner after posting career highs in 2020 with a .295 batting average and five steals. Furthermore, her .920 fielding percentage was tied for first among infielders

Senior Emma Roxbury is back at shortstop following a breakout 2020 campaign with 13 RBIs and a .271 average. She's also one of the toughest strikeouts on the team with 6 Ks in 65 plate appearances.

As a team, the 2020 Lady Panthers' 10.6% strikeout rate was a noticeable decline from 13.8% in 2019.

Chloe Potts took over the leadoff spot in 2020 as a sophomore while providing steady defense at second base. Her .397 on-base percentage was third among players with 50-plus plate appearances, which led to a share of the team lead with 16 runs. Potts swiped seven bags in eight attempts, led the team with 10 walks and knocked in an impressive nine runs atop the batting order.

Senior Rebekah Chambers became a mainstay at first last fall, despite suffering an early-season head injury courtesy of a one-hop line drive. Instead of returning from the incident gun-shy, Chambers went on to provide Union County with error-free softball for the remainder of the season.

Chambers received only a handful of at-bats in 2020, going 1 for 5 with a run, an RBI and a walk.

Others to watch at first base are seniors Tori Tracy and Kaelyn Jones. At the plate, Tracy finished her junior year 1 for 6 with 2 RBIs. Jones scored once while going 1 for 10 a year ago.

Outfield - Senior slugger Lexi Sisum is back for year-four in right field after leading the team in RBIs in each of the last two seasons. In 2020, the left-hander slashed .286/.328/.540 with three homers and 21 ribbies. However, Sisum hopes to finish strong in 2021 after her slash-line dipped to .257/.297/.343 once region play got underway in September. But one ability

that never slumps is speed, and Sisum swiped eight bags in 10 attempts last fall.

Aubrie Banton was well on her way to continuing Union County's string of elite defensive centerfielders before nagging injuries slowed an all-around productive junior campaign. While hitting only .222 through the first month, Banton was still finding her way aboard with a .343 OBP. And despite a late drop in average, her OBP remained consistent at .327 for the year. Her team-best 5 Ks in 56 plate appearances contributed to her team-leading 46.4% quality at-bat rate.

When the team's late-season offensive woes set in, then-junior left fielder Ansley Collins continued to rake. Over the final two regular-season outings and three region tourney contests, Collins hit .500 with a 1.145 OPS. As a result of her late-season play, she finished the year hitting .458 - second only to Patton's .464 mark - with a team-high 13 steals in 14 tries. She hit .529 with runners in scoring position and matched Potts with a team-best 16 runs.

Others to watch are Burnette, who had 12 hits in 30 at-bats (.400) as a freshman. Another up-and-coming youngster is sophomore Katie Byers, who scored 15 runs as a freshman pinch runner.

"We've got some young kids who are going to push our older girls," Mitchell said. "Georgia Patton, Jewell Massey and Katie Byers; all three are going to find their way into the lineup in some capacity. They work really hard and they're really pushing our older girls and it's creating some competition. We're really excited about them."

As far as a No. 2 pitcher is concerned, Mitchell offered high praise for a trio of hurlers currently competing for the role.

"We've got Tori [Tracy], who's logged a lot of innings for us," he said. "She's a veteran. She's done it, she's been there and she understands what we want to do. She's worked hard throughout her career and we're going to find a way to help her

be successful."

Behind Tracy is a pair of talented freshmen in Sloane Dyer and Ila Bragg.

"They're impressive, but we haven't thrown any [live pitching this summer], so we'll learn a lot about them in the next couple weeks. They're a couple of young, talented freshmen that will help this program immensely over the years. We just don't know how, and when, we'll be able to use them this year. But I do know that one of them will have to log some varsity innings."

This week's summer league action gets underway Tuesday at 5 p.m. when Union takes on host Banks County. The game two opponent recently changed, but as of this writing, Stephens County is listed to face the Lady Panthers.

A 4 p.m. first pitch is



Senior Emily Byers is one of two players in the running to fill the void at catcher left by four-year starter Hannah Patton. Photo/Todd Forrest

slated for Thursday's twin bill at Banks County vs. the Leopards and an undetermined opponent.

"Honestly, I don't know how we're going to play it at Banks County this week," Mitchell said, discussing the pros and cons of facing a region rival during the preseason. "We're going to take our older girls on Tuesday and see how it goes. But when you're facing a region opponent, there's a fine line between showing them too much and gaining a mental edge over them going into the fall. So we have to figure out the best plan for us going forward. But our main goal of the summer is to just get better and be ready for the season."

Next week, Union County travels to west Georgia to participate in the Carrollton Summer Slam tourney before

returning home to continue summer league action.

July wraps up with Midnight Madness on Friday, July 30. The night begins with an on-field movie at dark, followed by a midnight practice. Afterward, the team will camp overnight on the UCHS softball field.

The first three regular season games are at home with the opener scheduled for Thursday, Aug. 5. Two days later, Union County will host a doubleheader with Commerce and Dawson County on Saturday, Aug. 7.

"We're really excited to be back to normal," Mitchell added. "Our school system has done a great job throughout the pandemic and we're just happy to be back to normal. We're excited about the upcoming season and just excited to get going."

Local Racing Report: Tri-County

By Blake Lynch
Racing Reporter
North Georgia News

Brasstown, NC - Tri-County Racetrack held its annual Independence Day race on July 2, featuring a full racing program along with an outstanding fireworks display.

On July 9, Tri-County was able to pull off a night of racing between rain showers.

JULY 2 RESULTS

Crate: No. 7 Jason Deal took home the win. Coming in second was No. 44 Drew Deaver. No. 14 Sylvan Schuette was third. Coming in fourth was No. 88 Ricky Smith. No. 11 Preston Crisp was fifth.

KMSA: No. 88 Tim Ladd took home the checked flag. No. J58 John Smart was second. No. 17 Daniel Moody came in third. No. 01 Austin Baxley came in fourth. No. 10 Tony Coffman was fifth.

Street Stock: No. 12 Lynn Burchfield took home the win. No. 95 Alex Vance took home second. No. 21 Troy Turner was third. No. 01 Jacob Lynch was fourth. No. 73 CB McKinNo. n was

fifth.

Modified Street: No. 41 Bobby Elkins took home the win. No. 81 John Howard was second. No. 37 Micheal Barnett was third. No. 03 Dante Curtis was fourth. No. 42 Johnny Gulizia placed fifth.

Beginner 602: No. 117 Dylan Beaver was the winner. No. 22 Tucker Anderson was second. No. 100 Copper Twiggs was third. No. 4 Mark Ledford was fourth. In fifth was No. 39 Matt Lockaby.

FWD: No. 4 ShanNo. n Jones was the winner. No. 192R Robby Lynch was second. No. 05 Glenn Coker was third. No. 10 Blake Lynch was fourth. A1 Steven Godfrey was fifth.

Blue Ridge Outlaws: No. 8 David Payne took home the win. No. 4 Danny Ledford was second. No. 4H Levi Hicks was third. No. 55 Kep Cochran was fourth. No. 21 Scott Shirley was fifth.

JULY 9 RESULTS

FWD: F3 John Fulford took home the win. No. 19R Sean Rice was second. No. 192R Robby Lynch took home third. No. 1 Josh Smith took home fourth place. No. 232 Jim Exum finished fifth.

602: For the second

week in a row, No. 117 Dillion Beaver took home the win. No. 100 Cooper Twiggs took second place. No. 55 Brad Sosebee was third place. No. 4 Max Ledford took home fourth place. No. 55 Jerry Buick was fifth.

Modified Street: No. 35 Seth Wimpey took home the win. No. 44 Bobby Elkins was second. No. 92 Brawley Stillwell was third. No. 4 Dante Curtis was fourth. No. 99 Reese Stillwell was fifth.

Pony: No. CP 11 Caylee Payne took home the win. No. 01C Tweedy Chirus was second. No. N8 Nathan Crowder was third. No. 42 Adam Jones was fourth. No. 01W Phil Wood was fifth.

Crate: No. 7 Jason Deal went to the winner circle for the second week in a row. No. 4 Danny Ledford was second. No. 16 Kenny Collins was third. No. 55 Kep Cochran was fourth. No. 26 Trever Parker was fifth.

Street Stock: No. 7 Lynn Burchfield won for the second week in a row. No. 32 Logan Exum was second. No. 95 Alex Vance was third. No. 2 J.D. Smith came in fourth. No. 21 Troy Turner placed fifth.