

Sports

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Volleyball: Recent success and youth camps increase sport's popularity

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

On the heels of Union County High School's historic four-year run, volleyball is arguably one of the fastest growing local sports, despite a one-year-old middle school program and no youth program.

Union County volleyball hosted its youth camp last week, attracting more than 20 girls to the three-day event from July 11-14 at the Union County Middle School gymnasium.

According to UCHS head coach Megan Brown, the camp delivered an opportunity for youngsters, grades 4-8, to get acquainted with the sport of volleyball, learn the basics and be around the Lady Panthers program.

"We went over the fundamentals: Passing, setting, hitting and serving," she said. "We covered each of those every day, and we gave them a chance to play some games with the high schoolers. Each of the groups had a high school player that oversaw their group, so they had a lot of real-time on-court practice at their position. Then we added some fun drills just to help reinforce the fundamentals."

Brown would thank the program's booster club, the youth and high school girls that participated at the camp, adding that without a volleyball team below the middle-school level, last week helped familiarize many young ladies with the sport.

"Volleyball is really growing in Union County and we're just happy to get these girls introduced to it at a younger age, instead of having to wait until middle school," she said. "I think that was our main goal, just getting our younger kids introduced to it and allowing



With youth camps and spring programs at the rec center, volleyball continues to grow in Union County. Last week, UCHS hosted a youth camp for grades 4-8. Photo/Todd Forrest

them to get some practice in before they get to middle school."

Despite Union County volleyball appearing in four-straight Class AA Sweet 16s, picking up two region titles, an elite eight and two final-four berths, the recent success came without a middle school team until last fall. This spring, Coach Brown headed up a twice-per-week youth volleyball program at the Union County Recreation Center for more than 50 participants.

"Most of the kids had never played volleyball, so it was a lot of fun to get them interested in the sport," Brown said. "We've talked about

starting a rec program for the younger kids, but that's still in the works -- there isn't anything definite there yet."

Along with the Lady Panthers, last week's camp saw incoming JV coach, Steve Ridley lend a helping hand. Ridley comes to UCHS by way of Gwinnett County.

As for the high school program, the regular season is only weeks away. This week, Union County will see action at Gainesville High for an officials training event on Tuesday and Thursday, facing Lanier High, Commerce and others.

"That will give the girls some real game-time experi-

ence," Brown said. "We're going to take everyone, JV and varsity, since we haven't designated anyone JV or varsity yet. We don't officially start until August, but we've been going all summer except for the dead week and we have a play date at Murray County on July 25."

The Lady Panthers open their 2023 slate with an Aug. 10 scrimmage at Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina. The first official match is on Aug. 15 at Dawson County. Region 8-AA play kicks off on Sept. 6.

Entering its seventh season, Union County volleyball will feature a new-look squad in 2023 following the departures

of several multi-year starters that contributed heavily during the program's consecutive final-four campaigns in 2020 and 2021.

Coming off back-to-back region titles, the Lady Panthers finished third in 8-AA in 2022 following the GHSA's reclassification that moved three powerhouse private schools (Athens Academy, Fellowship Christian and Providence) into the region. Despite falling to all three during the regular season, Union County's postseason experience shined in October, securing a spot at state by defeating Banks County 2-1 in Homer to open the 8-AA

tournament. After a 2-0 loss at top-seeded Athens Academy in the semis, the Lady Panthers stunned Fellowship Christian 2-1 in the consolation match to enter the Class AA State tourney as a No. 3 seed.

Union went back on the road and upset second-seeded Murray County, winning three straight sets in Chatsworth after dropping the first two. In the Sweet 16, the Lady Panthers ran into a buzzsaw in the eventual State Champion -- and another private school -- at Kennesaw's Mt. Paran Christian, which dropped only one set throughout its dominating postseason.



Union County volleyball campers in action at the UCMS gymnasium on Thursday, July 13. Photos by Todd Forrest

Old Union's Junior Golf clinic doubles attendance in three years

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Old Union's junior golf camp continues to grow, drawing 44 participants this summer in year three, doubling its initial tally of 22 in 2021.

"[We hope to] to teach life skills, along with golf skills to [help the kids] improve not only as golfers, but as young people," Old Union Golf Course General manager Cameron Forrest said.

The youngsters spent time on the driving range and putting green, while also learning the rules and etiquette of the game over the three-day camp that teed off on Monday, July 10. On the final day, the kids were able to hit the course for a round of golf.

The junior golfers primarily hailed from the three-county region of Cherokee County, North Carolina, Fannin County and Union.

Old Union golf pro Matt Cook, plus a handful of volunteers, provided tutelage over the three days. Others helping out were former LSU women's golf coach Mary Holmes, former UCHS standout Megan



Old Union Golf Course's third annual Youth Golf clinic drew 44 local golfers from for last week's three-day event. The inaugural clinic in 2021 attracted 22 participants.

Rowe, retired PGA club pro Wayne Dahlstrom, two-time Smoky Mountain Conference Player of the Year Wyatt Simmons (Murphy, NC), Jim Roper, Randy Vaughn and others.

In closing, Forrest added that Old Union Golf Course wishes a special thank you to Chick-Fil-A for its camp sponsorship.

"It was great to get [the kids] out on the golf course,"

Forrest said. "They are the future of local golf."

For more information, tee times or upcoming tournaments, visit www.oldunion-golf.com.



Junior golfers practice on the putting green. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union

FOOTBALL

Get excited Union County! It's that time of year and we all have FOOTBALL FEVER! Come out on August 3rd and show your Panther Spirit in support of our football players, cheerleaders, and band! This year we have Nana & Papa's Ice Cream (\$5), Southern Sips Lemonade (\$5), & Kona Ice (\$4)! There will be free hotdogs for all who attend and inflatable slides for the kids! Featuring performances by the UC cheer squad, UC band, & other events that you do not want to miss! We look forward to seeing our community pack the stadium on August 3rd at 6:00pm at UCHS stadium!

Union

FOOTBALL MEET THE PANTHERS

WHEN: AUGUST 3RD
TIME: 6:00PM
WHERE: UC STADIUM

YOU'RE INVITED!

FREE Hotdogs

Kona Ice \$4

Nana & Papa's Ice Cream \$5

Dunk Tank

Southern Sips Lemonade \$5

Inflatable Slides

Face Painting

Wing Eating Contest

Cheer & Band Performances

Football, Cheer, & Band Introductions

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Deklin K. Jones (9)
To assist with Travel and Medical Expenses for Cancer Treatment.

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The Cross Worship Center
58 Queens Gap Connector
Blairsville GA 30512

Entry Fee: Donations

Registration Begins: 8am
Shotgun Start: 9am

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