

Sports

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Perry: Improvement is 'night and day' compared to 2021 preseason Panthers and War Eagles to square off in Friday night scrimmage

By Todd Forrest
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With another successful Meet the Team in the rearview mirror, all that's left for Panthers football is to buckle up their chin straps on Friday night.

Union County season unofficially opens its 2022 season this week when they travel to Chestatee on Friday for a pre-season scrimmage. However, a recent string of minor injuries in the backfield has been a blessing and a curse for coach Michael Perry, who is trying to wrap up an offseason where the second-year head coach has navigated knee injuries at both quarterback and receiver.

Recently, running backs Connor Schuknecht and Liam Cone have each missed time since official practices began Monday, Aug. 1. But according to Perry, rising-junior Braylen Rader has excelled since shifting to the backfield in their absence.

"Braylen Rader has really stepped up at that position and is going to help us a lot," Perry said. "Both of those guys we're missing are great football players, but Braylen Rader has turned out to be a pretty good ball player too."

Perry added it's likely that Schuknecht and Cone will both be ready for Friday,



Union County football's annual Meet the Team event was another resounding success, attracting hundreds of Panthers fans to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Thursday, Aug. 4 to support the football, cheer and band programs. Photo/Todd Forrest

but he won't rush them back for a scrimmage game that's divided between varsity and junior varsity.

"The varsity will go three quarters then the junior varsity will get the last quarter," he said. "Otherwise, it will be like a live game, except for punts, PATs and field goals; they will be live until the ball is kicked."

Furthermore, the quarterbacks won't see any contact at Chestatee, which is welcomed news for Perry and junior Cayden Tanner.

The Union County quarterback is close to 100% following offseason knee surgery and will take the bulk of the snaps at Chestatee.

In other injury news, junior receiver and kick returner

Jensen Goble (knee surgery) is back in pads and could be available Friday in a limited role.

Overall, there is still room for improvement in all three phases, but Perry's confidence in the program is at an all-time high.

"We still have a ways to go, but I feel a lot better going into this scrimmage than I did last year's [scrimmage at

Southeast Whitefield]," Perry said. "The guys know the system better, I know the guys better and where we are compared to last year at this time is night and day."

Union County might be hosting a rivalry game to open the year, but Perry and his staff won't start thinking about Fannin County until Saturday morning.

"We're going to try and just execute our base offense and defense [on Friday night] and not worry yet about preparing for Fannin County," he said. "But I will say this: If we can't execute our base offense and defense, we won't be very good against anyone."

Meet the Team: Union County football, cheer and band hosted its annual Meet the Team event on Thursday, Aug. 4, attracting hundreds to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The event opened with comments from quarterback club president Joseph Goble, followed by remarks from cheer coach Emily Cobb, band director Will Stafford and Coach Perry.

At the conclusion of performances by the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band and the UCHS cheer squad, players gathered behind the north endzone for a community meet-and-greet.

"I can't say enough how awesome everyone has been," Perry told the *North Georgia News*. "We were practicing on the field [before Meet the Team], and there were people out there setting everything up the entire time we practiced. There must have been 100 volunteers. It's been really cool the way the community has always stepped up and come out to support us, whether its on Friday night or at an event like this."



Union County softball player Jewell Massey (right) felt that UCHS athletic director Mandy Hunter needed to cool off in the dunking booth at last Thursday's Meet the Team event. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County seniors Elijah Haynes (99) and Wilson Walker (0) sign autographs for young Panthers fans during the meet-and-greet segment last Thursday. Photo/Todd Forrest



Juniors Jensen Goble (12) and Cayden Tanner (17) sign autographs. Last week's Meet the Team allowed fans to chat and take pictures with their favorite players. It also afforded the players and coaches an opportunity to thank the community for their non-stop support of UCHS football since 1957. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County Football 2022 schedule

Regular season		
08/19	H	Fannin County (Region 7-AA)
08/26	H	Lumpkin County (Region 7-AAA)
09/02	A	Towns County (Region 8-A Division II)
09/09	A	Armuchee (Region 7-A Division I)
09/16	H	West Hall (Region 7-AAA)
10/07	A	● Banks County
10/14	H	● Providence Christian
10/21	H	● East Jackson
10/28	A	● Athens Academy
11/03	H	● Fellowship Christian

Softball: Diamond Day rained out with Union ahead 4-1 in third inning

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Thunderstorms washed out Union County softball's Diamond Day during the third inning of Saturday's season opener vs. Lumpkin County.

Union County pushed across four runs in the bottom of the second before allowing an unearned run to score in the third. With two on, two outs and Union leading 4-1, the contest was delayed due to lightning. Within an hour of the stoppage, heavy rains forced a cancellation of the day's events.

Lumpkin County and Commerce were scheduled to meet following the Union-Lumpkin game. The Lady Panthers would have played Commerce later in the afternoon.

Junior right-hander Sierra Burnette worked around a leadoff single in the top of the first, then opened the Union half of the frame by lacing a first-pitch double off the left-centerfield fence.

Jewell Massey followed with a bloop single but the Lady Panthers couldn't generate a run when a pop-up and two strikeouts stranded both runners.

Still scoreless with one away in the bottom of the second, Slone Dyer singled to right, then scored after Caroline Karnes' bunt single led to a throwing error.

Katie Byers made it a 2-0 game with an RBI triple to deep right and Massey scored



Lady Panthers junior Sierra Burnette barely misses a homerun on the first offering of the 2022 season, lining a leadoff double off the fence in left-centerfield. Photo/Todd Forrest

Byers with a two-out single. A base hit by Gracie Gladding capped off the four-run inning, bringing home Massey, who moved into scoring position with a stolen base.

Lumpkin County cracked the scoring column in the third via an error and a two-out single.

Unofficially, Massey finished 2 for 2 with a pair of singles and an RBI.

The Lady Panthers at-

tempted to get in an official game on Monday at White County. No results are available due to the Monday morning deadline.

Union County will face Prince Avenue and Alcovy in a neutral site tournament on Saturday, hosted by Athens' Prince Avenue Christian.

The Lady Panthers and Alcovy will get underway at 11 a.m. with the Prince Avenue game to follow.



Junior Katie Byers watches her run-scoring triple sail over the right fielder's head during Union County's 4-run second inning against Lumpkin County on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest

2022 Union County Softball Schedule



Date	Opponent	Location	Time
8/6	Lumpkin	Home	11:00
8/6	Commerce	Home	3:00
8/8	White	Away	6:00#
8/13	Alcovy	Away(Prince)	11:00
8/13	Prince Ave	Away	1:00
8/15	Lumpkin	Away	6:00#
8/16	Fannin	Home	5:30
8/20	Bremen	UNG	TBA
8/20	Dawson	UNG	TBA
8/23	Pickens	Away	6:00#
8/26	BASA	Oconee Tour(2)	4:00
8/26	PACE	Oconee Tour(2)	6:00
8/27	Savannah Chr.	Oconee Tour(2)	9:00am
8/27	Ware	Oconee Tour(2)	11:00am
8/31	Pickens	Home	6:00#
9/6	Commerce	Away	6:00#
9/8	Banks	Away	5:30*
9/12	Rabun	Away	6:00#
9/13	East Jackson	Home	5:30*
9/15	Providence	Home	5:30*
9/20	Banks	Home	5:30*
9/27	East Jackson	Away	5:30*
9/28	White	Home	6:00#
9/29	Providence	Away	5:00*
10/4	Banks	Away	5:30*
10/6	East Jackson	Home	5:30*
10/11	Providence	Home	5:30*
10/13	Rabun	Home	6:00#

Union XC turns the page into new-look region with fresh crop of runners

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The Union County cross country program opened official practice earlier this month, splitting time at the UCHS track and Meeks Park.

Head coach Paige Dyer has several concerns ahead of her seventh season at the helm, beginning with the graduation of the top runner from each squad - Luke Gambrell and Hana Gregory.

Another unknown entering the fall is the new-look region that saw the departures of Elbert County, Rabun County and Riverside Military Academy coincide with the arrival of four new programs.

Athens Academy, East Jackson, Fellowship Christian and Providence Christian joined Banks County and Union in 8-AA, presenting Dyer with more questions than answers, especially with East Jackson hosting the region meet.

"It's pretty much a new region so you don't know what you will face, and we're holding region at East Jackson, a course we've never raced at," Dyer said. "You can look at past results, but with three private schools, you never know if they'll have the same kids year to year."

"Banks' boys lost some good runners but they will still be good. So if we want to make it back to State, we're just going to have to work really hard."

However, Dyer remains upbeat due to a young crop of runners moving up from a suc-



The Union County cross country teams held their first timed practice on Thursday, Aug. 4 at Meeks Park. Photo/Todd Forrest

cessful middle school program

"The girls will probably be even deeper than last year while the boys will be about the same, but I think we'll add a few more kids when school starts up," she said. "We've been practicing twice a week, all summer so we would be ready to go on August 1st. They were also supposed to run on their own twice a week over the summer."

The season starts earlier than usual with the first meet at Rabun County on Aug. 18.

Union County will host its annual Meeks Park race on Aug. 25.

"We can't officially begin practicing until Aug. 1st, which is really pushing it when you race on the 18th," Dyer said.

Despite the shake-up to the region and the roster, an 8-AA title remains the goal according to Dyer.

"[A region title is] what we're shooting for, but we'll have to work extra hard for it this year."



UCHS cross country runners take a warm-up lap ahead of last week's practice at Meeks Park. Officially-sanctioned GHSA practices began Aug. 1, but coach Paige Dyer encouraged her athletes to run on their own at least twice a week over summer break. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union volleyball scrimmage update

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Union County volleyball has made some changes to its early-season schedule.

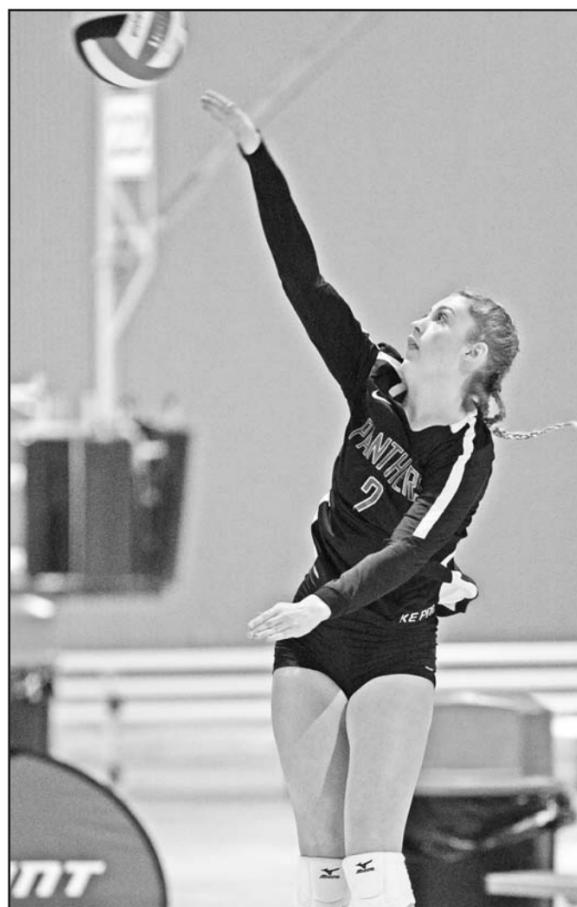
The scrimmage match vs. Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina slated for this Tuesday, Aug. 9 has been cancelled due to a scheduling conflict stemming from Union County's Meet Your Teacher event on Tuesday afternoon.

Union County will open its 2022 campaign at the Chestatee Preseason Elite Invitational on Saturday, Aug. 13. The reigning back-to-back Area 8 Champions' first home contest is a tri-match slated for Aug. 22 vs. Rabun Gap (5 p.m.) and Rabun County (7 p.m.).

The Panthers pay a visit to Stephens County for an Aug. 16 tri-match where they will see another former area-foe, Elbert County. Dawson County will host Union County and Chestatee on Aug. 18.

Following the home opener on Aug. 22, the Panthers travel to Fannin County on Aug. 23, where they will meet Rabun County again. August wraps up with the Coal Mountain Classic at North Forsyth on the 27th.

Union County's area schedule gets underway Sept. 8 at area-newcomer and 2021 Class A-Private State runner-up, Athens Academy.



Rising-senior Kaylee Ashcraft serves during the 2021 Class AA Final 4 at the LakePointe Sports complex in Emerson. As a junior, Ashcraft set a program record last fall with 86 aces. With 237 total serves, Ashcraft posted a team-leading 36.3 ace percentage (among players with at least 20 serves). Photo/Todd Forrest

2022 UCHS Volleyball schedule (August)

Date	Time	Opponent	Location
Aug 13	TBA	@ TBA	Chestatee Preseason Elite Invitational @ Chestatee
Aug 16	5:00 PM	@ Stephens County	@ Stephens County
Aug 16	6:00 PM	@ Elbert County	@ Stephens County
Aug 18	5:00 PM	@ Dawson County	@ Dawson County
Aug 18	6:00 PM	@ Chestatee	@ Dawson County
Aug 22	5:00 PM	vs Rabun Gap	High School Gym
Aug 22	7:00 PM	vs Rabun County	High School Gym
Aug 23	6:00 PM	@ Rabun County	@ Fannin County
Aug 23	7:00 PM	@ Fannin County	@ Fannin County
Aug 27	TBA	@ TBA	Coal Mountain Classic @ North Forsyth