

Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

Volleyball: Lady Panthers seek Area title under first-year coach

Coach Chapman hopes to build on program's first Elite 8 appearance

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

With softball already underway, Union County volleyball is on deck to open the 2020 season when they visit Lumpkin County on Thursday evening.

After surpassing expectations with its first-ever playoff appearance in 2018 and an Elite 8 berth last year, the program opens year-four under its third head coach. In June, UCHS introduced Anna Chapman, who takes over for Megan Swanson. During her two seasons at the helm, Swanson oversaw many program milestones, from the first-ever varsity win to its area title game appearance and berth in the Class AA State Elite 8.

However, one accomplishment still missing from Union County's volleyball resume is an Area Championship. Last year, the Lady Panthers finished second after putting a scare into host Rabun County during the Area finals. After taking the first set 25-15, Union would jump out to an 8-3 lead in set two before Rabun found another gear and took the best-of-five match 3-1.

Undoubtedly, the dethroning of Rabun County will be at the top of the Lady Panthers' to-do list this fall. And Chapman is confident the necessary pieces are already in place.

"I've heard great things about this team, [for example] their companionship and character," Chapman told the North Georgia News following her June 8 introduction. "I'm excited to see where they are with their skills and then we'll just go from there."

Despite the wealth of experience returning in 2020, Chapman must also replace five seniors, including three All-Area selections in Kait McCarter, Adelia Pyle and Izzy Zamora. They also lost a key underclassman in Maci Williams, who is no longer with



Head coach Anna Chapman (top left) conducts Union County's first 'official' volleyball practice on Thursday, Aug. 6. Photo/Todd Forrest

the program.

Fortunately for Chapman, the cupboard isn't bare thanks to a couple of stay-in-the-making rookies, Riley Allison and Morgian Fussell, who are primed and ready to lead this fall.

Others expected to make a significant impact are Haley Noe, Saylor Noe, Molly Kay West and Emma Whicker.

Despite not hosting its first official practice until Aug. 6, Union County has remained active since the Georgia High School Association (GHSA) began easing practice restrictions in early June.

"We were able to hold conditioning a few days a week at Meeks Park before the GHSA allowed us to work inside with volleyballs," Chapman said. "Then, in July, we were able to come inside and work in the gymnasium.

"But they're just happy to be back playing volleyball. I constantly have to remind them of (all the new safety regulations) because it's a totally new normal for everybody. But they're handling it really well."

On Aug. 4-5, the Lady Panthers hosted tryouts before beginning its official season preparation last Thursday. With only one week of practice before their trip to Lumpkin County, Chapman's early focus centers on building chemistry.

"We want the girls to be comfortable with their positions and comfortable with each other," she said. "We also need to work on communication because we have a lot of talent and I'm really pleased with where they are skill-wise."

As for the aforementioned Rabun County, the de-

fending Area champs are also welcoming a first-year coach in former Lady Wildcat Meridith Coleman, a recent graduate of Chapman's alma mater, the University of North Georgia.

Despite losing standout

Destiny Deetz to graduation, Rabun County returns four capable seniors prepared to carry the load.

In another similarity with Union County, the Lady Cats are also a program on the

rise after reaching the Elite 8 in 2018 and the Final Four a year ago.

To prep for area and postseason play, Coach Chapman has beefed up Union County's non-area schedule this fall. And with the limited summer workouts, the early-season contests will take on additional importance.

"We've added more challenging matches from outside the (area) to try and push ourselves early," she said. "We'll mostly use those games to allow the girls to get used to their positions and work on a few small things. I really want to stretch what the girls are capable of in terms of skill level."

Thursday's match at Lumpkin will be a tri-match with the Lady Indians and Habersham Central beginning at 6 p.m.

Union County's home opener is Tuesday, Aug. 18, when they host Dawson County at 5 p.m.

All home matches are scheduled to take place at the Union County High School gymnasium.

For Coach Chapman's introductory article and interview that was featured on Page 2D of the June 17 Sports section, you may visit the online "News Archives" at www.nganews.com.

Date	Opponent	Match Time	Location	Team
8.13.2020	Lumpkin/Habersham	6:00/7:00	Away - Lumpkin	JV/Varsity
8.18.2020	Dawson Co.	5:00/6:00	Home	JV/Varsity
8.20.2020	Gilmer Co/Murray Co	5:00/6:00	Away - Gilmer	JV/Varsity
8.25.2020	Chestatee/West Hall	5:00/6:00	Away - Chestatee	JV/Varsity
8.27.2020	White Co/Stephens Co	5:00/7:00	Home	Varsity Only
9.1.2020	East Hall/Banks Co	5:00/6:00	Away - East Hall	JV/Varsity
9.3.2020	Dawson Co/Johnson	5:00/6:00	Away - Dawson Co	JV/Varsity
9.10.2020	Elbert Co/Banks Co	5:00/7:00	Home	Varsity Only
9.15.2020	Commerce/LOA	5:00/6:00	Away - Commerce	Varsity Only
9.22.2020	Chestatee/Elbert	5:00/7:00	Home	Varsity Only
9.24.2020	Oglethorpe/Washington Wilkes	5:00/6:00	Away - Oglethorpe	Varsity Only
10.1/2020	Rabun/Putnam	5:00/7:00	Home	Varsity Only

Softball: Lady Panthers total 15 runs in split with Lumpkin

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County opened 2020 by splitting a Saturday doubleheader with Lumpkin County - running away with game one by an 8-1 margin and dropping the second contest 9-7 after nearly rallying from an 8-0 first-inning deficit.

Originally slated to open against White County on Friday before hosting Haralson County and Lumpkin on Saturday, the season faced one final speed bump as thundershowers forced a washout on Friday night, and Haralson canceled its Saturday trip to Blairsville.

Fortunately, the Lady Panthers and Lady Indians were still ready to play ball Saturday morning, so the former region foes got together for an 11 a.m. twin bill.

GAME ONE - Lady Panthers 8, Lumpkin Co. 1

In the first meeting, Union County grabbed an early 2-0 lead, which proved more than enough for the reigning Region 8-AA Pitcher of the Year Trinity Queen.

The senior right-hander tossed a complete game, striking out six and walking one while scattering seven hits (all singles).

Trailing 2-0 after one, Lumpkin got a run in the second, but the Lady Panthers responded with two more in the bottom half of the inning for a 4-1 advantage. The Lady Panthers would add a run in each of the next two innings before putting things out of reach with two in the fifth.

In the two games overall, Union County got on the board in 10 of the 13 innings with four resulting in multi-run innings. Meanwhile, the Lady Indians crossed home in just three of their 14 plate appearances during the doubleheader.

The Lady Panthers' first run of the season belonged to sophomore Chloe Potts, who came around on a Lexi Sisum RBI single. Later in the first, Queen helped herself by knocking in Sisum with a base hit to



Trinity Queen begins the 2020 season with a first-pitch strike - UCHS's first athletic event in 149 days (March 12). Photo/Todd Forrest

left field.

Union County terrorized Lumpkin on the basepaths in game one, successfully stealing 11 bags in a dozen attempts.

The Lady Indians lone run came in the second when Queen plunked the leadoff batter, allowing a sacrifice bunt, a wild pitch and a sac fly to cut the Union lead in half at 2-1.

The Lady Panthers quickly answered in their half of the second when junior Ansley Collins singled and stole second to kick off a 3-for-4 day at the plate.

Junior Caley Davis put runners on the corners with nobody out when she beat out a bunt single. With one down, Potts scored Collins with an RBI single. Later, senior catcher Hannah Patton brought home Davis with a two-out double.

Queen pitched out of a two-on, two-out jam in the third and Union County followed by adding another run for a 5-1 lead.

Juniors Emma Roxbury and Aubrie Banton put the Lady Panthers in business with a pair of walks before a bunt single by Collins loaded the bases with one away. However, their only run came with two down when Roxbury scored from third on a wild pitch.

With two aboard and nobody out, Lumpkin was poised to make things interesting in the fourth until Queen induced a bouncer back to the circle and fanned a pair of Lady Indians to retire the side.

As a result, Union County extended its margin to 6-1 when Lumpkin County's Natalie Shubert issued a two-out walk to Sisum and Roxbury made her pay with an RBI double to left-center.



Ansley Collins swipes second during game one. The junior outfielder was 4-for-7 with 3 runs and 4 steals in the doubleheader. Photo/Todd Forrest

Potts scored Collins with a base hit, and consecutive walks brought Chambers around when Sisum drew a base on balls with the bags full.

Collins' three-hit day included three stolen bases and a pair of runs. Meanwhile, Potts finished 2-for-4 with two runs, two RBIs and two steals. Sisum had two runs, two walks, two steals and a pair of RBIs during a 1-for-2 performance at the dish. Roxbury and Patton each finished 1-for-3 with an RBI double.

GAME TWO - Lumpkin Co. 9, Lady Panthers 7

Coming off a 20-win season that included a Class AAA Elite-8 appearance, Lumpkin County was sure to bounce back in the second meeting, and that they did, putting an 8-spot on the board in the top half of the first.

Union County spent the rest of the day playing catch up and had a chance in the late in-

nings, but was unable to deliver a timely hit after pulling within two runs in the final stanza.

Trailing 9-6 in the bottom of the seventh, Patton drew a leadoff walk and courtesy runner Katie Byers scored on Sisum's double to deep right. With the tying run at the plate and nobody out, the Lady Panthers' 4-5-6 hitters were retired in order, allowing Lumpkin to escape with a 9-7 victory. The final out came on a leaping grab by the Lady Indians' shortstop to steal an RBI, and potentially extra bases, from Banton.

Ultimately, an 8-0 deficit proved too much to overcome despite a heroic effort by ninth-grade pitcher Sierra Burnette, who was forced into action prematurely with one down in the first. Despite making her high school debut with the bases loaded and her team already trailing 3-0, Burnette went on to finish the game, working 6 2-3 innings and allowing just

two earned runs, six hits and two walks while striking out four. She also got the job done at the plate, going 2-for-3 with a double and an RBI.

After the eight-run first, Lumpkin only mustered one unearned run off Burnette, coming via a two-base outfield error in the third inning.

Down eight runs, Union immediately started chipping away, beginning with an RBI single by Roxbury. In the second, an error off the bat of Burnette allowed Banton to score. Later in the inning, Collins stole home on the throw when the Lumpkin catcher cut down a would-be base-stealer at second base.

The unearned run in the third pushed the Lady Indians' advantage out to 9-3, but Union County answered with two more in the bottom half of the frame.

A Patton single, a Sisum double and a walk to Roxbury loaded the bases with nobody out. After a pop-out, Banton made it 9-4 with a single to left. Sisum would later score with two down to trim the deficit to 9-5 after three.

Following a scoreless fourth that saw Patton end the Lumpkin County threat by throwing out a base-stealer at second, the Lady Panthers pulled within three on a Queen double that scored Roxbury from second. However, a Union base runner was caught stealing third just moments before Queen's extra-base hit, limiting the damage to only one run.

Down 9-6 in the sixth, the Lady Panthers escaped with a 2-3-5 inning-ending double play to remain within striking distance. Unfortunately, Burnette was left stranded at second following a two-out double in the bottom of the sixth. Back in the circle, she got out of trouble during the seventh by inducing a pair of ground outs after Lumpkin put two aboard with one out.

Things didn't go well for the Union County starter, junior Adaley Burnette, who walked two batters and allowed

See Softball, Page 3B