

# Sports

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## Panthers keep it simple in tune-up game ahead of Hwy. 515 rivalry

### The Michael Perry era gets underway Friday with visit to Fannin County

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@ngame.com

**Dalton** - First-year head coach Michael Perry's goals were crystal clear heading into last Friday's 13-7 scrimmage victory at Southeast Whitfield: Stay healthy and do not provide next week's opponent with any valuable game film.

Was he successful? Well, to use a baseball analogy, Perry is batting .500.

While the Panthers rolled out an overly vanilla offensive game plan, they could not avoid the nip of the injury bug, which took a bite out of three varsity contributors on Friday night.

"Keeping it basic: Yes. Injury-wise: No," Perry answered when asked if the team accomplished its objectives. "We had three guys go down on Friday, so we're really banged up heading into week one."

As for the game itself, Perry granted his seal of approval to a defense, that, for the most part, stymied Southeast Whitfield's methodical Wing-T rushing attack - a system rarely seen in today's up-tempo, air-it-out style of football.

"I was very proud of our guys [on defense]," Perry said. "They did a really good job, especially having to go against the Wing-T this early in the year. One area we need to improve on is forcing turnovers. We're going to have to get some turnovers if we want to beat Fannin."

Meanwhile, Perry admits he has his work cut out for him on offense entering Friday's Hwy. 515 rivalry showdown vs. Fannin County.

"The main thing was just running our base offense and getting out of there healthy," Perry said. "But after watching our film, [I realized] we have to do better on third down. We converted around 29%, which is terrible. We also had six drops - one on third down and another on fourth down."

Ahead of last week's



Senior running back/cornerback Eli Peugh lobbies for a turnover after SEW muffed a first quarter punt return. Photo/Todd Forrest

tune-up, both coaches agreed to forego designed quarterback runs and keep scrambling at a minimum. As a result, Union County saw several lengthy runs from senior Logan Helcher blown dead by the officials just as he broke into the open field.

"There were two or three occasions where Logan would have scored [had the officials not blown the whistle]," Perry said. "And if he didn't score, he would have gained at least 50 yards."

On Union's opening possession, Helcher and the Panthers were denied a fresh set of downs when the whistle blew as the QB broke out of the backfield. Two plays later, Helcher rolled out of the pocket and hit senior Keyton Chitwood deep over the middle, but the play was ruled dead before the throw. The drive eventually stalled at midfield despite an early 22-yard hookup with first-year wide receiver Caleb

John.

The defense forced a quick three and out, and Union took over at its own 11 where Helcher was once again denied access to the wide-open real estate in front of him on third down.

The ensuing Raiders drive moved 34 yards on 11 plays but stalled at the 21. Their 38-yard field goal attempt drifted wide right and the Panthers set up shop at the 20.

Junior running back Caleb Rogers spelled senior Eli Peugh on Union's third series and broke out of the pack for 51-yards before coughing up the football - resulting in the game's only turnover.

Two questionable pass interference calls extended the Southeast drive, but the stingy defense stiffened and forced another punt with 8:09 remaining before halftime.

After trading punts, Union regained possession



Junior lineman Noah Helton (67) wraps up a SEW ball carrier during the second half while junior safety Wilson Walker (7) lowers the boom. Photo/Todd Forrest

just 45 yards from paydirt with 4:34 on the clock. This time, the Panthers capitalized, requiring just three plays to grab a 7-0 advantage. Chitwood and Helcher accounted for all the heavy lifting, beginning with a 35-yard completion. A Helcher scramble was blown dead for a 10-yard loss but he immediately went back to his favorite target on 2nd and 20, hitting the senior receiver on a quick slant that ended with a 20-yard touchdown when Chitwood slipped a tackle and outran the secondary across the goal line. Sophomore Ethan McBride connected on point-after for a 7-0 lead.

"I'm very pleased with Keyton Chitwood, not just his pass catching but the effort he gives even when he's not getting the ball," Perry said.

Despite converting a 4th and 3 on the ground, the home team was forced to the air in the half's final moments, but two sacks and a 3rd-and-18 in-

completion preserved Union's 7-0 advantage at the break.

Southeast answered on the opening series of the second half, moving 75 yards on just seven plays - highlighted by consecutive runs of 25 yards and capped by a six-yard sweep.

Both squads would exchange punts one more time before handing the keys to the junior varsity. Sophomore quarterback Caiden Tanner took the reins late in the third and provided instant offense - leading a 10-play, 67-yard scoring drive for a 13-7 lead at the 11:32 mark of the fourth.

Freshman Connor Schuknecht carried the ball four times on the drive, including the game's final score that he punched in from the 3-yard line.

"He was extremely impressive and I was very proud of him," said Perry, complimenting his freshman back. "He ran over probably eight

players when he got to carry the ball.

"Overall, I was very pleased with the young group. The O-line did a great job and Caiden Tanner moved the offense down the field."

On Friday, the Panthers travel to Blue Ridge looking to avoid consecutive losses to Fannin County for the first time since 2006-2007.

"We're going to have to have a great week of practice in all phases because Fannin County is a very good football team," Perry said. "They are very strong and physical up front. But what scares me is their [new starting] quarterback, because he can run very well."

"I'm looking forward to my first game and it's a rivalry game against a great opponent so I'm excited and looking forward to it."

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Friday at Fannin County High School.



Head coach Michael Perry (center) instructs quarterback Logan Helcher (right) and wide receiver Keyton Chitwood (9) between possessions during the first half of Friday's scrimmage contest at Southeast Whitfield. Photo/Todd Forrest



Connor Schuknecht trucks a SEW defender during the Panthers second-half scoring drive that ended with a Schuknecht TD. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Softball: Union halts three-game slide with 7-2 win over Pace Academy

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
tforrest@nganews.com

The Union County bats struggled to generate any consistency last week during three straight losses before closing the four-game stretch with 13 hits in a 7-2 victory over Pace Academy on Friday night in Dalton.

Non-region play resumed Monday with a rematch vs. Dawson County (0-4). The Lady Panthers visit Class A Public's third-ranked Commerce (1-1) on Thursday.

**Lady Panthers 7, Pace Academy 2** (five innings) - Sierra Burnette, Lexi Sisum and Emma Roxbury combined for three doubles and nine total bases as Union County (3-3) scored the game's first seven runs in a 7-2 runaway to close out the week.

Burnette went the distance, scattering five hits, walking three and allowing two earned runs. More importantly, the defense played error-free softball behind her as the sophomore righty fanned just three batters.

Additionally, Burnette helped spot herself an early lead when the sophomore followed a Sisum double with a two-bagger of her own, resulting in a 1-0 lead on a Roxbury single.

The Lady Panthers made it 3-0 after Burnette escaped a bases-loaded situation in the second and Union was the benefactor of a defensive slip in the bottom half of the frame. Leading 2-0 on base hits from Kaelyn Jones and Katie Byers, along with a costly Pace error, senior Caley Davis bunted home Katie Byers for the team's second 3-0 lead in five days.

This time around, Burnette and the defense made it stick as consecutive flyouts ended a Pace threat in the third and the Lady Panthers sent eight batters to the plate in their half of the inning.

Burnette stroked a leadoff double and courtesy runner Jewell Massey scored on a single from Roxbury, who made it 5-0 when she crossed home on a wild pitch. Katie Byers sparked another run with a two-out bunt single, then Davis brought her home with her second ribby of the day.

Singles from Sisum and Tori Tracy put two aboard in



Senior Ansley Collins ropes a single into left field to ignite a run-scoring third frame at White County. Photo/Todd Forrest

the fourth when a double-steal moved both runners into scoring position. With no outs and Union County threatening, pinch-hitter Georgia Patton lifted a fly ball to center - deep enough to score Sisum and build a 7-0 advantage.

Pace chipped away in the fifth before the time limit brought things to a close after five innings. A hit batter and two four-pitch walks packed the bags with one away when Pace broke up the shutout with a base hit to center.

A pop fly resulted in the second out, but a bases-loaded hit batter trimmed the Union lead to 7-2. Burnette settled down by inducing three swings and misses to slam the door and stop a three-game skid.

The losing streak matched the worst August slide (2019) under head coach Stephen Mitchell.

**Lumpkin County 4, Lady Panthers 3** - The week began on Monday, Aug. 9 with an opening-day rematch in Dahlonega. However, Union County could not protect its late-inning lead in the second meeting, surrendering four runs in the seventh during a walk-off loss.

Four days removed from a six-inning no-hitter vs. the Indians (1-3) in Blairsville, Burnette fanned a career-high eight batters on Monday, but

four unearned runs in the final frame proved fateful.

The heart of the Union County lineup -- Sisum, Roxbury and Jones -- did most of the offensive damage, accounting for six of the Lady Panthers' eight hits and two RBIs.

After putting up a two-spot in the first, Union added an insurance run in the fifth when Burnette reached on an error and came around to score on a Sisum base hit. With two on and one out following Sisum's RBI, all the Lady Panthers could muster was a two-out walk, leaving the bases full.

Union County went down in order during the sixth, then stranded another one-out single from Sisum in the final frame, setting the stage for Lumpkin's rally.

A nine-pitch at-bat to start the bottom half of the seventh ended with a Union error, followed by a walk that brought the tying run to the plate. A groundout to second moved both runners into scoring position, and a flyout to right field granted Burnette two quick outs while still nursing a three-run advantage.

A first-pitch, two-run single up the middle from the ensuing batter trimmed the margin to 3-2. A bloop to right field put the winning run aboard and a wild pitch advanced two into scoring position. Meanwhile,



Emma Roxbury fires to first, completing the 4-6-3 double play started by Chloe Potts (11). Photo/Todd Forrest

the Lumpkin pinch-hitter battled Burnette into a 3-2 count before walking off the Lady Panthers via a two-run single to center.

**No. 8 White County 6, Lady Panthers 2** - Continuous lightning delays canceled Wednesday's meeting in Blairsville, but luckily, a Thursday contest in Cleveland was already slated between the two squads.

A five-run second doomed Union County on Thursday with Burnette victimized by four errors while plunking three batters in the frame. Despite taking a two-hitter into the sixth, Burnette received little in the way of run support as the Lady Panthers were limited to just four hits -- three off the bat of senior Ansley Collins -- while striking out 10 times in the loss.

With two down in the bottom of the second, three hit batters and three errors put Union County into a 4-0 hole. Burnette's first walk of the game kept the inning alive when the fourth fielding miscue of the frame opened up a 5-0 White County advantage.

The Warriors pitching recorded the first six outs via strikeout despite Union loading the bags in the first with three bases on balls. Collins put her team on the board during the

third after lacing a one-out single and stealing a base. Collins moved to third on an error, setting up a run-scoring bunt from Sisum.

Burnette escaped a minor jam in the fourth when a one-out grounder to Chloe Potts incited a 4-6-3 double play, but eighth-ranked White County extended its lead to 6-1 in the sixth with a leadoff double and a one-out single. After White loaded the bases with a hit and a walk, Burnette limited the damage with a three-pitch K to close the frame.

Union refused to go away in the seventh, beginning with a Seabolt single and a Davis walk. Collins' third hit scored Massey with one away, but consecutive pop-ups ended the threat with runners at second and third.

**Pepperell 8, Union County 2** (six innings) - In the first of two Friday night contests at Dalton's Heritage Point Park, the Dragons used a six-spot in the bottom half of the fourth to extend a 2-1 lead and cruise to an easy victory.

The pitching trio of Tracy, Sloane Dyer and Burnette combined to surrender six hits and three earned runs while fanning two and walking three. Sisum contributed half of Union's four hits, going 2 for 2

with a pair of runs and a walk. Collins doubled in the first inning during a 1-for-3 afternoon. Emily Byers plated Sisum with a sacrifice fly while finishing 0 for 2.

Union County left the bases loaded in the first and took a scoreless tie into the third where Pepperell broke through with consecutive RBI groundouts, aided by two errors and a free pass to start the frame.

Sisum and Roxbury answered with back-to-back hits in the fourth, but an error off the bat of Seabolt resulted in the Lady Panthers' only run when Aubrie Banton lined into a double play.

The Dragons used small-ball to push their edge to 4-1 in the bottom of the fourth until the bottom fell out on a Union County squad clinging to life.

With two down and a runner on third, Pepperell singled to extend its lead to 5-1. Later in the inning, a hit batter, a two-run error and two base hits made it an 8-1 game.

Both teams stranded the leadoff hitter in the fifth and Union manufactured its second and final run in the sixth. Emily Byers' sac fly made it 8-2 after Sisum bunted her way aboard and advanced to third with one out.



Aubrie Banton made her 2021 debut at White Co. after an injury cost the senior two games. Photo/Todd Forrest



Freshman Sloane Dyer forces a swing-and-miss strike three vs the White County JV on Wednesday, Aug. 11. Dyer made her varsity debut on Friday, working 1 2/3 scoreless innings vs. Pepperell. Photo/Todd Forrest