

Sports

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Football: Turnovers loom large as Rebels pull away in third quarter

Union seeks program's first-ever win over No. 7 Commerce in Friday's home opener

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Blue Ridge - An early defensive battle quickly went south for the visiting Panthers as Fannin County struck for two touchdowns in the final 3:39 of the first half before putting the game out of reach with two more in the third quarter, en route to a 34-7 victory.

"When you turn the ball over four times, you're not going to beat anyone," Union County first-year head coach Michael Perry said. "Our defense was put into too many tough situations because of the turnovers and only converting 33% of our third downs. Those are some of the areas that must be addressed and will be addressed."

Union County's lone score came with just over 2:30 to play when senior quarterback Logan Helcher hit junior Griffen Young down the seam for an 83-yard catch and run. Ethan McBride's point-after brought the final score to 34-7.

"Logan Helcher is a warrior," Perry said. "He took a lot of shots and kept getting back up. You'd never be able to tell the score based on how he played, we just have to get better as a group."

Turnovers and penalties eventually helped the Rebels pull away during the second half after the Panthers overcame a costly miscue on the game's opening possession.

On the 10th play of Fannin County's first series of 2021, the Union defense hastily jumped offsidelines on fourth and 6 from its 9-yard line but stuffed the Rebels moments later on fourth and inches.

Fannin County forced the Panthers into a three-and-out and took over at the Union 44-yard line. A 27-yard scamper moved the Rebels inside the red zone for the second time when junior safety Wilson Walker picked off a pass near the goal line and returned the interception out to the 15.

Landon Panter applied pressure up the middle -- drawing a declined holding penalty in the process -- and flushed the Fannin quarterback out of the pocket, forcing an errant off-balance throw that floated into the hands of Walker.

Unfortunately, Union County suffered another three-



Junior safety Wilson Walker returns an interception that kept Fannin County off the board in the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

and-out, but penalties derailed the ensuing Rebels' possession. The Panthers finally moved the chains just over three minutes into a scoreless second quarter when junior Sam Page hauled in Helcher's 16-yard dart across the middle. Union would be forced to punt four plays later, but Helcher's kick rolled dead inside the 3-yard line.

A 19-yard run moved the Rebels out of their own end-zone's shadow when a holding penalty brought back a 78-yard quarterback keeper. However, Fannin kept the drive alive with an 11-yard gain on third down, followed by passing plays of 19, 10 and 23 yards, advancing the Rebels inside the Union County 12-yard line.

Consecutive runs of 4 and 8 yards put Fannin County in front 7-0 with 3:39 left in the half.

A 13-yard scramble by Helcher on a third-and-9 put the Panthers in business until two penalties brought up a third and 30. Pushed back inside his own 20 and faced with near-insurmountable odds, Helcher stepped up in the pocket and fired 20 yards downfield, hitting Young on the near sideline. The junior cut back inside and found some running room across the 40, but as he neared midfield, he was

stripped from behind and Fannin pounced on the loose ball at their own 45.

"We had 18 missed assignments, people lined up wrong and running the wrong play," Perry said. "That's something that will definitely be cleaned up."

"With all that said, Fannin County is a very good team. Coach (Chad) Cheatham and his staff do a great job and No. 5 (Seth Reece) is one heck of a football player."

With 2:25 left in the half, the Rebels needed just three plays and 32 seconds to build a 14-0 advantage, scoring on a 44-yard completion.

"Our defense played well in the first half, we just got worn down a little bit due to the lack of execution on offense," Perry said. "We also need to be smarter about how we use [our players] because we have a lot of guys that play both ways. You can't have kids out on the field for over 100 snaps and we had a couple that played over 100."

Another fumble killed Union's drive to begin the third after Helcher orchestrated the Panthers' best series of the night. Starting at the 23, the senior QB found fellow senior Keyton Chitwood for 14 yards on second down. A pass to Walker



Logan Helcher fires downfield during the first half of Friday's loss. The senior QB accounted for all of Union's 254 total yards. Photo/Todd Forrest

went for 6 yards, then a third-and-4 throw to Chitwood was good for 5 yards.

Faced with a fourth-and-1 at the Fannin County 40, Helcher kept it himself for 2 yards, setting up a first down at the 38. On the very next play, a handoff to Peugh was stood up at the line of scrimmage, allowing a late-arriving defender to jar the ball loose.

"We need to do a much better job on the offensive line and with the running game," Perry said. "There definitely needs to be improvement."

Seven plays later, Fannin County was eyeing another fourth-down situation inside the Union 10-yard line. But the Panthers jumped offsidelines for a second time, awarding the Rebels a first and goal at the 3-yard line. On the very next play, Fannin capped off the drive with a 3-yard plunge to open up a 20-0 lead.

Starting at their own 15, Union County moved the chains with a 10-yard catch and run from Peugh and a 10-yard throw to Chitwood, but a fumbled shotgun snap gifted possession back to the home team.

Fortunately, a holding penalty and a sack from sophomore Jensen Goble forced Fannin into its only punt of the second half. The Rebels regained possession

after a Panthers' three-and-out and immediately pushed the margin to 26-0 on a 23-yard hookup over the middle with 1:19 left in the quarter.

The third closed with a Fannin penalty awarding Union a fresh set of down, but the fourth quarter got underway with the Panthers' third fumble of the half.

"Not taking anything away from Fannin County, but if we do what we're supposed to do, it's still a game going into the fourth quarter," Perry said. "But we didn't and the score showed it."

In contrast, the Rebels did exactly what needed to be done, putting the Panthers away with carries of 12, 14 and 7 yards - the latter opening up a 34-0 score following a 2-point conversion.

A Union three-and-out and a Fannin turnover on downs set up Young's 83-yard score in the final minutes. With a first down on the Panthers' 17, Young lined up in the slot to Helcher's right and worked a seam route down the middle of the field. Helcher connected with Young at the 35 when the Fannin safety attempted to jump the route but didn't get his head turned around in time. Helcher's throw zipped past the defender's earhole and into the hands of Young, who won a 65-

yard foot race to the endzone.

Helcher finished 15 for 28 through the air with 169 yards and a score. He also ran for 58 yards on eight carries.

Overall, the Panthers were limited to just 53 rushing yards on 23 carries.

Fannin County totaled 434 total yards, 200 coming on the ground, which marked the Rebels' first 200-yard rushing game in the series since 2016.

Game Notes:

*Union's 83-yard score was Young's first touchdown and Helcher's longest completion. The score also prevented Union's first shutout at the hands of Fannin County since 1995.

*The 27-point final margin marks the program's worst loss to Fannin since 2006 - a 43-7 rout in Blue Ridge.

*The teams' 41 combined points on Friday were the lowest total since Union's 23-7 win in 2012 and the lowest combined output in Blue Ridge since 2000 when Union blanked the Rebels 36-0.

*Walker's red zone interception was the first takeaway of his career.

Looking ahead: No. 7 Commerce visits Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium for the first time since 1999 on Friday night. The Panthers have never defeated the Tigers in 14 tries.

Under the direction of first-year coach Mark Hollars, Commerce survived a 10-0 defensive struggle over neighboring Banks County last Friday night.

Entering Fannin County, the Panthers were down three linemen and a running back due to injuries and quarantines. This week, Union is short another two-way starting lineman after a concussion on Friday. Meanwhile, the quarantine list continues to grow, leaving Coach Perry's squad even thinner ahead of Friday's contest.

"We're looking forward to the challenge of defending our home turf against a great program like Commerce," Perry said. "I'm super excited for my first chance to be at home in our beautiful stadium. It's going to be a lot of fun."

In addition to being the home opener, this Friday is Military Appreciation night. All military veterans will receive free admission to the game.

Due to the number of players quarantined, Thursday's junior varsity game has been canceled.

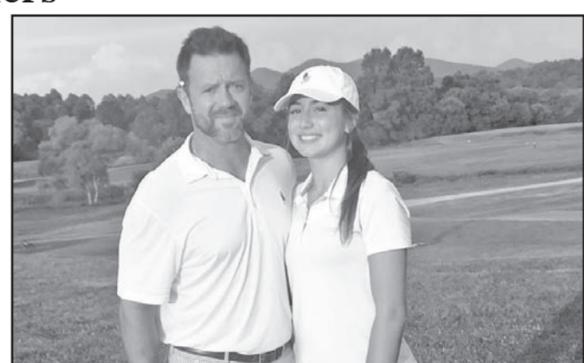
Old Union Golf Course Member-Guest Tournament flight winners



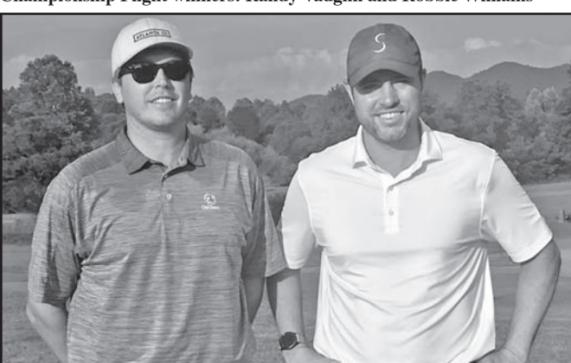
Championship Flight winners: Randy Vaughn and Robbie Williams



Second Flight winners: Daniel Wehunt and Tony Smith



Fourth Flight winners: Lawrence and Sofia McNabb.



First Flight winners: Daniel Davenport and Jordan Rackie



Third Flight winners: Ryan Burks and Josh Colwell

Benton MacKaye Trail Association upcoming hikes

The following hikes are sponsored by the Benton MacKaye Trail Association. The current social distancing and health rules are used by hike Leaders.

August 27 (Friday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors an easy 5-mile hike on the BMT Highway 515 to Weaver Creek and return. Dog friendly hike (adult humans may bring a leashed

dog). Hike Leader Ken Cissna. For more information contact hikeleaderKC@bmtamail.org.

August 30 (Monday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors easy/moderate 4-5 mile hike on the Amadahy trail at Carter's Lake. Hike Leader Steve Demnison. For more information contact hikeleaderSD@bmtamail.org. NT(Aug25,22)CA

XC: Union ladies take home individual and team gold at Meeks Park

Union County men place third behind Fannin and Lumpkin in season-opening race

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County's 2021 cross country season got underway at Meeks Park on Thursday, Aug. 19 with the girls sweeping both top spots behind junior first-year runner Ashley Shipes.

Seniors Hana Gregory and Allie Brey finished sixth and eighth, respectively, leading Union County past Fannin County and the defending Region 8-AA (team and individual) Champion Rabun County.

With 44 points, Union edged the Rebels by three (47). The Wildcats finished 14 points back at 58.

Lumpkin County, Towns County and Gilmer rounded out the top six.

The Union Ladies featured three freshmen and a sophomore among its top-seven runners last week. Freshman Ariel McCarter placed fourth and sophomore Natalie Payne came in fifth.



Senior Hunter Hartzog follows sophomore Zander Rotko to the finish line. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

Freshmen Noel Hyatt and Lydia Wagner took home sixth and seventh, respectively.

In the men's race, a pair of sophomores, Benton Gregory and Zander Rotko, paced the Panthers to a third-place

finish. Union's 68 points was eight back of second-place Fannin County.

Lumpkin County ran away with the competition, tallying 43 points in the win.

Gregory finished fourth and Rotko came in sixth to lead

the Union men. Senior Hunter Hartzog turned in a seventh-place performance.

Sophomore Wes Seiler placed 17th and fellow 10th grader Braden Cobb came in 34th. Junior Ethan Rouse was 38th and sophomore Anderson



Senior Hana Gregory places sixth at Meeks Park. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

Clouse finished 47th.

Union County travels to Chestatee on Saturday to compete against one of the deepest fields of the season at the 17th Annual War Eagle Invitational.

The 2019 race (last year

was canceled) saw 22 teams participate, ranging from Hart County and Central Gwinnett to Towns County and Hiwassee Dam, NC.

Saturday's race gets underway at 9 a.m.

Softball: Burnette, Davis power Lady Panthers past Dawson County

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

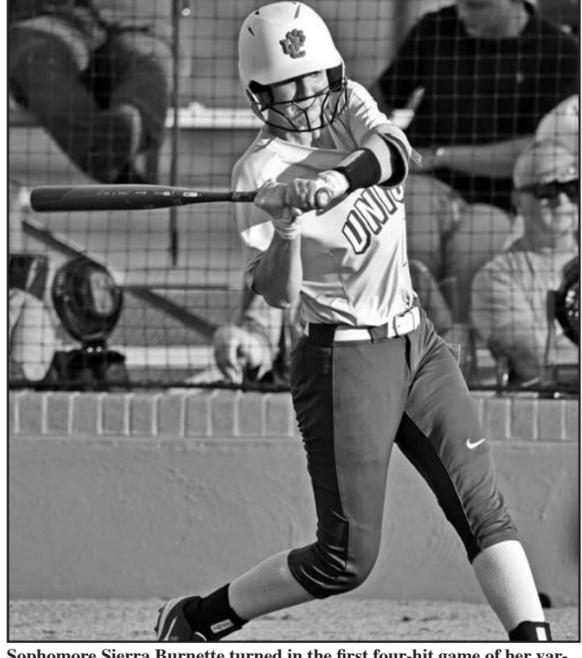
Dawsonville - The Lady Panthers (4-3) were victorious in their only matchup of the week, belting 13 hits in a 7-3 win at Dawson County on Monday, Aug. 16.

Tori Tracy picked up her second win of the year, departing with a 6-2 lead after a 73-pitch outing that saw the senior right-hander surrender five hits and three runs (two earned) through five-plus innings.

Union County spotted Tracy a 6-1 advantage in the top of the sixth when Sierra Burnette capped off the first 4-hit game of her varsity career with an RBI double. The sophomore finished 4 for 4 with 3 RBIs (also a career-high), falling a homer short of the cycle.

The three-run sixth opened with an Aubrie Banton single and a Caley Davis triple. Chloe Potts bunted Dyer home for a 5-3 lead, and Collins doubled to keep the inning alive for Burnette.

Freshman Sloane Dyer nailed down her first high school save, entering a 6-2 contest with no outs and a runner on second in the sixth inning. A groundout and a wild pitch made it a 6-3 game, but Dyer



Sophomore Sierra Burnette turned in the first four-hit game of her varsity career last Tuesday in Dawson County. Photo/Todd Forrest

didn't allow a single Tiger to reach base over the final two frames.

The Lady Panthers padded Dyer's lead with a run in the seventh when Kaelyn Jones singled and pinch-runner Georgia Patton later came around on a Davis single.

Davis finished 2 for 4 with 2 RBIs and a run.

Union County never trailed after grabbing a 1-0 first-inning lead following a Collins hit-by-pitch and Burnette's first RBI of the day - a line drive to center - two batters later.

An error kept the Dawson County second alive, and the Tigers evened the score on a stolen base and a run-scoring single. The Lady Panthers



Caley Davis is off to a blistering start in 2021. On the heels of a 2-for-4 day at Dawson County, the senior third baseman is slashing .313/.368/.438 and hitting .667 with runners in scoring position. Photo/Todd Forrest

finally offered Tracy some breathing room with two runs in the fifth, beginning with an error of the bat of Lexi Sisum to start the frame.

Burnette tripled home Sisum for a 2-1 advantage and Emma Roxbury's opposite-field single scored Burnette.

Junior Jaycee Seabolt finished 2 for 3 for Union

County.

The Lady Panthers host Fannin County at 5 p.m. Thursday before taking part in another weekend tournament at Victor Lord Park in Winder.

The action begins on Friday at 6 p.m. vs. Chapel Hill from Class 5A. At 8 p.m., the Lady Panthers will face Class-A Johnson County.

Saturday's slate opens at 9 a.m. vs. GISA's Bulloch Academy. At 11 a.m., Union County meets Class A Public's fourth-ranked Emanuel County Institute (ECI).

The Lady Panthers return home on Monday, Aug. 30 to host Class 4A's 8th-ranked Madison County.

Volleyball: Union stumbles vs. Dawson after flooding quashes season opener

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

No. 8 Union County dropped its first match of the season in straight sets to Dawson County (7-1) last Thursday, Aug. 19 in Blairsville.

Following the cancellation of Tuesday's season-opening tri-match with Lumpkin County and Murray County due to statewide flooding, a coronavirus-related concern forced Union to start its 2021 season without the services of second-year head coach Anna Chapman. The Panthers went on to drop all three sets (16-25, 13-25, 22-25) of the best-of-three contest.

Under the direction of assistant coach Seth Merritt, Union County came out clicking in the early going of set one, seizing an 11-8 advantage and forcing a Tigers timeout.

After the stoppage, it was all Dawson County the rest of the way. The visitors rattled off a 9-0 run to build a 17-11 lead. Union pulled within 17-13 but got no closer as Dawson outscored the Panthers 8-3 the rest



Assistant Seth Merritt handled the varsity and JV coaching responsibilities vs. Dawson. Photo/Todd Forrest

of the way.

A 1-0 score was Union's only lead of the second set as Dawson raced ahead by for an 8-3 advantage. Trailing 10-6, the Panthers would get no closer as the Tigers continued to extend their margin with leads of 14-6, 15-7, 17-8 and 21-9.

Union's last gasp came when they cut the deficit to 10 at 22-12, but three of the next four points went to Dawson County.

The Tigers held off Union in set three by a score of 25-22. No stats from Thursday's match were available at press time.

The Panthers visit Chestatee on Tuesday at 5 p.m.. The Lady War Eagles are currently 10-0 on the year, including a 2-0 win (25-14, 25-15) over Dawson County.

Chapman is expected to return to the Union County bench this week.



Senior Morgan Fussell vs. Dawson County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Ladies Mountain Tennis team second at State Championship

The Ladies Mountain Tennis 40 and over team recently traveled to LaGrange to compete in the USTA Georgia Tri-Level State Championships, coming home with the silver medal!

The ladies had an excellent tournament, starting off on Friday with a 2-1 win over Silver Crescent/ Peachtree City in the morning and sweeping the Lake Oconee team 3-0 in the afternoon.

Those wins put our Mountain Mamas at the top of the leader board going into the second day of round robin play.

Saturday proved to be a tougher day, with our local ladies dropping the morning match to a second Peachtree City team 1-2 before facing an extremely tough Macon team in the afternoon match. Our



(Front row L-R) Nancy Wenz (Blairsville), Kim Duval (Blairsville), Jackie Hughes (Blairsville). (Back L-R) Mary Nell Cullpepper (Hiawassee), Linda Gebbert (Suches), Holly Cannon (Young Harris), Patty Lee (Blairsville), Gail DeLuca (Blairsville), Tammy Pearson (Brasstown, NC), Nancy Honeycutt (Hiawassee).

3.0 line made short work of the Macon team putting the first point on the board for Mountain

Tennis. Our 4.0 line went down the first set, but fought back to

take the second set and force a deciding tiebreaker set.

Meanwhile on the 3.5 line Mountain was holding on to a slim lead in their second set. Mountain ended up going down to Macon 1-2, but our overall record left us in third going into Sunday's semifinals.

On Sunday, Mountain came out strong taking all three lines from the CORTA/ Columbus team, setting up a final in the afternoon that was a rematch with the Macon team.

Once again our 3.0 line jumped out in from and ticked off their win in short order putting Mountain in the early lead. Our 3.5 and 4.0 lines started more slowly, but were gaining momentum before Macon summoned a new reserve of tough shots and closed out both lines to take the win 2-1.



Senior Emma Whicker vs. Dawson County. Photo/Todd Forrest