

# Sports

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## XC: Both Union teams second at Region, qualify for State meet

### Seniors Hana Gregory and Hunter Hartzog take home silver

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**Helen** - Union County High School notched a pair of runner-up finishes at last Wednesday's Region 8-AA Championships at Unicoi State Park to qualify for Friday's Class AA State meet in Carrollton.

Originally scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 29, a multi-day weather forecast of wind and rain pushed the region meet up to Wednesday, Oct. 28, which forced the Union County ladies to compete without its top runner, junior Ashley Shipes.

Shipes, who had an FFA commitment last Wednesday, is still eligible to race at this Friday's State Championship.

As a result, the short-handed girls finished one point behind Region Champion Rabun County and individual champion Molly Jo Wright. (In two prior meetings earlier this season, Union County defeated Rabun County each time, with Shipes claiming a pair of victories over Wright.)

Union still went on to place five runners in the top nine at region for a total of 29 points. However, Rabun County put four runners inside the top six to finish with 28.

Senior Hana Gregory



led the way for Union, finishing in second at 22 minutes, 23 seconds - 24 ticks behind first-place Wright. Ellie Adams placed third overall at 23:01 and senior Allie Brey came in seventh with a time of 24:17.

Lydia Wagner (24:28) and Natalie Payne (24:59) rounded out Union's top-five runners, placing eighth and ninth, respectively.

Senior Katelynn Rash placed 13th at 26:21 and Ariel McCarter was 19th at 27:43.

Other region representatives headed to Carrollton from the four-team race will be third-place Elbert County (80 points) and fourth-place Banks County (92).

On the boys' side, senior Hunter Hartzog paced the

Panthers with a second-place performance at Unicoi, clocking in at 17:33 - nearly a minute back of Banks County's Buck Ledford (16:37).

Overall, Union County (46) fell 10 points shy of Banks (36) but defeated third-place Riverside (52) by a half-dozen, with fourth-place Rabun County (87) barely visible in the top three's rearview.

Benton Gregory picked up a top-five finish, crossing the finish line at 18:11. Zander Rotko was ninth at 19:09 and Wes Seiler placed 13th at 19:54.

Anderson Clouse rounded Union's top-five with a 17th-place finish and a time of 20:28. Other Panthers included Grayden Cobb in 23rd



with a time of 21:05 and Ethan Rouse in 25th place at 21:10.

The Class AA State Championships get underway on Friday when the starting gun fires at 9 a.m. in the girls' race and 9:45 a.m. for the guys. Union County cross country is searching for the program's seventh state title after the boys won a team State Championship in 2018 and the ladies took home back-to-back individual state titles (Zoe Sanchez) in 2018 and 2019.

Union County won the Class AA girls' individual championship (Emma Garrison) in 2012 and 2013, while the men won an individual Class AA title (Chris Jones) in 2007.



Clockwise: Union County ladies with second-place trophy. Union men with trophy. Coaches Beau Kelley and Paige Dyer with all of Union's 2021 region hardware. Photos courtesy of UCHS

## Panthers have no answer for Rabun on Stockton's record-breaking evening

By Todd Forrest  
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Rabun County senior quarterback Gunner Stockton broke the state record of 161 passing touchdowns previously held by former Cartersville and Clemson standout Trevor Lawrence in the Wildcats' 56-14 victory at Union County on Friday.

The five-star University of Georgia commit finished with five touchdown passes as Rabun built a 56-7 halftime lead. The record-breaker came late in the first quarter as Stockton flipped a 1-yard completion into the endzone with junior linebacker Elijah Helton draped around his waist.

He would go on to throw another four touchdowns in the half, including a 20-yarder to open up a 28-0 advantage after one quarter. He connected on an 81-yard score early in the second for a 35-0 lead, giving the Wildcats five touchdowns on their first 11 plays from scrimmage.

"When you're playing a great team like that you can't miss tackles and make stupid mistakes," Union head coach Michael Perry said.

Rabun added a 9-yard scoring strike and a 16-yard run that extended the margin to 49-7, followed by a 5-yard touchdown pass with 1:04 remaining in the half.

Stockton's record comes on the heels of a record-setting performance last month when he broke Deshaun Watson's state record for total career touchdowns.

Union County's lone first-half score came on fourth-and-goal at the nine when Logan Helcher found a diving Caiden Tanner in the front corner of the endzone with 7:11 left in the second.

The touchdown was set up by a Helton fumble recovery at the Rabun 14-yard line.



Caiden Tanner (17) dives in front of a Rabun defensive back to make the grab for Union's first score of the game. Photo/Todd Forrest

A Rabun pass interference and offside advanced Union to the five when a handoff to Tanner moved the Panthers inside the 3-yard line. Tanner was smothered for a loss on second down, then an incomplete pass and a false start brought up fourth down from the nine.

On the scoring play, Helcher immediately looked left toward Trace Wright but the Wildcats were in tight man coverage on the outside. With the backside defensive end applying pressure in the backfield, Helcher rolled right toward the boundary where Tanner had a half-step on the cornerback. Before the defensive back could turn around and find the football, Helcher fired low and inside where only his receiver could make a play, and that's exactly what Tanner did, securing the catch two-yards deep in the endzone.

With a running clock coming out of halftime, Union cut the deficit to 56-14 at the midway point of the third behind a steady running attack led by junior Cayleb Rogers and freshman Connor Schuknecht.

Starting from the 30,

three gives to Rogers moved the Panthers inside the Rabun 40. Following three short runs, Union faced fourth and 5 but Helcher hit Chitwood over the middle for 20.

A screen to sophomore receiver Kooper Ashcraft went for 14 yards, setting up the Panthers with a first and goal at the one, where Schuknecht powered his way in with 6:12 left in the third.

The ensuing Rabun drive stalled shy of midfield and Union took over inside the five following a punt. A pair of runs by Helcher and a quick throw to sophomore Tyler Grasty moved the Panthers inside Rabun territory early in the fourth where they turned it over on downs.

The Wildcats took over at their own 15 and eventually punted back to Union after moving across the 50 and chewing up most of the remaining game clock.

The Panthers finished with 197 yards of offense with 132 coming on the ground. Rabun piled up 476 yards behind 256 yards rushing. The Wildcats scored on first-half runs of 25, 74 and 16 yards.



The Panthers take the field on a cold, rainy night at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union turned it over three times, including a first-half fumble that set up a 16-yard toss sweep for a 49-7 score.

"Early on we had some dropped passes that really hurt us," Perry said. "We had chances to keep the offense moving but had turnovers and passes go right through our hands. We just didn't execute."

**Up next:** The Panthers host Gilmer (3-6) on Friday for Senior Night. Kickoff is slated for 7:30 p.m. with pre-game festivities at 7 p.m.

Gilmer is under the direction of first-year coach Paul Standard, who spent 20 seasons at St. Pius before packing his bags for Ellijay.

Between 2001-2020, Standard won 174 games and eight region titles at his former school. Standard led the Golden Lions to the State finals in 2012 and 2014 with Final Four berths coming in 2006 and 2017.

Union County is looking to avoid its first seven-loss regular season since 2011. Meanwhile, with four wins, Gilmer can match its highest win total since 2014.

"Having a non-region game this late in the year is a

first for me, but I'm excited for Senior Night and hopefully we can send these guys out on a high note and get ready for the playoffs," Perry said. "The most important thing is, going into the postseason with some momentum so we're going to do our best to manage injuries, but at the same time, we're going to do everything we can to win the game. Of course, [balancing injuries and playing to win] is something that's always on your mind as a coach and something we deal with."

Unlike Union, Gilmer's season ends on Friday leaving the Bobcats simply playing for bragging rights. With a win, the Panthers will even the all-time series at 9-9 and extend their winning streak over Gilmer to four games.

The first round of the Class AA State Tournament opens Friday, Nov. 12 at either South Atlanta, Columbia or Lovett.

Friday's South Atlanta (7-0 in the region) vs. Columbia (6-1) de facto region title game will finalize the top-three seeds in 6-AA with Union County visiting the No. 2 team. Should South Atlanta win the region,

that sets up a tie for second between Columbia and Lovett (6-2) with the latter owning the tiebreaker via a 16-0 victory over the former on Oct. 22.

A Columbia victory would result in a three-way tie for first, which would be determined by the region's tiebreaker rules.

Although, with South Atlanta rolling, averaging 61 points over its last two outings, including a 59-0 win over KIPP, and Columbia limping (14 ppg in the last two with a 28-0 win vs. KIPP), it appears very likely that Union will visit Lovett in the opening round for the second time (2013) in eight years.

"More than likely, we're going to be playing Lovett, unless something strange happens on Friday," Perry said. "Out of [South Atlanta, Columbia and Lovett] I would rather play Lovett."

"I haven't had a chance to look at any of those teams, but I do know that (former Florida and South Carolina head coach) Will Muschamp's brother, Mike, is still the coach at Lovett."

# Déjà vu: Pace Academy eliminates Union volleyball in the Final Four

## Panthers sweep Dade County in Elite Eight to set up a Final Four rematch

By Todd Forreest  
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Union County's season wrapped up Saturday in the Class AA/A Final Four with a 3-0 loss to defending state champ Pace Academy at LakePoint Sports in Cartersville.

Last week began with promise, however, as the Panthers turned in their best performance of the postseason during a 3-0 sweep of Dade County during Wednesday's Elite Eight round in Blairsville. Unfortunately, Union was unable to find any rhythm during a one-sided loss to second-ranked Pace Academy.

In the victory over Dade, the Panthers jumped out to a 17-10 lead in set one before holding off a furious rally that eventually knotted the score at 18-18. Still tied at 20-20, Union County took five of the final six points to survive 25-21.

A pair of aces from junior Haleigh Helcher helped the Panthers build an early 3-0 advantage in set one. Still ahead 8-5, kills from juniors Sofia Swartz and Saylor Noe extended the margin to 11-5.

On top 14-10, Kaylee Ashcraft and Morgan Fussell provided most of the damage in a 3-0 spurt to build Union's largest lead of the set at 17-10.

An 8-1 run by Dade tied things up at 18-18 with both teams exchanging points for a 20-20 score.

"We were just beating ourselves and that's the only reason they were able to tie it up at 18," Union head coach Anna Chapman said after the win over Dade. "I talked to the setter and hitters about executing [during the timeout] and they went out and did it."

"We played really strong across the board. Everyone contributed. They all did great to-



Sophomore Sofia McNabb sets up a shot during the Elite Eight match vs. Dade County at UCHS. Photo/Todd Forreest

night." Kills from Swartz and Fussell pushed the margin to 22-20 before a Dade error provided Union a 23-20 cushion.

Clinging to a 23-21 lead, Noe and Fussell finished off the Wolverines with consecutive points to put set one in the Panthers' win column.

The second set saw the Panthers take a commanding 2-0 match lead after securing the game-point while clinging to a 24-23 advantage. And this time, it was Union's turn to erase a mid-set deficit, storming back from a 14-9 margin at 16-15.

All square at 19-19, two aces by Noe and an Ashcraft kill put the Panthers on top 22-19. Another kill from Ashcraft made

it 23-20 before Union surrendered consecutive points.

Noe put the home team on the verge at 24-22 when a Union shot sailed out of bounds to keep Dade within a point.

On set point, Dade returned a Fussell shot, setting up a shot attempt by Ashcraft that was blocked, but Fussell deflected the block to sophomore Addison Cross, who fed Ashcraft for the winner.

The Panthers didn't fool around during the third set, blasting Dade County 25-13 and advancing to consecutive Class AA semifinals.

Union jumped out to an early 7-3 lead in the set but the Wolverines responded with four unanswered. The Panthers used



Senior Morgan Fussell with a kill during her final match at UCHS on Saturday in Cartersville. Photo/Todd Forreest

five-straight to take a 12-7 advantage and maintain a 14-11 lead when Ashcraft's kill sparked a 12-0 Union outburst that finished off the visitors.

"It's hard to tell what you're going up against based on film but we had an idea [about Dade] going in, but it all came down to our girls bringing the heat when they needed to," Chapman said. "Early on, we were reacting to [Dade], but we looked a lot better as the match went on."

"We still need to reduce our errors going into Saturday, but I think a lot of that is the adrenaline."

Against Pace, the first set saw the teams swap leads until Pace used a 9-0 run to turn an 8-7 edge into a 17-7 score.

A kill from Swartz stopped the bleeding but Pace eventually prevailed 25-10.

Union trailed 7-6 in set two when the Knights began to pull away with leads of 10-6 and 14-8.

After a serve sailed out of bounds to pull Union within five, Pace scored the next five points to open up a 19-9 margin.

The Panthers kept fighting, using three Fussell kills to trim the deficit to 20-14 but Pace answered with five of the next six points to take a 25-15 win.

A kill by Ashcraft had Union within a point at 5-4 in set three before the Knights used a 12-1 onslaught to put the Panthers away for good in a 25-9 victory. Union County finishes



Kaylee Ashcraft vs. Pace

18-8 on the year - falling one win shy of last year's school record of 19 victories. The Lady Panthers did set a program mark with only eight losses - one fewer than last season.

Union graduates just one senior (Fussell) from its postseason roster and expects to return the team leader in kills and aces (Ashcraft), assists (Sofia McNabb) and digs (Cross) in 2022. Other key contributors this fall were juniors Presley Berry, Mattie Brookshire, Helcher, Noe, Swartz and Elyssa Whicker.

No. 3 Gordon Lee swept No. 1 Lovett in the other Class AA semifinal matchup, setting up a rematch from last year's state title contest.

Along with a near-identical final four from a year ago, there remains little parity across the state in Class AA/A. Entering this weekend's final match, 28 of the 30 contests during the Class AA/A State Tournament ended in 3-0 sweeps. Furthermore, the only two matches that didn't end 3-0 came in the first round and they ended 3-1.

A wrap-up interview with Coach Chapman will be included in next week's edition.

# Softball: No. 3 Dade County, No. 1 Vidalia knocks off Union in Columbus

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**Columbus** - Union County dropped both matchups during last week's trip to Columbus for the Class AA State Championships, surrendering a couple of late insurance runs in a 5-2 first-round loss to No. 3 Dade County, then suffering a 15-1 five-inning defeat at the hands of top-ranked Vidalia.

During Thursday's opener, the Lady Panthers gave third-ranked Dade County all it could handle, but four Union County errors proved too much to overcome despite out-hitting the Wolverines 10-7.

The senior trio of Caley Davis, Kaelyn Jones and Lexi Sisum recorded two hits apiece and sophomore right-hander Sierra Burnette didn't surrender an earned run while taking the hard-luck loss.

Dade County grabbed a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the first after Union County loaded the bases with one out but was unable to manufacture a run.

Burnette fanned the first two hitters to open the second but a two-out double, a passed ball and an infield single spotted the Region 7-AA champs an early advantage.

Senior Emma Roxbury worked a leadoff walk to begin the third and Sisum moved



Ansley Collins is amped after a hit in the Sweet 16. Photo/Todd Forreest

her to second with a sacrifice bunt. Unfortunately, Roxbury couldn't move up on Burnette's pop-fly single to right, putting runners at first and second with one away. Junior Chloe Potts' ground out to first moved Roxbury to third but an inning-ending grounder to second kept the Lady Panthers off the board.

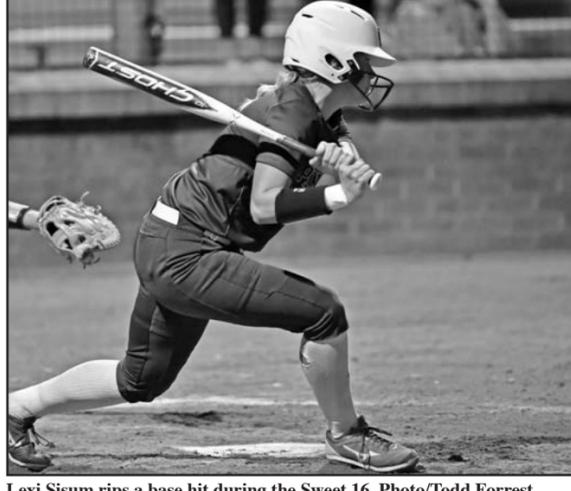
Two Union County fielding errors in the fourth allowed Dade to open up a 2-0 lead, and the Lady Panthers stranded two runners in the top of the fifth when consecutive ground outs ended the threat.

The Wolverines built a 3-0 advantage via three con-

secutive singles in the bottom of the frame, but Burnette escaped without further damage when an inning-ending lineout to short was snagged by Roxbury.

Union County broke through for two in the sixth, pulling within a run at 3-2 when a Jones base hit and an Aubrey Banton sacrifice set the stage for Davis to lace an RBI single to right field, scoring pinch-runner Georgia Patton.

With two away, Collins worked a seven-pitch walk and Burnette loaded the bases with an infield single, allowing Sisum to plate Davis with another infield single. The inning finally came to an end when



Lexi Sisum rips a base hit during the Sweet 16. Photo/Todd Forreest

Burnette stroked a line drive at the centerfielder.

With two down and two aboard in the bottom of the sixth, a two-run error helped Dade open a 5-2 margin heading to the seventh.

The Lady Panthers brought the tying run to the dish with one out when Jones and Banton each singled, but Union would be rung up on consecutive strike-three calls to end the game.

Collins finished 1 for 2 with two walks and Roxbury went 1 for 3 with one free pass. Burnette and Aubrey Baton each finished 1 for 3.

Burnette walked a sea-

son-high five batters while striking out three and giving up seven hits over six innings.

Vidalia put game two out of reach with four in the fourth and seven in the fifth to end the contest with a 15-1 victory after five innings.

Union County went hitless while committing five errors in the field.

Trailing 3-0 in the bottom of the first following back-to-back Indians' home runs, the Lady Panthers pushed across their only run when Collins walked and Roxbury and Sisum both reached on an error.

With the bases loaded and nobody out, Burnette scored

Collins via an RBI groundout before consecutive strikeouts ended the Union threat.

Leading 4-1 in the fourth, Vidalia took advantage of a pair of two-out errors by the Lady Panthers to build an 8-1 lead.

The Indians built a 15-1 score with seven in the fifth as senior Tori Tracy replaced Burnette in the circle before giving way to freshman Sloane Dyer. Vidalia smacked its fourth homer during the frame while taking advantage of three errors, two walks and a hit batter.

Burnette's day ended after 3 2/3 innings, yielding six hits, three homers, three walks and eight runs (six earned).

Tracy lasted 1/3 of an inning, giving up three hits and five earned. Dyer allowed an unearned run and no hits over one inning.

Union County will replace nine seniors heading into 2022 while returning three of its top four pitchers, including Burnette, to go with second baseman Chloe Potts, catcher Gracie Gladding and a handful of underclassmen that saw sporadic action this fall.

Heard County defeated Vidalia in the title game to earn back-to-back Class AA State Championships. Dade County finished third after falling to Heard County and Vidalia in consecutive games.

# Union County's Joe Mancuso plays in front of family, friends at Virginia Tech

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**Blacksburg, VA** - Former Union County standout quarterback Joe Mancuso is taking advantage of his extended opportunity at Richmond (Virginia) University this fall.

Upon graduating from UCHS in the spring of 2016, Mancuso became the Spiders starting quarterback as a redshirt-sophomore in 2018. And despite entering 2020 as a redshirt-senior, Mancuso is suiting up again this fall as a sixth-year graduate student after the NCAA granted athletes an additional year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Sept. 25, Mancuso, now in his fourth-year as the starting QB, led his Spiders into Blacksburg, Virginia to face the Hokies in front of a hostile Lane Stadium crowd. With family and friends in attendance, Mancuso suffered a broken finger after a 299-yard carry on his team's second offensive play.

However, coming off a successful surgery on Sept. 27, Mancuso returned to the field on Oct. 22. Then, one week later he pulled off another impressive comeback when he led an 18-point fourth-quarter



Richmond quarterback Joe Mancuso (third from right) is flanked by family and friends outside of Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium in Blacksburg, Virginia following Richmond's 21-10 loss to the Hokies on Sept. 25.

rally at New Hampshire.

He finished with four total scores while completing 19-of-26 passes for 291 yards and three touchdowns. Mancuso added a team-high 44 yards rushing on 10 carries, including a rushing score and a two-point conversion in the win.

Mancuso ranks sixth all-time in Richmond history with 6,574 yards of total offense (5,174 passing 1,400

rushing).

He is eighth all-time in Richmond history with 5,174 passing yards and seventh all-time with 400 pass completions.

Mancuso is also tied for seventh all-time in Richmond history with 36 passing touchdowns.

In 2021, Mancuso has thrown for 1,155 yards and 10 scores in six games. He also

owns two touchdowns and 174 yards rushing.

Richmond returns home for the next two games, beginning Saturday vs. Townson at 2 p.m.

While at Union, Mancuso led the Panthers to back-to-back nine-win seasons in 2014 and 2015 while setting school records in nearly every passing statistic during his three-year career as the starter.



Richmond QB Joe Mancuso looks downfield before taking off on a 299-yard pickup. On the tackle, the helmet of a Virginia Tech defensive back caught Mancuso's right index finger, knocking him from the game with a broken digit. Photo/Todd Forreest