

Sports

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Lady Panthers claim program's third region title

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County softball secured its first region championship in 11 years and its third overall by mashing four home runs in a 14-9 victory at Banks County on Tuesday, Oct. 4.

"These girls have bought into what [the coaching staff] is selling," Union head coach Carissa Owenby said. "Getting them to come together as a team has been my key focus. My philosophy is 'get them on, get them over and get them in' and the girls have bought into having that selfless attitude at the plate."

However, the Lady Panthers didn't have time for small ball during last week's trip to second-place Banks County.

Senior Jaycee Seabolt finished 4 for 5 with a homer, a double and 5 RBIs as the Lady Panthers seized a 12-0 advantage before giving up eight runs in the bottom of the fifth.

Leading 12-9 in the seventh, Gracie Gladding worked a four-pitch walk and Seabolt belted a two-out, two-run homer to provide Union a bit of breathing room at 14-9.

A Leopards single and a Union error had the home team in business with one away in the bottom half of the seventh, but Burnette slammed the door with consecutive strikeouts to secure the Region 8-AA title.

Junior Katie Byers homered, stole a base and scored three times during a 3-for-5 performance. Gladding walked twice, homered and scored



Senior Jaycee Seabolt went 6 for 8 with 8 RBIs during Union County's two region games last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

while going 2 for 3. Burnette's day ended 3 for 5 with a home run and 3 RBIs.

The junior tossed a complete game, allowing 11 hits, eight earned runs and striking out nine.

Seabolt opened the scoring with an RBI single in the first before the Lady Panthers went back-to-back-to-back in the second, beginning with a two-run shot by Burnette. Byers followed by belting a solo homer to left and Gladding went deep to center for a 5-0 lead.

A two-run double by

freshman Peyton Grisham made it 7-0, then Burnette's RBI single opened up an 8-0 margin. Seabolt continued the onslaught with a two-run double and an error off the bat of Georgia Patton built an 11-0 advantage after three.

Senior Chloe Potts stretched the Union County margin to a dozen with a fifth-inning sacrifice fly. But the Leopards made it a game when seven of the first eight hitters reached during their half of the fifth. Later in the inning, Banks tacked on two more runs with two away to move within four



First-year head coach Carissa Owenby has guided Union County softball to its first region title since 2011. Photo/Todd Forrest

at 12-8. An RBI groundout in the bottom of the sixth made it a 12-9 game but they would get no closer as Seabolt went deep in the seventh.

Grisham finished 2 for 4 with two runs and a pair of RBIs. Senior Caroline Karnes and Patton each went 1 for 4 with a run. Brooklyn Brown and Lilly Helton scored two runs each for Union County. Potts drove in one and was hit by a pitch.

According to Owenby, she realized from the moment she took the head coaching job

that the 2022 team had what it takes to end the program's region title drought.

"I knew as soon as I took over that we have some really good tools and a solid foundation," she said. "So winning region has been our goal from day one."

Lady Panthers 23, East Jackson 8 (3 innings) - Union County recorded another region victory during last Thursday's Pink Out contest vs. East Jackson.

Union fell into a 7-0 hole in the top of the first but responded with 12 in the bot-

tom half. The Panthers added seven runs in the second and four in the third.

Potts scored three times and drove in three during a 2-for-2 day. Seabolt finished 2 for 3 with three runs and 3 RBIs. Burnette walked twice during a 2-for-2 performance. Karnes drove in three runs while going 1 for 2 with an inside-the-park homer.

Byers walked and scored three times, knocking in two during a 1-for-1 game. Patton went 1 for 1 with a run and an RBI. Zady Ludlum finished 1 for 1 with 2 RBIs, while Sloane Dyer and Grisham each walked and scored. Gladding walked twice and drove in three runs; Helton and Brown scored four times apiece.

Burnette tossed the final 2 1/3 frames, fanning six and giving up one earned. Dyer went 2/3 of an inning, allowing four walks and six earned runs.

Union County will host Providence Christian on Tuesday in the 8-AA finale. The Class AA State Tournament gets underway next week with Union hosting the No. 4 seed from 7-AA, the 3-seed from 6-AA and the 5-AA runner-up in a double-elimination tournament to qualify for the Elite Eight.

"Keeping the girls healthy and focused is our priority during the final week," Owenby said. "We also have fall break this week, so a healthy and focused team would be great [going into next week's post-season]."

Volleyball: UCHS hosts Senior Night, preps for Region tourney



Union County volleyball recognized its six seniors and their families during last Wednesday's tri-match vs. Dawson County and Providence Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County volleyball paid tribute to the most decorated senior class in the program's six-year history during last Wednesday's tri-match with Dawson County and Providence Christian.

The Panthers recognized seniors Kaylee Ashcraft, Presley Berry, Mattie Brookshire, Haleigh Helcher, Saylor Noe and Sofia Swartz, who have been an integral role in Union's two Area Championships and Class AA Final Four appearances in 2020 and 2021. As freshmen in

2019, the Class of 2023 reached the Area 8 Championship and the Class AA Elite Eight.

"They are a great group of girls," said first-year head coach Megan Brown. "All six of them are very special and have very unique qualities. Each one of them brings something great to the team and their leadership skills are top notch. I'm thankful to start with a group of seniors like this. They have stepped up and led and set an example for the underclassmen. They are all great girls on and off the court."

Earlier in the week, Union County visited Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina and came away with a 3-2 victory, taking the

first set 25-10, the third 26-24 and the fifth 15-5.

Swartz logged a career-high 20 kills in the match, Ashcraft added 12 kills and Noe finished with eight kills, 22 assists and six aces. Sophomore Charlei Robinson notched four aces, Swartz and sophomore Katelyn Brown had three apiece and Ashcraft added two.

Swartz recorded three blocks. Noe and Ashcraft had 11 digs each; junior Addison Cross added eight digs. Sophomore Lily Brookshire picked up six digs and eight assists.

Union County opened Wednesday's tri-match with a 2-0 loss (17-25, 21-25) to Dawson County. The Panthers led

9-6 in the opening set before an 11-2 Tigers spurt allowed Dawson to race ahead 17-11.

After a back-and-forth start to set two, Dawson County pulled ahead at 18-13 and 24-17, eventually hanging on 25-21.

Ashcraft finished with nine kills and 10 digs. Swartz added six kills and two blocks. Mattie Brookshire chipped in two blocks and Noe had eight assists.

In the finale, Union County fell by the same scores to Providence, dropping the opener 25-17 and the finale 25-21.

The Panthers held an early 5-4 lead in set one before the Storm pulled ahead to stay at 20-9 and 23-13. Union grabbed

a 6-4 advantage in set two but Providence pushed ahead at 8-6, 14-12 and 16-14. The Panthers moved within a point at 16-15 when the Storm opened up a 20-16 lead.

Union battled back to within one at 22-21 but Providence rattled off four straight to end the match.

Ashcraft had six kills and Swartz added five kills and seven assists. Cross logged 10 digs and Robinson had six.

Notes: With 155 kills in 2022, Ashcraft has broken Morgan Fussell's 2020 school record of 136 kills in a season.

Noe's 83 kills make her the first Panther to log three 80-kill seasons.

Ashcraft (268), Noe (261) and Swartz (252) have each surpassed 250 kills in their storied careers and are all within striking distance of Fussell's program record of 302.

Up next: Union County opens region tournament play at 5 p.m. Thursday in a win-or-go-home scenario at Banks County. With a win, the Panthers will visit Athens Academy at 10 a.m. Saturday.

"We played very well [last Wednesday] against two very tough opponents, but if we can go to Banks County and play like we did [on Wednesday], then I like our chances to come out on top," Coach Brown said.

Football: Panthers kick off region play with 42-7 win at Banks

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Homer - Junior quarterback Cayden Tanner accounted for five touchdowns and Union County (5-1, 1-0) scored the game's final 35 points during a 42-7 Region 8-AA victory at Banks County on Friday night.

Following consecutive bye weeks, the Panthers' 2022 season faced additional delays when a fatal two-vehicle accident near Lula closed Ga. Hwy 52 for nearly three hours. The road eventually reopened at 7:30 p.m., and the team arrived at the stadium just shy of 8 p.m.

With only 20 minutes to warm up coming off their two-week hiatus, Union County head coach Micheal Perry feared the worst for his team's region opener. However, the Panthers quickly put those fears to rest by storming out to a 28-7 halftime lead.

"That's a coach's nightmare right there -- having two weeks off followed by four hours sitting on a bus," Perry said. "But I can't tell you how proud I am of how our players and staff handled the situation. It would have been really easy to lose our focus, but our guys stayed focused while going up against the best player we've seen this year in [Banks County senior running back] Andrew Shockley. I'm just extremely proud of our entire program."

According to Tanner, the extended bus ride only added to the team's hunger.

"Being stuck on that bus for four hours and having a short warm up was a definitely a tough adjustment, but we were just so ready to get off that bus and get out here on the field," he said after the game.

Offensively, both squads came up empty on their first



Junior QB Cayden Tanner bounces off a Leopard's defender to score his third rushing touchdown of the night. Photo/Todd Forrest

two drives until Union took advantage of a shanked punt that awarded possession to Tanner and the offense at the Leopards' 16-yard line. On Union's first play of the series, junior running back Braylen Rader broke free into the secondary, carrying five defenders across the goal line for a touchdown.

"We knew we would have to get a jump on them," Perry said. "Their starting quarterback is out with a broken collarbone, so we knew they would probably be limited in the passing game. We knew if we could get up on them early, it would be difficult for them to get back in the game."

Banks' lone touchdown came on its next play from scrimmage when a Shockley catch and run went 69 yards to even the score at 7-7.

The Panthers answered back, beginning with a Griff

Young kick return to the 40-yard line. Four plays later, Young took a screen pass from Tanner and weaved 28 yards through traffic, setting up Tanner's 7-yard score on third-and-4 early in the second period.

"This was by far Cayden Tanner's best game," Perry said. "He made some great decisions, we had some RPOs that he read really well and he did a great job scrambling when he was forced to take off. I'm really proud of the progress that he's making."

Junior Jensen Goble returned a Banks County punt to the Leopards' 25, and one play later, the Panthers went play-action and Tanner hit junior Zack Taylor in the endzone for 25-yards and a score.

"We wanted to come out and hit them in the mouth early," Tanner said. "We knew that Shockley is a great player and can score at any time, so we wanted to put them away early and not give them any chances."

Union's defense forced another punt, and the offense set up shop at its own 36 with 7:16 left before halftime. A Connor Schuknecht rush drew a facemask penalty, then Tanner found Goble over the middle for 34 yards followed by Tanner's 13-yard scamper to build a 28-7 lead.

"The knee feels great and I gain more confidence in it



Senior Griff Young's fingerprints were all over Union County's 42-7 win at Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

every week, I'm not as scared to take off and run anymore," Tanner said regarding his off-season injury.

Union's final first half possession ended with an interception when a bobbled screen pass ended up in the hands of a defensive lineman. With 21 seconds on the clock and Banks at the Panthers' 34, the Union defense delivered, beginning with pressure up the middle from senior Gage Barnes that resulted in a grounding penalty. The half ended with junior Kooper Ashcraft corraling the Leopards' quarterback in the backfield for an 11-yard loss.

"That's just a tribute to how hard our guys prepare," Perry said. "The [defensive staff] do a great job getting our guys ready to play and those kids bring it every single week."

"A lot of the credit for our defensive success goes to Griff Young," Perry continued. "He played the role of Shockley in practice and did a great job getting our defense prepared to face a player of that caliber."

Banks County made its first visit to the red zone early in the third, but the Panthers forced a turnover on downs at its own 15. Two plays later, the Leopards took over inside the 10 when Union County airmailed the shotgun snap and Banks jumped on the football

at the nine.

The defense did its job again, limiting the home team to only two combined yards on first and second down before forcing consecutive incompletions. Freshman cornerback Cade Dockrey broke up a third-down underneath throw, and Ashcraft's pressure resulted in an errant pass on fourth and goal.

"He might be a freshman, but [Dockrey] has a great football mind, he understands the game and he is a real student of the game," Perry said. "We know he's going to be a bright spot for our program, now and in the future."

A Union County punt and a Banks missed field goal gave possession to the Panthers at the 20 with 2:21 remaining in the third. From there, the Panthers used a 6-play, 80-yard drive to put the game out of reach at 35-7.

The drive's key play came via Young's 52-yard keeper from the Wildcat formation, setting up first-and-goal at the two. On second-and-goal from the two, Tanner found room around the left corner and bounced off a would-be tackler at the goal line.

On the heels of another Leopards' punt, Union began at its own 43, where three Schuknecht carries combined for 27 yards. With just over seven minutes to play, the Panthers went for the juggu-

lar, connecting on a 30-yard hookup from Tanner to Young that extended the margin to 42-7.

Tanner finished 11 for 16 with 217 yards and two scores through the air. He added 12 yards and three touchdowns on four carries, resulting in a career-best five total touchdowns.

Young rushed six times for a team-high 75 yards to go with 56 receiving yards and a score on three catches. Goble's six grabs and 89 yards were tops on the team; Rader rushed eight times for 73 yards and a touchdown. He added two catches and 4 yards receiving.

Taylor caught three passes for 48 yards and a score; Grasty had one reception for 20 yards. Schuknecht added 33 yards rushing on four carries.

Up next: Union County hosts Providence Christian on Friday night at 7:30 p.m. in the first-ever meeting between the two programs. The Storm are currently 2-4 overall and 0-1 in 8-AA following a 48-14 loss at Athens Academy.

Providence opened 0-3 with one-sided losses to St. Francis, Hebron Christian and Whitfield Academy. They rebounded with a 52-0 win over Riverside, then outlasted Athens Christian 36-19 on Sept. 16.

"The teams that have beaten [Providence] are private schools and are very good," Perry said. "What's going to be challenging about them is, they throw it more than anybody we've seen all year, and that's the strength of their offense."

Junior quarterback Benjamin Klassen leads the Storm offense at 155 yards passing and 44 yards rushing per game. His favorite target through five games is Devin Long, who owns two touchdowns and averages 49 yards receiving a game.

Extra points: The Panthers recorded the program's 300th win at Banks County.

Six different Union County players have caught a touchdown this year, matching the half-dozen players that had TD receptions last year.

With 22 touchdown passes through six games, the Panthers have already equaled their total for the 2021 season. Only three players caught touchdowns in 2020. Seven different Panthers had touchdown grabs in both 2018 and 2019.

Union County Rec Department October 23rd Youth Hike



Register now for the next hike to Preacher's Rock on Sunday, October 23rd at 1:30 PM guided by the one and only Dustin Rogers! This hike will be 2 miles round trip. Enjoy scenic views and fall color! Kids ages 7-13. Parent or legal guardian must accompany child. Space is limited to 10 kids along with parent. (20)

You must register at the Union County Sports Center by Friday, October 21st, \$5. Bring sack lunch and wear appropriate shoes, no flip flops. Don't miss out on the beauty of Union County!

XC: Panthers hold their own vs. North Georgia's best at Mountain Invitational

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Helen - Union County freshman Lola Hunter placed sixth out of 168 runners at White County's Mountain Invitational with a time of 20 minutes, 26 seconds on Tuesday, Oct. 4.

Junior Ellie Adams came in 22nd at 21:47 as Union placed sixth out of 23 teams in the team standings.

The Union County men finished 14th out of 31 behind Benton Gregory's 31st place finish (17:43). Wes Seiler came in 69th with a time of 18:41. Zander Rotko was 85th at 19:00, Anderson Clouse (19:26) placed 104th and Ty Hogsed (19:40) came in 114th.

Alec Wilder (20:50) finished 152nd and Ethan Rouse (21:00) was 155th.

Rounding out the Union girls' runners was 32nd place Lydia Wagner at 22:52, Ashley Shipes was 41st at 23:30 and Hannah Kazmierzak came in 45th at 23:42. Noel Hyatt placed 51st at 23:52 and Natalie Payne was 57th at 23:58.

Union County enters the



Union County sophomore Lydia Wagner placed 32nd out of 168 runners last week at Unicoi State Park. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Class AA state meet gets underway at 8 a.m. on Nov. 5 in Carrollton.

Burks aces 13th hole at Old Union



Congrats to Blairsville resident Ryan Burks for his hole-in-one on the 13th hole at Old Union Golf Course.



The Blue Ridge Mountain Jeepers meet on the 2nd Friday every month. We will meet temporarily at Mimm's Distillery at 10 AM, due to the permanent closing of the Blairsville Skillet Cafe.

Weather permitting, we ride once or twice a week on various kinds of rides: street rides, forestry roads, and more challenging rides such as Beasley Knob.

We invite all Jeep enthusiasts to join us. Check us out at www.blueridgemountain-jeepers.com or attend a meeting. We would love to meet you!



Union County second-year head coach Micheal Perry has the Panthers sitting pretty at 5-1 entering the heart of the Region 8-AA schedule. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Panthers finally take the field at Banks County following consecutive bye weeks and three additional hours on the bus during the Friday trip to Homer. Photo/Todd Forrest