

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Volleyball: Panthers crowned Area 8 champions

Union County overwhelms the competition during Area title run

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

Union County Volleyball continued its command of Area 8 during last week's tournament at UCHS, winning every set en route to its first Area Championship in program history.

After finishing the regular season 8-0 in Area play, the Panthers opened the postseason by sweeping Commerce and Banks County to earn a berth in their second consecutive title match. In the finals, held Thursday, Oct. 8, Union County took care of ninth-ranked Oglethorpe County in straight sets, 25-16, 25-19 and 25-15.

With the victory over Oglethorpe, Union County improves to 16-6, setting a program record for wins in a season, surpassing last year's 15-win squad. They also finish the year winning 23 of their 24 sets in Area competition, including the postseason.

In addition, Union County outscored the opposition throughout the Area 8 Tournament, an average of 25-14 per set.

Despite beginning the year 0-4 overall, senior Haley Noe realized the Panthers could accomplish big things after they started 6-0 in Area play with several key players sidelined due to injury.

"We knew that our two toughest matches would be Lake Oconee (Academy) and Oglethorpe, and after we won both of those, I knew that we really had a shot at [winning area]," she said. "We're all really close friends and do a lot together, so I think that's taught us how to work well together and communicate, which has helped us become successful."

In the first set of last Thursday's Area Championship match, the Patriots grabbed early leads of 7-4 and 10-7 before Union rattled off 11 straight points behind the serving of Haley Noe.

Leading 18-10, the Panthers held off a late rally that pulled Oglethorpe within three at 19-16. But the final six points



Union County Volleyball following last week's Area 8 Championship victory over Oglethorpe County. Photo/Todd Forrest

would belong to Union as they took the first set 25-16.

"Coming in, Oglethorpe County had me a little bit worried with the way they've been playing in the last few matches, and when you're playing the undefeated first-place team in Area, it always gives you a boost," Coach Anna Chapman said. "I think our girls also had a confidence boost after going undefeated, so the most nerve-racking part was just waiting [two days] to play. But whenever it boils down to it and it's time for our girls to get serious, I know they will play well. And once they took the court and that first serve was hit, I knew we were in our happy place."

The Panthers' momentum carried over to set two as they built early leads of 4-1, 9-4 and 13-6. Union's largest margin of the set came at 16-8 before the Patriots began chipping away, trimming the Union advantage to 17-14.

The Panthers quickly slammed the door with four unanswered points, but Ogletho-

pe kept things close with three straight of its own for a 21-17 score.

Union County scored the next two points, backing the Patriots into a 23-17 corner that they could not recover from as the Panthers prevailed 25-19 to seize control at 2-0 of the best-of-five match.

Trailing 3-1 early in set three, Union scored seven straight points and wasn't threatened again as they put the finishing touches on an Area Championship in the program's fourth year. The Panthers quickly turned an 8-5 advantage into a 15-5 margin, taking the fight out of Oglethorpe County once and for all.

Sophomore Saylor Noe led Union with 7 kills, Morgan Fussell and Riley Allison had six each. Sophomore Sofia Swartz added three and junior Olivia Blocker had two.

Saylor Noe and junior Emma Whicker had 3 aces apiece. Haley Noe had 15 digs, Saylor Noe had 12 and Allison added 10. Juniors Molly Kay

West and Whicker had 8 digs each. Whicker also led the Panthers with 23 assists.

"We had a good practice on Monday (Oct. 5) and were able to focus on some things that needed work," Chapman said when asked about keeping the team focused throughout the week. "During [the Wednesday, Oct. 7] practice, we just goofed around. I let the girls play any position they wanted to, and we scrimmaged and just had a lot of laughter. I think that's what they needed before a match like this. It's like training for a marathon, you can't do it the day before and it's everything we've done in months past that prepared us."

In the opening round on Tuesday, Oct. 6, Union County dismantled the 8-seed Commerce 2-0 (25-7, 25-15) to punch its ticket to the State Tournament for the third consecutive year.

Juniors Fussell and Allison led the way with Fussell recording 6 kills and Allison adding three. Swartz had two, while Whicker and Saylor Noe

had one kill each.

West finished with a team-high 7 aces, Saylor Noe had four, Fussell added three and senior Katie Baumeister had two. Haley Noe led the way with 5 digs and Whicker had 11 assists.

In the second round, Union faced Banks County, who stunned defending Area Champion Rabun County in round one.

However, the Leopards only had one upset in the tank as Union County had little trouble taking care of the fifth-seeded Leopards to earn a spot in the Area finals.

The Panthers took the first set 25-13 despite getting off to a slow start. Tied at 9-9, Union took control at 16-9 behind seven straight points. Later, they used another 7-0 run to put the Leopards away at 23-12.

In the second set, Union trailed 6-4 before finding another gear and blowing things wide open at 18-7, en route to a 25-12 victory.

"I think we would have

played our best regardless of if it were Rabun or Banks," said Chapman on how her squad expected Rabun in round two. "With Rabun, it was more mental, but with Banks, we beat them twice this year, pretty heavily, so I think that gave us an advantage."

Allison finished with a team-best 6 kills vs. Banks County. Fussell and Swartz added three apiece, Saylor Noe had two and Blocker chipped in one.

West led the way with 4 aces. Saylor Noe had three, Haley Noe added two and Whicker recorded one ace.

Haley Noe tallied 16 digs. Saylor Noe had seven, West and Whicker added three each. Allison and Fussell finished with 2 digs apiece. Whicker recorded a team-high 15 assists.

"We're at the point where everyone is playing so well and you can't really pick anyone that has stood out," Chapman said. "Everyone has their strengths, they cover each other's weaknesses and our strength right now is teamwork and communication and knowing how to play with whoever is on the court. It's just phenomenal."

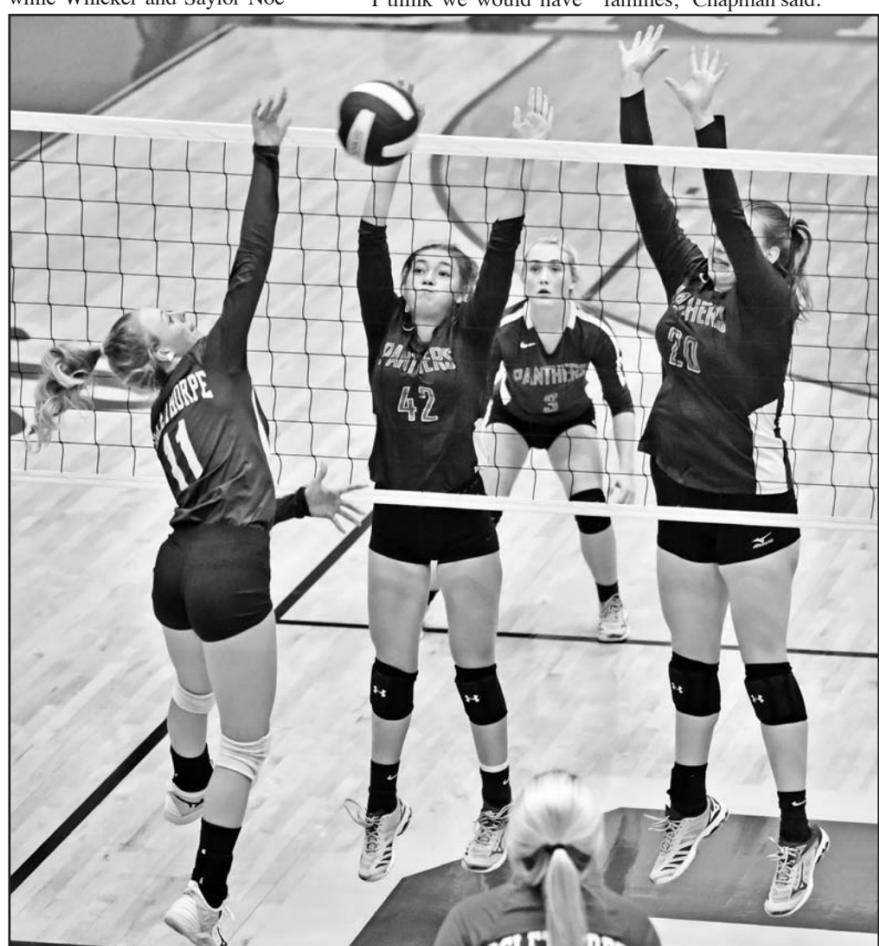
The State Tournament is slated to open in Blairsville next week with Union County facing the No. 4 seed from Area 5 in round one. Area 5 features Class AA/A's No. 1 ranked team in Elite Scholars Academy. As for the Panthers' opponent, it will likely come from a group of teams that includes Atlanta Classical Academy, Drew Charter, Lovett, McNair, and South Atlanta.

In the second round, Union could draw Fannin County if the cards fall correctly. Fannin is currently third in Area 7, and the Panthers' second-round opponent would come from the winner of Area 7 No. 3 vs. Area 6 No. 2. Area 6 includes No. 4 Armuchee, Bremen, No. 6 Coosa and No. 5 Haralson County.

"We're going to practice three days [this] week, but I'm also a family person, so I want to give the girls some time over fall break to hang out with their families," Chapman said.



Senior Haley Noe was instrumental in Union's rally during the first set vs. Oglethorpe. Photo/Todd Forrest



Emma Whicker (42), Morgan Fussell (20) and Molly Kay West (3) battle at the net. Photo/Todd Forrest