

# Sports

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## Volleyball: Panthers overpower Armuchee, move on to Elite 8

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It's all business this time around for Union County Volleyball as they return to the State Elite 8 for a second straight year.

A season ago, the Panthers entered the quarterfinals with a happy-to-be-here attitude. This year, it's merely another step on the journey to their ultimate goal.

Despite winning the Area title and securing home-court advantage through the Sweet 16, the first two matches were no cakewalk for Union County, who fended off a young, but talented Atlanta Classical Academy 3-1 in round one.

In the Sweet 16 contest, the Panthers hosted fourth-ranked Armuchee, who suffered an upset loss in the Area title game, dropping the Indians to a No. 2 seed and setting up a heavyweight showdown in round two.

"We watched some film, so we knew [Armuchee] was an unorthodox team, more so than [Atlanta Classical Academy] in terms of their play and style," Union County head coach Anna Chapman said following Saturday's win. "I'm not going to lie, [Armuchee] looked a lot bigger on the court during warmups than they did on film, and it had me a little scared."

After Union took the first set 25-21, set two proved to be the turning point, which came on the heels of a couple more turning points and a few momentum swings that appeared to do in both squads on multiple occasions.

Trailing 5-1 early, the Panthers stormed ahead 10-8, eventually building a 15-11 advantage. Still in front 19-16, Union seemed poised to take a 2-0 overall lead, but Armuchee had other plans.

The Indians rallied with six unanswered points to seize control at 22-19. The Panthers



Sophomore Sofia Swartz was tied for the team lead with 7 kills and 4 blocks during Saturday's win over No. 4 Armuchee. Photo/Todd Forrest

refused to quit, responding with five straight for a 24-22 lead. One point away from capping off the comeback, Union surrendered three in a row, putting Armuchee on the brink at 25-24.

Since a two-point victory is required, there was still hope for the Lady Panthers, and that was all they needed.

Consecutive Union points made it 26-25, but Armuchee staved off defeat, evening the score at 26-26. Moments later, leading 27-26, the Panthers were unable to finish the visitors. Union tried again, taking a 28-27 advantage, but this time, Armuchee answered with two points to jump ahead of the Panthers 29-28.

That was the last point of the set for the Indians as Union rattled off three straight points to take set two 31-29 and build a 2-0 advantage in the best of five match.

"We talked [before the

second] set about not just getting one point at a time, we've got to get two or three at a time," Chapman said. "There were also a couple rotations that got the best of us, and we just need to come up with a plan about getting out of some of those rotations."

With their backs against the wall, the Indians came out swinging in set three and eventually held off a Union rally in a 25-21 victory.

The Panthers never led as Armuchee built early leads of 3-0, 5-2, 9-5 and 13-8 before Union finally evened the score at 13-13.

"We like to do that," Chapman said regarding Union's constant slow starts that lead to early deficits. "I wasn't as concerned about giving Armuchee new life as I was about our energy. We were giving 100% and putting it all out there, so I was concerned that we were getting tired and that's



Junior Riley Allison finished Saturday's win over Armuchee with 7 kills and a career-best 35 digs. Photo/Todd Forrest

where our mistakes were coming from. But give Armuchee credit, they are a solid team."

The Indians scored the next four points to build a 17-13 advantage, but the Panthers clawed their way back within a point at 20-19. Armuchee continued to answer, rattling off four straight en route to a 25-21 victory.

Hoping to avoid a fifth and final set, Union County overcame an early 4-1 deficit to take a 6-5 lead. Tied at 6-6, Union scored the next two points and would never trail again. Clinging to a 13-12 advantage, the Panthers started to pull away at 17-12 and 18-14.

Armuchee had one last spurt left in the tank but Union delivered the knockout blow in the form of three-straight points that turned a narrow 18-16 lead into a somewhat comfortable 21-16 margin.

The Panthers surrendered just one more point as

they closed out Armuchee with four straight to take a 25-17 victory and punch their ticket to the Elite 8.

"A different team showed up today [compared to the first round] and we played phenomenal and deserved to win," Chapman said.

In the first set, the two squads traded jabs as they felt each other out in the early going. Tied at 4-4, Union County landed the first blow with a 5-0 spurt to build a 9-5 advantage.

But the Indians rebounded and eventually found themselves ahead 18-16 but five-straight from the Panthers put the home team ahead for good at 21-18.

Armuchee kept things tight but couldn't get over the hump as Union finally broke away from a 22-21 lead for the 25-21 opening-set victory.

Juniors Morgan Fussell, Riley Allison and sophomore Sofia Swartz led the Panthers

with 7 kills each. Saylor Noe had four and Haley Noe added one.

Fussell, Swartz and Olivia Blocker had four blocks each. Emma Whicker added one.

Whicker also finished with a team-high 25 assists.

Haley Noe piled up the digs with 44. Allison had 35. Whicker added 17 and Saylor Noe had 15. Fussell had 8 digs. Molly Kay West chipped in four and Swartz had one.

Blocker, Fussell, Saylor Noe, West and Whicker all recorded one ace.

In the first round match on Wednesday, Oct. 14, Union County won the first two sets en route to a 3-1 victory over Atlanta Classical Academy.

The first set was all Union, jumping out to an 11-3 lead before cruising to a 25-9 victory.

Things tightened up late in the second set as the Panthers started pulling away from a 9-9 tie, eventually building a 17-12 lead. Union appeared to have things wrapped up at 23-15 but ACA refused to go away, slicing the margin to 24-21 when the Panthers finally put an end to the comeback bid.

Union trailed wire-to-wire in set three, falling into a 7-2 hole that they couldn't escape. Still behind 16-10, the Panthers started to chip away but still found themselves trailing 24-19. They nearly pulled off the rally but ACA secured the match-point for a 25-23 victory.

The Panthers continued to struggle in the early stages of set four before turning a 6-2 deficit into a 10-9 advantage. Union slowly inched away with leads of 12-10, 16-13, 18-14 and 19-15.

Still in control at 21-18, the Panthers rattled off four straight to take the 25-21 victory and punch their ticket to the Sweet 16.

Fussell recorded a team

See Elite 8, Page 3B

## Softball: No. 2 Heard County ends Lady Panthers' season in first round

Union bids farewell to two valuable seniors; future remains promising for 2021 and beyond

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Franklin - Union County's season came to an earlier-than-anticipated close last week following a pair of losses at second-ranked Heard County on Monday, Oct. 19.

The Lady Panthers (12-9) closed out 2020 by dropping six of eight after sporting a 10-3 record entering the regular season's final week. Their two most recent losses were courtesy of Heard County during the first round of the Class AA State Tournament. The Braves took game one 8-0 in six innings behind an early 2-run homer and a stellar pitching performance by freshman LilyRae Fulford, who surrendered just three hits and didn't walk a batter over five innings.

In the second contest, Heard scored two runs in the first en route to a 7-2 victory - ending Union County's season.

With the loss, the high school careers of Hannah Patton and Trinity Queen come to a close. However, both players have an excellent shot at continuing their careers at the next level.

Patton, who goes out as a four-year starter, began her high school career as an infielder



Union County Softball will miss the senior duo of catcher Hannah Patton (L) and pitcher/infielder Trinity Queen (R). Photo/Todd Forrest

before moving behind the plate in year two.

Entering the State playoffs, Patton led the Lady Panthers with a .464 batting average, a .531 on-base percentage, a .625 slugging percentage, a 1.156 OPS, 26 hits and seven doubles. Her 15 RBIs were second on the team, while her four strikeouts were the fewest among players with at least 35 plate appearances.

Meanwhile, Patton en-

tered last week's doubleheader at Heard County with 77 hits, 36 RBIs and 13 doubles for her career.

Trinity Queen has anchored the Union County pitching staff for three seasons, taking over as the team's ace during her sophomore campaign in 2018.

After leading the Lady Panthers to the postseason in 2018, Queen earned Region 8-AA Pitcher of the Year honors in 2019 - an award she's



the likely frontrunner for once again.

Last year, she finished with a 2.44 ERA, a 1.15 WHIP, 81 strikeouts, 17 walks and 12 hit batters in 91 2/3 innings. Additionally, she was nearly unhittable in region play, posting a 0.67 ERA and 0.62 WHIP in 41 2/3 innings vs 8-AA.

This fall, Queen sported a 1.78 ERA and a 1.07 WHIP entering the State playoffs. In 86 2/3 innings, Queen fanned

70 batters while issuing 25 walks and 20 hit batters. Once again, the senior right-hander upped the ante against region competition, lowering her ERA and WHIP to 1.47 and 0.97, respectively.

Queen, who also saw action at first base, was solid at the plate, hitting .259 with nine RBIs and four doubles.

Looking ahead, the Lady Panthers will return seven starters in 2021, and once again,

should open as the favorites in Region 8-AA and among the top 10 in Class AA.

Rising-sophomore Sierra Burnette will be the early frontrunner to replace Queen. As a freshman, Burnette was second on the team with 30 2/3 innings pitched, a 1.83 ERA and a team-leading 0.85 WHIP. Her 26 strikeouts gave her a slightly better strikeout-per-inning ratio (0.87) than Queen (0.81). Burnette can handle the bat as well, hitting .400 with four RBIs in 33 plate appearances.

Pushing Burnette for the No. 1 starter job will be Emily Byers, Kaelyn Jones, Tori Tracy and a pair of impressive rising-freshman coming up from middle school.

Other returning starters for Union County in 2021 will be Aubrie Banton, Ansley Collins and Lexi Sisum in the outfield. The infield will return three full-time starters and two part-time starters at first base. Caley Davis, Emma Roxbury and Chloe Potts all started the entire season. And at first base, juniors Rebekah Chambers and Kaelyn Jones split time at the position while Queen pitched.

Other returning contributors from 2020 will be Katie Byers, Caroline Karnes and Jaycee Seabolt, among others.