

Sports

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Helcher's Senior Night heroics rally Panthers past Gilmer in OT

Union County kicks off the State Tournament Friday at second-seeded Lovett

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Union County (3-6) survived a 49-48 overtime thriller vs. Gilmer on Friday to put an exclamation point on the 2021 regular season with a come-from-behind Senior Night victory.

Trailing 42-21 with 9:55 to play, the Panthers rallied to even the score at 42-42 when Union County recovered a fumble deep in Bobcats' territory to set up a game-tying touchdown run from senior quarterback Logan Helcher with 1:18 to play.

During the extra session, Gilmer needed only four carries to move 15 yards and take a 48-42 lead to open the first overtime period. However, questions surrounding the kicking game resulted in a Bobcats 2-point conversion run that the Panthers stuffed to remain within six points.

Union took over at the 15 with Helcher finding senior receiver Eli Peugh in the flat for 8 yards. On the next play, junior running back Cayleb Rogers powered his way inside the 3-yard line to set up Helcher's seventh score of the night - a keeper that knotted the score at 48-48.

Kyler Robbins' extra point split the uprights moments later, bringing the Panthers' sideline onto the field in celebration during a chilly evening at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Helcher finished with 399 total yards while matching a career-high with seven touchdowns. Through the air, the senior connected on 26 of 35 for 301 yards, three scores and an interception. He added four rushing touchdowns and 98 yards on 18 carries.

"[Helcher's] confidence is sky-high right now and he's a heck of a player," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "He's like a sponge on the practice field and in meetings. I never have to tell him something over and over again. He takes a lot of pride in his [work ethic] and the guys all look up to him. He's been a joy to coach."

Rogers turned a career-high 168 yards rushing and caught five passes for 34 yards



Four of Logan Helcher's seven touchdowns vs. Gilmer came during the fourth quarter and overtime. Photo/Todd Forrest

and a touchdown. Keyton Chitwood finished with 133 yards and two scores on a career-best eight grabs.

The Panthers' 572 yards of total offense was enough to overcome 498 yards rushing from Gilmer, who ended its night with 627 total yards.

Bobcats junior back Will Kiker finished with a career-high 261 yards rushing and four touchdowns on 14 attempts for an 18.6 yards-per-carry average. Senior Kobe Stonecipher added 107 yards and two scores on 19 carries.

The Panthers entered the half tied at 21-21 after taking advantage of a Gilmer fumble on the game's first play, setting up a 30-yard scoring strike to Chitwood on fourth and 4.

The Bobcats answered with a 2-yard rushing score to put the finishing touches on a 12-play, 80-yard drive that evened the score at 7-7. The Panthers pushed ahead on the ensuing possession when Rogers slipped out of the backfield and Helcher found him in the endzone for a 1-yard completion with 1:40 left in the first.

Gilmer needed only four plays to respond, taking advantage of a kickoff return to the

Panthers' 35-yard line. On the fourth play of the series, the Bobcats found paydirt on a 12-yard buck-sweep.

Union County recovered an onside kick at midfield but couldn't take advantage of the field position, stalling at the 8-yard line when Gilmer tripped up Helcher in the backfield on a fourth-and-1 scamper.

The Panthers forced the game's first three and out and set up shop at the Bobcats' 47 following a punt. Union County would eventually build a 21-14 lead, but the drive-defining play came on a second-and-13 completion to Rogers for 20 yards. Helcher kept it himself two plays later, diving across the goal line to complete the 5-yard score with 5:13 remaining in the first half.

Gilmer added one more score before the half when a 3-yard carry tied the game with 2:24 on the clock.

The Bobcats picked off Helcher on fourth down at the Gilmer 43 to end the first half locked at 21-21.

The opening drive of the third quarter saw a Panthers' fourth-down pass attempt fall incomplete inside the Bobcats' 30-yard line. Gilmer took over



With 133 yards receiving, senior Keyton Chitwood finished 2 yards short of matching his career high of 135 yards at RMA. Photo/Todd Forrest

at the 28 and drove 72 yards on seven plays, using a 6-yard sweep to take its first lead of the night at 28-21.

Moments later, Union's first punt gave the Bobcats the football at their own 13, and on the fourth play of the series, Kiker found a seam and cut upfield, going 73 yards to open a 35-21 Gilmer advantage.

Gilmer took over at the 8-yard line when they denied Union on another fourth-down try deep in Panther territory. The Bobcats continued to feed Kiker, who broke loose for 87 yards to double-up the home team at 42-21 with 9:55 left in the regular season.

With the Panthers' backs against the wall, sophomore Caiden Tanner immediately breathed new life into Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium with a 64-yard kickoff return.

"[Tanner] had to play receiver for us [vs. Gilmer] and I'm just really proud of both him and Cayleb Rogers and the way they stepped up for us," Perry said. "Caiden Tanner makes plays for us no matter where he's at. He's like a Swiss Army knife. It doesn't matter where you put him, he's going to come through."

Starting from the 25, Helcher needed only two plays to cut the margin to two scores, hitting Chitwood on a 22-yard stop-and-go route when the senior receiver hauled in a one-handed, over-the-shoulder catch in the back of the endzone.

After Robbins' PAT tied the game at 42-42, Gilmer elected to play it safe, running the ball

four times as time expired.

In OT, Gilmer ran four times between the tackles, eventually punching it in from the 4-yard line for a 48-42 advantage.

Instead of kicking the PAT after the previous attempt barely cleared the crossbar, the Bobcats lined up for a 2-point conversion. However, Gilmer went back to the well one too many times as the Panthers smothered a fifth consecutive inside-run to remain with six points. A solid push up front from linemen Lane Lance and Cooper Almassey stood up the Gilmer fullback at the line of scrimmage long enough for help to arrive and stop the Bobcats more than a yard short of the endzone.

Up next: Union County visits Region 6-AA's No. 2 seed Lovett at 7:30 p.m. on Friday in the first round of State. The 7-3 Lions enter on a four-game winning streak following consecutive midseason losses.

The Lions finished 6-2 in 6-AA with narrow losses to Pace Academy (17-14) and region champ South Atlanta (34-33). The closest common opponent is Pace, who lost 47-14 to Rabun County on opening night.

The Lions have allowed just 92 points on the year - the program's lowest mark since 1983 and the third-lowest in Class AA this season.

"[Lovett's] defensive line and linebackers are really strong and we're going to have to do a good job protecting [Helcher] and executing if we want to have a chance," Perry said.

With an elite defense, Lovett is 7-0 this year when scoring at least 16 points. Meanwhile, Union has lived and died by its offensive production this fall, averaging 44.3 points in its three wins and 15.9 in six losses.

However, the Panthers put up just 16.5 points per game during their 0-4 start but have averaged 35.2 a night in the recent 3-2 stretch.

"Offensively, Lovett is similar to us, so hopefully practicing against our offense all year and going up against several spread teams will help us out on Friday," Perry said. "It's definitely going to be a big change from what we saw [vs. Gilmer]."



Junior LB/DB Wilson Walker has had a nose for the football all season and was involved in two critical stops vs. Gilmer during the fourth quarter and overtime. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union basketball scrimmages Pickens on Thursday, girls' season-opener Saturday vs. Stephens County

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Union County basketball's 2021-22 season gets underway this week beginning with a Thursday scrimmage vs. Pickens before the new campaign officially begins Saturday with a girls-only meeting with Stephens County.

Despite reaching the post-season for the third consecutive year, both Union County squads are coming off a disappointing 2020-21 that saw the teams combine for two victories while going winless in Region 8-AA.

Regardless of past results, Union County enters the winter with high hopes as both programs expect to return four starters from a year ago.

The men should bring back 95% of their scoring, 94% of their rebounding and 100% of their 3-point shooting from last year. Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers return players that accounted for 82% of the scoring, 91% of the rebounding and 77% of their assists in 2020-21.

The men will be playing shorthanded Thursday with the



Senior Ava Hunter begins her fourth season as a starter with 1,076 career points and 591 rebounds despite an abbreviated junior year that was reduced to 12 regular season games due to COVID-19. Photo/Todd Forrest

football team starting postseason play on Friday.

Thursday's scrimmage gets underway at 6 p.m. with the men to follow. Saturday's season opener tips at 1 p.m. (JV) and 2:30 p.m. (varsity).

Saturday's contest vs. Stephens County is a girls-only matchup to balance the schedule as a result of the Union guys playing two boys-only games vs. Riverside Military Academy.

XC: Ladies finish eighth, Union County men place 14th at State meet

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Carrollton - Union County turned in two top-15 finishes at last Friday's state meet, with the ladies placing eighth and the men coming in 14th.

The girls, paced by junior Ashley Shipes' 25th place performance, finished one point back of sixth place.

Shipes crossed the finish line at 22 minutes and 15 seconds.

Meanwhile, the guys raced without Region 8-AA runner-up Hunter Hartzog. With Union's senior leader sidelined, sophomore Benton Gregory's 35th place finish led the Panthers, who finished three points shy of 13th place.

"Looking at Hunter's times, I think we would have finished in the top-10 [if Hartzog were healthy]." Union head coach Paige Dyer said. "But without Hunter, we had only one guy who had ever raced at State before, so I think that's a good sign of things to come."

In the girls' race, senior Hana Gregory came in 34th at 22:49. Sophomore Ellie Adams was 50th at 23:49; senior Al-lie Brey came in 52nd with a time of 24:14 and sophomore Natalie Payne rounded out the team's top five in 58th at 24:34.

Freshman Lydia Wagner placed 63rd, clocking in at 24:54. Senior Katelynn Rash was 85th with a time of 26:39.

The boys' race saw 10th grader Zander Rotko come in 59th, crossing the finish line in 19:36. Sophomore Wes Seiler



Union County senior Hana Gregory crosses the finish line one final time at the State meet in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest

placed 72nd, finishing the course in 19:49.

Sophomore Grayden Cobb (21:20) and junior Ethan Rouse (21:41) finished 120th and 134th, respectively, while Anderson Clouse came in 138th at 21:50.

The Panthers fell three points behind Region 8-AA's Riverside, who placed 13th with 411 points. Lamar County finished 12th with 400.

Union defeated 15th place Cook (469) by 55 points.

As expected, Pace Academy (28 points) and Lovett (76

distanced themselves from the pack, taking home the top-two overall spots and six of the top-10 individual positions. Meanwhile, Bleckley County finished third with 168 points.

As for the girls, Union (219 points) was unable to overtake Region 8-AA champ Rabun County (218), who once again edged the Panthers by a point. The Wildcats placed seventh after losing the tiebreaker to Jeff Davis, who also tallied 218 points.

Vidalia came in fifth with 187 points, while ninth place-



The Union County girls wait at the starting line on a nippy morning in Carrollton. The two Class AA races were the first of 16 State races over the weekend, beginning at 9 a.m. Friday morning. Photo/Todd Forrest

place Bremen had 247. According to Coach Dyer, the individual qualifiers (runners competing without their team) at State cost Union County a potential sixth-place finish due to individual runners not counting toward the team scores.

Wagner's 63rd place finish should have been four points better than Jeff Davis' fifth-place runner in 67th place, and 21 points better than Rabun's fifth runner in 84th. However, two individual runners finished 66th and 68th,

respectively, moving the Jeff Davis runner up one spot, and Rabun up two spots, costing Union County two places in the team standings.

"I still think our girls did really well," Dyer said. "We had a really strong girls team but we're losing some key runners, but I still think we'll have a very good team next year."

Pace (27) and Lovett (61) also dominated the girls' race, while Bleckley County took home another third-place finish with 107 points. Combined with its 3-1 victory over

Gordon Lee in the Class AA/Volleyball championships, Pace Academy took home three state titles over the weekend.

"I want to thank the runners and their parents for all of their support," Dyer added. "Our administration, athletic director, [assistant] coach Kelley all deserve a thank you. The community has also been very supportive of our athletes in a number of different ways throughout the season. Our athletes are thankful for everything they do and it makes a huge difference."



The Union County guys await the starting gun on Friday morning in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest



Benton Gregory



Junior Ashley Shipes was 25th in her postseason debut. Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Coach Chapman reflects on 2021

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A few days removed from Union County's second straight semifinal loss to eventual State Champion Pace Academy, the *North Georgia News* spoke with UCHS volleyball coach Anna Chapman, allowing the recent season to sink in a bit for the Panthers' second-year coach.

NGN: With all the ups and down throughout the regular season and Area tourney aside, what stood out to you during the State Tournament?

AC: Overall, I think we played well, we just don't ever see teams on [Pace Academy's level during the regular season]. That's something you can't practice for, so how do you prepare for that? But considering how good [Pace Academy] is, I was extremely proud of the girls' commitment to each other. They never stopped encouraging each other and it was a positive experience overall. A lot of times in situations like that, especially last year, we had a hard time staying positive.

NGN: Looking back at the Class AA/A State Tournament, 28 of the 31 matches ended as 3-0 sweeps and the other three were 3-1 finals. Obviously there is a significant gap at the state level, but is there anything that can be done, in our case, to close that gap on teams like Pace Academy? Or will rural public schools forever be playing catch-up in certain sports to Atlanta-area private schools?

AC: I think we're getting close [to being on Pace's level]. I'm always looking to add difficult schools to our regular season schedule. We saw Calhoun,



Union County volleyball coaches Anna Chapman and Seth Merritt look on as the Panthers warm-up ahead of their State Semifinal match vs. Pace Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest

Gordon Lee, Dawson, Lumpkin and teams like that. We tried scheduling bigger schools and we're going to continue trying to schedule the toughest competition that we can. But one drawback is, we go into Area play in early September and there's a big drop-off when we get into our Area.

But we're about to start a travel-ball, club team that will be coached by Megan Swanson (UCHS coach 2018 and 2019). That will be a huge addition for our girls since that's one advantage that [Atlanta and Chattanooga-area] teams had over us. Hopefully that will help narrow the gap a little bit.

NGN: Speaking of the Area, it does seem like several

programs are trending in the right direction. LOA just made the Elite 8, Banks didn't have a senior and Oglethorpe has some talented youngsters.

AC: Yes, Banks is still young and will be extremely tough next year; they even gave us some problems this year. I think LOA loses some of their better players, but yes, I agree that Oglethorpe seems to be getting better. And Rabun, you can't count out Rabun County either.

NGN: Speaking of next year, how confident are you that we can get back to the Final Four?

AC: I'm very confident. We only lose one senior from our postseason run, and we had a lot of younger girls that had to grow up fast at Area and State. If all of those girls continue to improve, we can be better next year. Of course, the one player we lose is Morgan [Fussell]. She was our leader and our go-to player. But talent-wise, I'm confident we have the players to get the job done, we just need some girls to step up and take on more of a leadership role.

YHC men's soccer enter postseason ranked No. 1

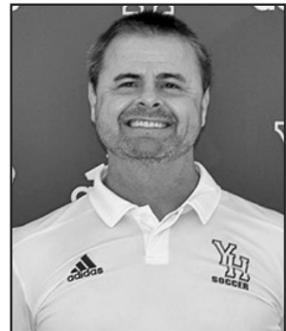
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Young Harris - The Young Harris College men's soccer team became the first Mountain Lions' program of the 2021-22 school year to be ranked No. 1 in the NCAA regional rankings when they took over the top spot last week.

YHC (15-0-1) also owns No. 1 ranking in the United Soccer Coaches Division II Coaches Poll as they enter the upcoming Peach Belt Conference (PBC) tourney as the No. 1 seed. The Mountain Lions, who are currently the only ranked PBC squad, will meet the winner of last weekend's first-round match between No. 4 seed Flagler College and fifth-seeded Georgia Southwestern in an 11 a.m. semifinal match on Nov. 12 in Evans.

The PBC finals will be held Sunday, Nov. 14 in Evans.

This season marks the sixth time that Young Harris has earned the PBC's top-seed. In their five previous conference tournament appearances as the No. 1 seed, the Mountain Lions departed as champions on four occasions.



Mark McKeever. Photo/YHC

"We've had good players, but this year we have a lot of seniority, we have 12 players that will graduate in either December or May, and oftentimes that's a recipe for success," YHC head coach Mark McKeever said.

Young Harris is coming off an abbreviated spring season after COVID-19 postponed its regular fall schedule. In the spring, the Mountain Lions finished second in a conference-only slate that saw the injury bug take a bite out of McKeever's club.

"We had a lot of unanswered questions coming in after last season, but I think it still served a purpose - the younger guys gained some experience

and the older guys were able to get stronger and [develop] some leadership," he said. "And when you combine leadership with talent, good things happen."

By earning a fifth PBC tournament title this weekend, YHC would host the NCAA Division II Men's Soccer Super Regionals on Nov. 18-19.

The Division II National Championship will be settled on Dec. 11 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The Mountain Lions field an international roster with 30 players from outside the U.S. Although, the Young Harris roster still features a heavy north Georgia presence that includes Towns County's Peyton Barrett, along with teammates from Cumming, Dalton, Lawrenceville, Marietta, Tucker and Watkinsville.

"We appreciate all the local support that we can get - the more, the better," McKeever said, in the event Young Harris hosts a Super Regional. "I encourage everyone to come out and support the guys. We have a lot of guys that could have a career professionally and we're thankful to anyone that comes out. We will truly appreciate that extra voice."

Union Co. Sixth-Grade team Super Bowl bound



The Union County Recreation Department's Sixth-Grade football team will play in the Mountain Athletic Conference (MAC) Super Bowl on Saturday night in Dawsonville. The Panthers, coached by Levi Kendrick, will meet Fannin County at 7 p.m. in a rematch from an early season 14-12 loss to the Rebels. Since that game, Union has outscored the competition 171-0, including a 28-0 win over Dawson County in last week's MAC semifinals. During the regular season, Union defeated Dawson 8-0, Pickens 32-0, Chestatee 34-0, Gilmer 44-0 and White County 25-0. Photo/submitted