

# Sports

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## Volleyball: Pace Academy ends Union County's season in Final 4

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Union County Volleyball's postseason run came to a close Saturday in the Class AA/A Final Four with a 3-0 road loss to an uber-talented Pace Academy squad.

"[Pace] is definitely on a different level," Union County head coach Anna Chapman said. "Going in, we knew it would be a tough battle, but we wanted to give it our best shot."

On Wednesday, Oct. 28, the Panthers traveled to Augusta and knocked off Davidson Fine Arts - the champion from Area 2 - in the State Elite 8. Union County took the first two sets before dropping the third. In the fourth and final set, the Panthers pulled away 25-19 to secure the 3-1 victory.

The Panthers never trailed in a 25-21 first-set victory, despite Davidson's repeated comeback bids. The home team evened the score at 9-9 and stayed within a point as late as 15-14 before Union began inching away with leads of 21-16, 22-17, 23-18 and 24-19.

The Panthers faced their first deficit of the match in set two, trailing 4-2 before storming ahead 11-7. However, Davidson had a run of its own, eventually jumping in front at 14-12. But in the end, Union dropped the hammer, outscoring the home team 13-4 down the stretch to take a 25-18 victory.

Union's set-three struggles continued as Davidson led wire-to-wire in a 25-16 win to pull within 2-1 overall.

"I think we have a bad habit of playing down to our competition," Chapman said. "After watching [Davidson] warm up, we thought it would be an easy win, so I think we took them lightly. It reminded me of the match with [Atlanta Classical Academy] in the first round."

The Panthers would rebound in set four, jumping out



Freshman Sophia McNabb got the start at Pace Academy. The young Panthers will return almost its entire rotation in 2021. Photo/Todd Forrest

front 5-0, en route to an early 10-3 advantage. But after five-straight points pulled Davidson within two, Union County extended its margin to 17-9 and appeared to seize control.

Down 18-11, Davidson refused to go away, using another 5-0 spurt to make things interesting at 18-16. The next two points went to Union for some breathing room at 20-16, but Davidson remained within striking distance at 21-18.

The Panthers finally had enough, taking four of the next five points to punch their ticket to the program's first Final 4.

In the State Semifinal round at Pace Academy, Union County ran into a private-school juggernaut that resembled a metro-Atlanta all-star team.

"We had storms on Thursday that closed school so we weren't allowed to practice," Chapman said of her team's preparation for Pace Academy. "Then we only got to practice

for one hour on Friday because our assistant coach got married. There's no way to prepare for a team like [Pace], especially with only an hour of practice.

"It was a long week and we're all tired, but we're also proud that we made it to the Final 4. But we don't lose many seniors, so that raises the bar for next season, and for our off-season as well. Hopefully, we can get in some camps and the girls can play during the off-season. I will try to schedule some tougher matches for next season too."

Pace dominated the first set 25-6 after jumping out to a 6-1 advantage. The second set saw Pace pull away from a 4-4 tie to take a 25-10 victory.

In set three, Union kept it close at 8-6 before the home team broke away for a 25-13 win.

The Panthers' 13 points in set three is the most Pace has allowed in a set during the State



Union County and its fans celebrate last Wednesday's Elite 8 victory at Davidson Fine Arts in Augusta. The win clinched the volleyball program's first-ever Final 4 berth. Photo/Todd Forrest

Tournament. Union's 29 total points also marks the most Pace has allowed in a match.

"I think we were really shell-shocked after that first set and I was afraid we wouldn't put up much of fight the rest of the way," Chapman said. "So I told the girls after the first set, 'we got six points, let's try to get more this set.' I continued to remind the girls that between each set, and we got 10 in the second set and 13 in the third."

Pace Academy will face Class A public school Gordon Lee for the State Championship. For whatever reason, the Class A split between public and private doesn't apply to volleyball at the AA level. While Class A Private has its own volleyball classification, the Class AA private

schools were not included. Even though the split was instituted to prevent small Class A public schools from competing against private schools, it appears the GHSA overlooked the sport of volleyball since Gordon Lee's reward for reaching the State finals is a matchup with a private school from a higher classification.

Meanwhile, the Panthers should enter 2021 with a top-five ranking and will be the heavy favorites to repeat as Area 8 champions.

Throughout much of 2020, Coach Chapman leaned heavily upon a nine-player rotation that included only one senior. Those eight underclassmen featured five juniors, two sophomores and one freshman.

And with the likelihood of state championship level expectations entering next year, Chapman hopes to beef up the schedule and even hinted at the possibility of visiting Pace Academy in the regular season.

"After [the Pace Academy match], I started thinking how it's such a disadvantage to come up against a team that good for the first time in the final four," she said. "Next season, it would be helpful if I scheduled matches against teams like that. I think if we had seen a few teams on that level, we would've been better prepared. But [the Pace coaches] were really nice and invited us back to play them next season, and I might just take them up on it."

## Cross Country: Union qualifies for State, falls short of Region title

Gambrell and Gregory turn in runner-up performances at Region meet

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**Helen** - Both Union County Cross Country teams qualified for Saturday's State meet with a pair of top-three finishes at the Region 8-AA meet on Wednesday, Oct. 28.

Previously slated for Thursday, Oct. 29, the threat of tropical storm conditions moved the race to Wednesday.

Hosted by Unicoi State Park in Helen, the region meet saw Union's Luke Gambrell lead the Panthers to a second-place finish with a runner-up individual performance. The senior clocked in at 17 minutes, 37 seconds, but it wasn't enough to catch Region Champion Buck Ledford of Banks County, who pulled away from the field with a time of 16:41.

Banks County would take the team title with 23 points - 11 points better than Union County.

Junior Hunter Hartzog placed fifth with a time of 18:02; senior Hunter Payne was seventh at 18:37 and freshman Zander Rotko was eighth at 18:52.

Despite placing four runners in the top 10, Union



Coming off consecutive top-two finishes, the Union men hope to be in contention Saturday. Meanwhile, a spot on the podium would be a confidence boost for a young girls team. Photo/Todd Forrest

County could not overtake the Leopards, who took four of the top six spots and five of nine.

Freshman Benson Gregory rounded out the Union top five with a 12th place performance - clocking in at 20:05.

Seniors Daniel Griggs and Zach Jackson took home 13th and 14th with times of

20:07 and 20:17, respectively.

In the girls' race, junior Hana Gregory came in second, finishing with a time of 22:46. Rabun County sophomore Molly Jo Wright was first at 22:23.

Union County placed third overall - two points back of second-place Banks County

and six points behind champion Rabun County.

Junior Allie Brey came in seventh with a time of 25:16; junior Campbell Chambers was ninth at 25:30 and junior Katelynn Rash placed 12th with a time of 25:51.

Rounding out the Union top-five were freshmen Abigail



Pruitt in 14th at 26:26 and Natalie Payne in 16th at 26:39. Junior Rachel Reid placed 17th with a time of 26:52.

The Class AA State Championships are scheduled for Saturday at 12:30 p.m. for the guys and 1:15 p.m. for the girls. Carrollton High School will once again play host to the

two-day event.

In each of its last two trips to Carrollton, Union has gone home with a state title. In 2018, the Union men won the Class AA team championship.

In 2019, senior Zoe Sanchez recorded her second straight individual championship.