

Sports

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Sanchez goes out with back-to-back State Championships

Union boys just miss a second state title, finish four points behind first

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Carrollton - Three years ago, freshman Zoe Sanchez had a completely different mindset about the State Meet.

After qualifying for her first-ever state appearance during the Region 7-AAA meet at Unicoi State Park, Sanchez was asked about her goals for Carrollton.

"Just don't die," answered the deer-in-the-headlights freshman.

Now, as a senior with two dominating State title performances on her resume, it's safe to say that Sanchez has mastered her fears, as well as the Carrollton course.

"My goals still haven't changed one bit," Sanchez said with a laugh as she reflected on that freshman quote from 2016. "If you would have told me back then (that I would end my career like this), I would have thought you were out of your mind and walked away. But now that all of this has become a reality, it's a pretty great feeling."

By the 2-mile mark of last Saturday's State race, Sanchez was in complete control. At that point, the only drama was whether or not she would finish under 20 minutes.

"I really wanted to get under 20 (minutes) but it didn't happen again," Sanchez said when asked what was going through her mind as she crossed the finish line for the final time. "I'm just happy to get the repeat but it was pretty stressful coming across the line because I wanted to get a better time. Other than that, everything went fine."

There is no doubt that Sanchez is one of the most driven runners in the history of Union Cross Country. And despite winning the Individual Region Championship by 27 seconds, Sanchez was concerned that performance wouldn't get it done at State.

"I wasn't very confident coming in and almost had a panic attack when I started looking at the other (runners')



L-R: Zoe Sanchez on the medal stand following her second-consecutive Class AA State Championship. Luke Gambrell starts to break away from the pack near the 1-mile mark of Saturday's race. Photos/Todd Forrest

times on MileSplit," Sanchez said. "There was a lot of stress going in but I also had a lot of confidence. I knew I was capable of winning and I did it, so I guess everything worked out."

Union County Cross Country coach Paige Dyer also discussed Sanchez's competitive drive, which climbed to new heights in the days leading up to State.

"We had some really good practices before State and she was focused," Dyer said. "I told her (before the State race) that 'you need to start fast and stay fast' and she did. She's an amazing athlete and any college is going to be lucky to have her."

"Zoe is a true racer. If someone is close to her, she kicks it into another gear. Sometimes in practice, she would run with the boys so she could be pushed. I think if someone were there to push her, she could have easily broken 20 minutes."

Sanchez would cross the finish line in 20:06. In second place was Bleckley County

freshman Tristen Crosby at 20:34. Behind her at 20:49 was Bleckley senior Austin Perez, who Sanchez has battled on numerous occasions in both cross country and track.

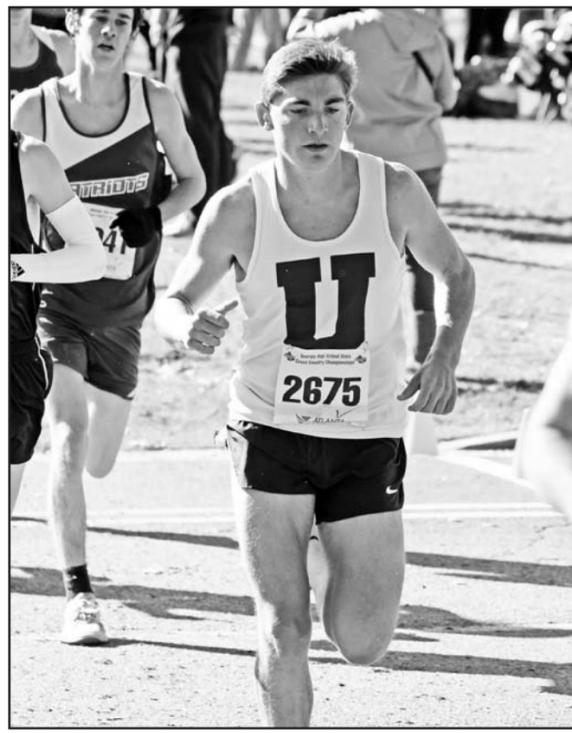
As for Sanchez's teammates, senior Sadie Underwood was 30th with a time of 23:36. Sophomore Hana Gregory placed 49th at 24:36; senior Lexi Ochoa was 57th, crossing the finish line at 25:02 and senior Allison Vincent placed 77th at 26:30.

Senior Jessie Holbrook clocked in at 26:51 - good enough for 85th and sophomore Campbell Chambers finished 97th with a time of 27:25.

Overall the girls placed ninth with 190 points - eight points back of eighth-place St. Vincents and 87 points better than 10th place Armuchee.

Boys place second - Union's guys turned in an impressive showing but it wasn't enough to overtake a slightly better showing from Oglethorpe County.

The Panthers finished in second with 99 points as first-



place Oglethorpe had 95 and third place Bleckley finished with 102.

"When comparing the top-five runners, three of our top-five runners came in before Oglethorpe's runners," Coach Dyer said. "In a one-on-one race with only two teams, we beat them. But Oglethorpe County ran a great race and you can't take anything away from them."

Banks County, the two-time defending Region 8-AA Champion, finished in fourth with 135 points. The Leopards did claim an individual title with senior Griffin Stephens edging Bleckley senior Garrett Rogers by six-one hundredths of a second at 16:44.

In fourth place was Union County junior Luke Gambrell at 17:35. Gambrell finished 11 seconds out of third and eight seconds better than fourth.

Just missing a top-10 was sophomore Hunter Hartzog, who placed 11th at 17:55; senior Thomas Mellendorf placed 26th, crossing the finish line at 18:48; in 30th was junior Malachi Patrick at 18:49.

Senior Guage Shumaker was 36th at 19-flat to round out Union's top-five.

Junior Trevor Guild placed 54th at 19:20 and senior Marcus Forrester came in 66th at 19:36.

"I knew that region wasn't a good showing of what our guys are capable of," Coach Dyer said. "I knew we were going to do better at State. We were shooting for the top spot, of course, but I was still proud of their showing. They were disappointed but that just shows how dedicated they are."

"I told them they should be proud of their effort. Their overall time as a team was faster than last year's State Championship time."

The Panther men should be right back in the mix next season with three of their top four runners and four of seven overall returning.

Helping Union County is the fact that nine of the top-14 runners at State were seniors, including Banks County's individual champion and Bleckley's runner-up.

"I told our four returning runners that 'you're going to be back here next year vying for a spot on the podium' and they all know it," Coach Dyer said. "Our team wants another title and Luke (Gambrell) wants an individual title. I do feel bad for our seniors because this was their last year, but they had a phenomenal run. Not many can say they were a State Champion and a State Runner-Up."

As for the girls, Coach Dyer must replace five of the top-seven, including her top-two runners.

According to Dyer, the current crop of eighth grade runners is a small one, but behind them is a large group of seventh graders.

"It'll be interesting with only a few girls coming up from eighth grade so we might have to find some new runners to get our numbers up."

"It may be a rebuilding year but I also like the fact that our younger girls saw their times improve during the season. It's going to be important to keep them working throughout the spring and summer."

Coach Dyer has coached the current seniors since they were in middle school so she knows them as well as anyone. According to Dyer, the Class of 2020 will be missed, as not only runners, but as outstanding individuals.

"The thing with them is, I'm just proud of them as people," she said. "They're disciplined, they have a tremendous work ethic and whether they're on the course, at school or at home, they are all just great people of integrity."

"I also want to say 'thank you' to our families and our cross country families and parents for supporting us," Dyer added. "Coach (Beau) Kelley and I also want to thank coach Jackie Hughes, she was a mentor to me and a coach to me."

"Thank you to our administration: C.T. Hussion and Banks Bitterman, who was at our race Saturday. And we just want to thank God for allowing us this opportunity."

Coach Swanson reflects on a 'banner' year for Union County Volleyball

By Todd Forrest
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Year Three of Union County Volleyball is in the books following two state tournament victories and an Elite 8 appearance.

In its first two seasons, Union County won a total of three matches. This year, they equaled that number in the post-season alone with one region and two state victories.

The 2019 season began with the Panthers dropping nine of their first 12, then 16 of 22, before flipping a switch at the end of August and going 9-4 over the final six weeks to finish 15-20 overall.

Union's first win came against Murray County in a tri-match at Fannin. Two days later, they defeated Andrews, NC to improve to 2-3.

Three straight losses followed before a win over Stephens County made their record 3-6. A tough stretch vs Fannin, Pickens and East Hall saw the Panthers fall to 3-9 on Aug. 29.

August closed with wins over Johnson and Eastside and September opened with a win over Lumpkin County.

Sitting at 6-9, Union's toughest stretch came when they dropped seven-straight in early-September for a 6-16 record.

The Panthers responded with four-straight wins, beginning on Sept. 17. After a 2-1 loss to Rabun, Union won two-of-three to close the regular season.

A win over Oglethorpe in the region semis was followed by a loss to Rabun in the region title game. State began nine days later for Union with road wins over Model and Harlem before eventually falling at Gordon Lee.

The Panthers started strong in set one at Gordon Lee but eventually fell 25-14, 25-14, 25-10.

Last week, the *North Georgia News* was able to chat with Union head coach Megan Swanson about the Panthers' regular season and postseason,



Coach Megan Swanson (middle) and senior Adelia Pyle (30) meet with the Rabun coaches prior to the Region Championship. Photo/Todd Forrest

the upcoming offseason, the future of the program and more.

NGN: What was your take on the Gordon Lee loss? What went wrong, in your opinion?

MS: We went in knowing they would be tough. We got some game film on them and studied what we could. They played Model so we saw that score and it was comparable to how we beat Model, so we went in thinking that we could play with them but still knowing it would be tougher than anyone we had faced in the playoffs.

We got over there and got a good jump on them in the first set, but then we made a few mistakes and wound up getting beat mentally more than anything. We got down ourselves a little bit and they had some really good hitters that were unlike anything we had seen all year. They were just simply the better team and we got frustrated a little bit.

We didn't play our best, but we didn't play our worst either. I'm proud of the effort, we played hard and did the best we could. We played with a lot of heart but (Gordon Lee) had one girl that really gave us trouble. She could put the ball wherever she wanted, as hard as she wanted, and we didn't have time to react to it.

NGN: If we were 100%

healthy and on our A-game, do you think it would have changed the outcome?

MS: It would have definitely been a much better game, but I went in knowing it would be tough. I knew if we played our best we could give them a run for their money and at least win a set or two. I think our girls were tired from all the traveling in the last week. Not that it should matter but I think it did take its toll on us a little bit.

If we could have gotten a few more blocks, I think it would have made a difference because that would have taken some of the pressure off our defense.

NGN: How close are we to being at the level of a Gordon Lee and the other top teams? Do you think we could be a State Semifinal team within a year or two?

MS: Oh yes. Definitely. We are losing a few good seniors but I have a lot of confidence in our underclassmen and I also have a lot of interest coming up from the middle school. If we work hard during the offseason and summer, then we can get there within the next year or two.

NGN: Without any feeder programs, how are you introducing volleyball to young girls in the community? Are there any

plans to start a middle school program in the near future?

MS: I'm trying to get one started but until then, we will offer out-of-season training that will begin in January or February. That will be for rising-seventh graders and up. That will give the girls who are in middle school a chance to get involved in the sport and to see if they're going to like it. If so, we can develop their skills, but the main thing is to create some interest.

(Additional info on the off-season volleyball programs will be published in the *North Georgia News* whenever it becomes available.)

For my second step, I'm also talking with the (athletic director) and working with the middle school on getting a program sometime in the near future. Then, later, my third step is to begin a recreation program.

NGN: Do you think it's a benefit to play six weeks of non-region games before beginning region/area play? We started 6-16 but turned it around just in time. What's your opinion on the long wait before playing the games that count?

MS: Absolutely it helps us. We played some teams, and beat some teams, that a lot of people would have never thought we could beat. Coming into the

season, I had high expectations and I wanted to shock some people. I wanted everyone to see just how hard these girls have worked and how far we have come since last year, and I think we accomplished that.

We could have had a better record if I made our schedule a little easier, but I wanted to challenge our girls and show them that they could play at that level. I didn't want them to think we were taking the easy way out. That's not how I do things and I that's now how I want them to do things. It prepared them for when we got into our region play. They were ready, they were fired up and they had confidence in themselves and it made a huge difference knowing that we were able to beat some really good teams. It helped the girls, it helped the program and it showed that, despite being in our early stages, we can still compete with people.

NGN: How much does being able to schedule North Carolina schools help us. North Carolina volleyball is like the SEC of college football.

MS: It's a huge plus. They've had volleyball programs for 30-plus years. They can start as early as third and fourth grade with their rec leagues. Those kids have had volleyball around

for a very long time. They grew up watching it so they are a lot more developed, but we were still able to contend with them so I was proud of us. This is our third year overall, and my second, so for them to be able to hang with some of the teams they did, I was extremely proud of them.

NGN: As for the immediate future, what will make these five departing seniors so difficult to replace?

MS: Those girls are irreplaceable on their leadership alone. They set the tone for our underclassmen. Now those girls are ready for next season and ready to step up into a new role and lead us back to the Elite 8 or even further.

It's going to be hard to replace them and we're really going to miss them but these younger girls are fired up. We had some younger girls move up from JV to varsity toward the end of the season and they really helped us. They are looking forward to off-season training and some of them are playing Club ball so they will get a lot of touches. Hopefully they'll get in plenty of work and be ready to step up to the plate and make us even better.

NGN: Years from now, what will you remember most about this past season?

MS: I think we'll look back on this season as the turning point for our program. The girls had goals before the season and one of those goals was to earn a banner in the gym. They wanted something to hang in the gym with their name on it showing that they achieved something great.

They thought getting a banner meant they had to win a region, which it would have, but when we won at Harlem and got into the Elite 8, we earned our banner.

It was an emotional night, not only because me made it farther than anyone thought we would, but we got our banner and it will hang at our high school forever so they can show their kids and families some day. Also, future volleyball players can look back at this and see that we made

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