

Sports

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Football: Union County places 14 on All-Region teams

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Six Panthers received First-Team All-Region honors, and eight picked up honorable mention nods during last week's 8-AA All-Region announcement.

Highlighting the selections were senior running back Jonah Daniel, senior offensive lineman Aaron Helton and senior receiver Kaston Hemphill, who all earned first-team honors for the second-straight year.

Seniors Mason McCombs (kicker) and Noah Underwood (linebacker) were named first team in 2020 after getting pegged for the second-team a year ago. Meanwhile, senior defensive lineman Conner Cook picked up his first all-region nomination.

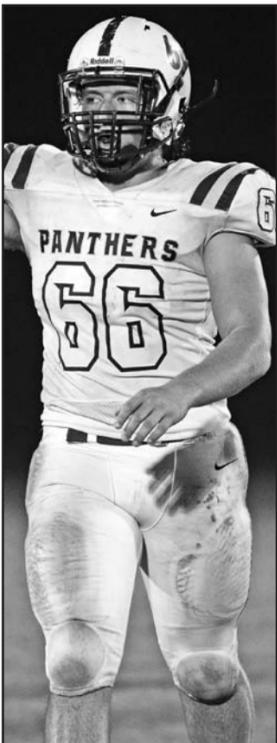
Helton closes out his career as a four-year starter at UCHS, where he was responsible for protecting every Union quarterback, starting with Cole Wright.

During his first three years on the job, Helton and the Union offensive line surrendered only 21 sacks in 33 games. And after allowing 12 sacks (four to Elbert, three at Commerce) in the first six games of 2020, the O-line allowed just three sacks over its last four outings.

Helton also played both ways for the Panthers, finishing with a team-high six sacks and 14 tackles for loss.

As for Hemphill, before moving to QB-1 over the final three games, he was among the team leaders with 16 catches and 249 yards. Defensively, Hemphill's two picks led the team while playing limited snaps in the secondary due to his offensive value.

Meanwhile, Daniel and McCombs each made a late-season push to pick up first-team honors, despite Daniel's



Senior O-lineman Aaron Helton at Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

injury battles and McCombs' early-season struggles.

The two-year starter at running back ended the year with 332 total yards and three scores - 224 yards and two touchdowns coming on the ground. In Union's postseason loss at Heard County, Daniel amassed 126 total yards on 20 touches.

At placekicker, McCombs connected on a pair of field goals at Heard, splitting the uprights from 30 yards and 40 yards to end the year with five-straight makes. He was also perfect on extra points over his final five outings.

The duo of Cook and Underwood round out Union's first-team selections. Cook's breakout campaign concluded with 55 tackles, five tackles for loss, one sack, a team-high three fumble recoveries and one forced fumble.



Senior wide receiver Kaston Hemphill prior to the season opener vs. Fannin County. Hemphill was all-region at safety in 2019. Photo/Todd Forrest

Underwood was a two-way star for the Panthers, piling up 78 tackles and two sacks. He was second on the team with 11 tackles for loss while forcing a fumble and recovering another.

Underwood led all Union pass catchers with four touchdowns from the H-back/tight end position. He posted career highs with seven grabs for 88 yards in the playoff loss at Heard County. He recorded a season-high 10 tackles vs. Elbert County to go with two tackles for loss, a sack, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

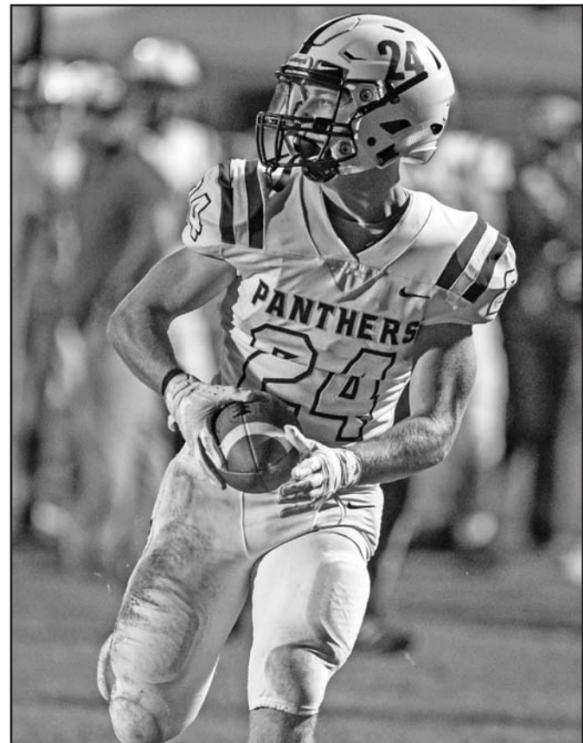
Senior linebackers Clayton Lester and Hunter Young were appointed as Honorable Mention by the region's coaches. Lester led the Panthers with 111 tackles while adding nine tackles for loss and five sacks. He turned in a monster perfor-

mance in the win over Class AAAA Chestatee, recording a dozen tackles, five tackles for loss and four sacks.

Young was second on the team with 99 tackles, to go with two sacks, four tackles for loss and a forced fumble. He totaled seven tackles vs. Elbert County, six at Banks County and a team-high five stops at Rabun.

Another honorable mention nod was sophomore linebacker Elijah Helton, who made 68 stops with 10 resulting in a loss. He added a 35-yard scoop-and-score at Commerce while leading the team with two forced fumbles.

Senior safety JJ Littles and junior cornerback Trace Wright conclude Union County's defensive honorable mentions. Littles tallied 33 tackles and an interception. He returned a kickoff for a touch-



Senior running back Jonah Daniel scores at Banks. Photo/Todd Forrest

down at Rabun County and led the way with seven tackles at Heard County.

Wright finished with 75 tackles, two fumble recoveries and an interception. He recorded 10 stops - one for a loss - during a 28-14 Homecoming victory over Class AAAA Pickens.

Junior receiver Keyton Chitwood claimed an 8-AA Honorable Mention nod after leading the team with 27 catches and 397 yards in 2020. His 50-yard grab in the opener vs. Fannin County stood as the longest pass play of the year. Later in the year, he added a 40-yard touchdown catch at Rabun County.

Last but not least is junior offensive lineman Tyler McBride, who picked up an Honorable Mention nomination after helping solidify a front-five that replaced four

starters entering 2020.

Region Champion Rabun County took four of the five Player of the Year selections and led 8-AA with 13 Wildcats named to the first team. Five Rabun County players received honorable mention accolades.

Quarterback Gunnar Stockton was the overall 8-AA Player of the Year; receiver Adriel Clark was the Offensive Player of the Year, linebacker Will Turpin picked up Defensive POY honors and Jaybo Shaw was named Coach of the Year.

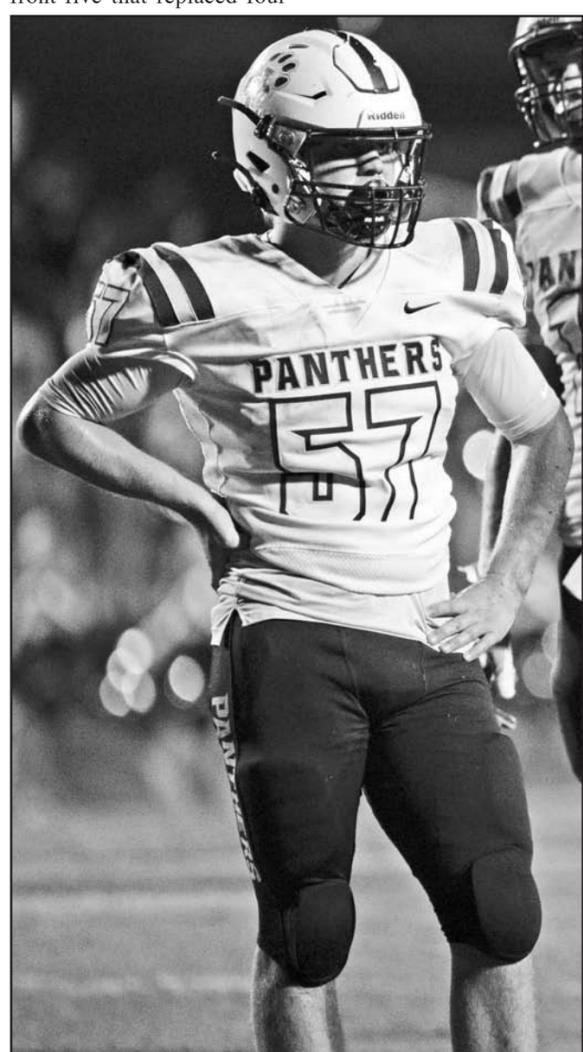
Elbert County's Quinn Hall earned 8-AA Athlete of the Year honors. The Blue Devils finished with seven first-team selections and five honorable mentions; Banks County had three players chosen for the first-team and seven honorable mentions.



Senior kicker Mason McCombs drilled a pair of field goals during Union's playoff game at Heard County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior linebacker Noah Underwood earned first-team honors after picking up a second-team all-region nod in 2019. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior defensive lineman Conner Cook proved difficult to block in 2020, earning respect from across the region. Photo/Todd Forrest