

Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

Union County High School Athletics 2020: The Year in Review

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nghanews.com

Union County High School athletics have seen their fair share of ups, downs and in-betweens during the 2020 calendar year.

From postseason success in girls basketball, swimming and volleyball to the first sub-500 football season in nine years, the last 12 months have been a roller-coaster ride for Panthers fans, and that's not including the abrupt cancellation of spring sports in March.

Over the next two weeks, the *North Georgia News* will reflect on the highs and lows between January and December 2020. We will highlight the memorable matchups and the phenomenal performances that stood out during an otherwise tumultuous year.

Before diving into the best of the best on the following page, here's a brief refresher-course of 2020 - UCHS sports edition.

The year got underway with Union County Wrestling qualifying a school-record five individuals for the State Sectionals. Cristian Martinez (182 pounds), Turner Cone (160), Brady Guild (152), Sean Phillips (170) and Eli Smith-Foot (285) all placed among the top-four at the Traditional Region 8-AA Tournament in Elbert County.

During the sectionals, hosted by Lamar County, Smith-Foot and Guild advanced to the State Championships with their respective fifth and sixth-place performances. In Macon, Guild split his four matches, winning his first and third contests of the day. Smith-Foot dropped his first two matches against the eventual fifth and sixth-place finishers.

In the pool, senior Brian Williams placed second at State in the 200-Yard Individual Medley, competing against swimmers from Class A through AAA. Williams joined six Panthers that qualified for the State Championships at Georgia Tech in February.

Concurrently, Lady Panthers basketball was in the midst of a postseason run on the hardwood, resulting in a 23-7 record, an Elite-8 appearance and a No. 7 final ranking in year one under head coach Crystal Beach.

Kindling the February surge was a 59-51 win over sixth-ranked Putnam County -- who previously defeated Union by 16 and 11 points -- during the second round of the Region 8-AA Tournament.

The Lady Panthers continued rolling with a 37-33 comeback win over Banks County in the Region Championship game to claim their first region crown since 2009. Banks was coming off an upset of its own, stunning No. 4 Rabun County in the 8-AA Semifinals. The Leopards would ride that momentum to a seven-point advantage before Union closed the tourney with a 13-2 run.

After blowout wins over Therrell and Butler in the first two rounds of State, the Lady Panthers met No. 3 Early County in the Elite 8. And it was all Union in the early going, grabbing an 11-4 lead before Early raced ahead 25-17 at the break and 32-19 in the third.

The Lady Panthers answered with a 30-9 run to take a 49-41 lead in the fourth. Unfortunately, Early outscored Union 19-9 over the final four-plus minutes to escape with the 60-58 victory.

Under first-year coach Corey Garrett, the Union men qualified for the State Tournament for the second-straight



Top-bottom: Union County girls basketball and Union County volleyball teams each won a Region/Area Championship in 2020. Photos/Todd Forrest

year, defeating Elbert County and Putnam County in the Region 8-AA Tournament. Senior Sawyer Drake topped 1,000 career points during the region consolation victory over Putnam, joining Pierson Allison, who reached 1K in December 2019.

The third-seeded Panthers' first-round setback at Douglas fell short, bouncing Union County from the state playoffs with a 15-12 overall record. The Panthers just missed homecourt advantage at State after dropping a grueling 62-58 battle to Social Circle in the Region 8-AA semifinal round.

The spring sports season was short-lived due to COVID-19, and the Union County boys soccer program saw its season canceled after eight outings with a 6-2 mark. Coming off a state runner-up performance in 2019 -- where they lost via penalty kicks in the Class AA title match -- the Panthers had high hopes in 2020. Unfortunately, injuries plagued Union County and they were dominated 5-1 by top-ranked Putnam in a match widely considered the de facto region championship.

The Lady Panthers, meanwhile, were replacing the bulk of its squad after winning region in 2019. And on the heels of a few early-season hiccups, including an 8-6 loss to Rabun County, Union (3-2-1) began turning the corner and found themselves tied for second in 8-AA, one one game back of first-place Oglethorpe County, who Union was slated to host later that season.

Union County Baseball also got off to a rocky start, but unlike the young Lady Panthers soccer team, the Panthers returned plenty of experience off a 2019 State playoff team.

The 2019 campaign

opened with the youthful squad dropping six straight, eventually bottoming out at 1-9 before winning 13 consecutive games to earn a spot in the State Tournament. So entering 2020, expectations were soaring on the UCHS baseball diamond.

However, February and March did not go as planned, and whether or not the Panthers would have righted the ship for a second straight year will remain a mystery. Entering March with a 3-5 record, the Panthers appeared to finally put it together with a convincing 7-3 win at sixth-ranked Commerce on March 3. Unfortunately, it wasn't the spark that Union County found in 2019 when they rallied from seven-down to beat Monticello. Instead, the Panthers rode a three-game skid into the March 13 cancellation to close at 4-8.

Without the cancellation, it likely would've been business as usual for Zoe Sanchez and UCHS Track and Field. Sanchez was primed to defend her 3200-Meter State Championship and make a run at a 1600M title after placing second in 2019.

In the opener at Gilmer, senior Kyle Morlock set a school record with a discus throw of 110-foot, 2 inches.

Meanwhile, other male athletes such as Luke Gambrell, Trevor Guild, Hunter Hartzog, Thomas Mellendorf, Zion Ross, Kyle Smith, Elliott Stepp, Noah Underwood, the relay teams (Mellendorf, Morlock, Ross and Sloan Sutton) were all expected to make noise at the region meet in their respective events.

On the female side, Evelyn McBride, Lexi Sisum, Sanchez, the relay teams (Mia McCombs, Allie Brey, Sisum and McBride) also had their sights set on a re-

gion title and a state berth.

The Union County golf teams also saw their seasons canceled within two weeks of filling out their rosters after basketball season wrapped up.

While high school sports were put on hold across the country, the Union County Schools administration remained active, hiring Anna Chapman to lead the volleyball program and Mandy (Bradley) Hunter to head up the Athletic Department. Hunter replaced outgoing athletic director Banks Bitterman, who stepped down for family reasons in June.

As for volleyball, Chapman's Panthers ran roughshod over Area 8, winning 25 of 26 sets (including the postseason) and finishing 8-0 during the regular season, en route to the program's first Area Championship. Union County ended 2020 with a program-record 19 wins and a berth in the Class A/AA Final Four, following three consecutive 3-1 victories over Atlanta Classical Academy, Armuchee and at Davidson Fine Arts.

The Panthers' season came to a halt with a 3-0 loss at eventual State Champion Pace Academy in the Class AA Semifinals. With only one senior starter this fall, Union County should be among the favorites to win it all in 2021.

Unlike volleyball, graduation hit Union County football hard and heavy entering 2020. When combined with limited summer practices to break in nine brand new offensive starters and a sizeable helping of early-season injuries, a perfect storm of adversity hit UCHS this fall, resulting in the Panthers' first losing season since 2011.

The year got underway with a 24-20 last-minute loss to

rival Fannin County, who reached the Elite 8 before losing a game. However, the more significant loss was sustained by all-region running back Jonah Daniel, who broke his ankle early in the third quarter vs. the Rebels.

Following a 32-14 road loss to a top-10 Commerce squad, the Panthers bounced back with wins over Chestatee, Pickens and Banks County. Unfortunately, the positive momentum hit a wall when Elbert County took advantage of five Union turnovers to score 21 unanswered and hand Union a 31-10 loss - the Panthers' first Region 8-AA loss in seven years to a team other than Rabun County.

Speaking of Rabun, the Panthers would later fall to Rabun Gap and at Rabun County but closed the regular season with a 7-0 win at Gilmer. Union entered the State Tournament as the No. 3 seed from 8-AA and proceeded to turn in a heroic effort in a 31-28 loss at Heard County.

Backup quarterback Kas-ton Hemphill and a healthy Daniel helped steer Union County

back from a 28-7 deficit to pull within a field goal in the final minutes. Junior running back Carson Walker accounted for two rushing scores, and senior H-back Noah Underwood added another through the air, but the Panthers ran out of time as Heard County picked up three vital first downs to run out the clock.

On the diamond, Union County Softball climbed its way into the Class AA top-five and clinched the regular season region crown with one week remaining. But after dominating for much of August and September, the Lady Panthers fell on hard times during the postseason, dropping its Region-semifinal contest to eventual 8-AA Champion Banks County.

The Lady Panthers defeated Banks twice in the regular season, including an eight-inning barn-burner in Blairsville and a 1-0 shutout in Homer behind a masterpiece from senior right-hander Trinity Queen.

Union would suffer an upset loss to Elbert County in the consolation game, sending the 4-seed Lady Panthers to top-ranked Heard County in the first round of State, where they dropped consecutive games to the would-be State Champions.

Cross Country continued its double-digit streak of State Tournament appearances; however, for the first time in three years, Union County would leave Carrollton without a State Championship.

Senior Luke Gambrell posted Union's only top-10 finish of the day as the shorthanded Panthers and Lady Panthers placed 10th and 13th, respectively.

Wrestling is off to a hot start in 2020-21 after graduating only one senior from last year's record-breaking squad. Wins over Jackson County, Towns County and White County have highlighted their early-season accomplishments.

Union swimming is also looking good through the first month, setting multiple program records in male and female competitions.

Meanwhile, Union County basketball has seen more than half its games wiped out due to COVID-19. With region play expected to get underway next month, both Union squads will enter January with only four games under their belts. The lone hardwood win of November-December came at Towns County on Dec. 4 when the Lady Panthers avenged a season-opening loss to the Lady Indians.

Junior Ava Hunter will enter 2021 with 917 career points. She was expected to top 1,000 by Christmas before cancellations delayed her milestone.

Finally, 1999 UCHS graduate and former Georgia Tech quarterback Robbie Brown was named the quarterbacks coach of the Miami Dolphins in the spring, ahead of the NFL Draft.



Senior swimmer Brian Williams with his coaches after placing second in the 200-Yard Individual Medley at the State Championships hosted by Georgia Tech.