

Union County High School 2020: The games we won't forget

By Todd Forrest
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Below are the *North Georgia News*' top games of 2020 from each sport, listed in chronological order beginning in January.

Each coach was consulted, but the final decision belonged to the newspaper. For consideration, the games had to take place during the 2020 calendar year.

Individual sports like cross country, golf, swimming, track and wrestling will not be included in this edition. Individual performances will be in next week's paper. For sports like basketball, that span two calendar years, only games from January and beyond are eligible.

If you agree, disagree, if there was an overlooked game, or just want to share your opinion, please email us at sports@nganews.com.

Boys Basketball: Social Circle 62, Union County 58 - Region 8-AA Semifinals - Feb. 7: Starting point guard and leading-scorer Pierson Allison went down with a first-quarter leg injury, and in his absence, the Redskins turned an 18-18 tie into 46-35 advantage in the fourth. With his team trailing late, Allison returned with a heavily-wrapped thigh and his facial expressions displaying obvious pain.

Allison immediately assisted on two straight buckets, cutting the margin to 50-42. Then he rattled off 14-straight Union points, pulling his team within striking distance at 60-56 with under a minute left.

A Drake basket with 11 seconds to play made it 60-58, but Social Circle sank two game-clinching free throws to survive 62-58.

Allison ended the night with 23 points; Drake added 18 and Sawyer Brey had eight.

Girls Basketball: Early County 60, Union County 58 - State Elite 8 - Feb. 25: Fueled by its loudest home crowd in a decade, Union County jumped all over Class AA's No. 3 team and its 4-star forward Mikayla Timpson, by scores of 7-2 and 11-4 in the opening frame.

Early County took advantage of the Lady Panthers' foul trouble in the second, building a 25-17 halftime lead that eventually expanded to 32-19 in the third. With Union on the verge of getting run out of its own gymnasium, Coach Crystal Beach's squad responded with its best 10 minutes of the season, outscoring Early 30-9 to take control at 49-41 near the five-minute mark of the fourth. Senior Andelin Hill accounted for 13 of Union's 30 points during the onslaught.

Now, with the visitors' backs against the wall, it was their turn to come out swinging, drilling consecutive 3s to ignite a 14-2 run in under 120 seconds.

Down 55-51 with three minutes left, Union seniors Brooke Dockrey and Kait McCarter scored five-straight to give their team its final lead of the night, 56-55 just inside of two minutes.

At the one-minute mark, a Lady Panthers turnover resulted in an Early layup and a 57-56 deficit. Trailing 58-56, Hill scored a game-tying put-back with 21 seconds to play, but Timpson answered with an offensive board on the other end for a 60-58 Early County lead.

On its final possession, Union went inside to Hunter, who was denied at the basket by the 6-foot-3 Timpson with four



Then-junior goalkeeper Aaron Helton was instrumental in Union County Soccer's first win over Riverside Military Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest

seconds left, blocking the shot out of bounds. With two seconds to go, the Lady Panthers went back to Hunter in the paint, but her 12-footer was turned away by Timpson, sending Early County to the Final Four.

Hunter finished with 19 points and 11 boards; Dockrey had 15 points and five boards, while Hill went for 14 and 10.

Boys Soccer: Union County 4, Riverside Military 3 - Feb. 18: The Panthers scored the program's first-ever win over RMA on a cold, soggy evening in Blairsville.

Tied 1-1 at the intermission, Union exploded for three goals in the first eight minutes to grab a 4-1 advantage. The three-goal lead was anything but secure as RMA answered with two goals in one minute to make it a 4-3 contest during the 68th minute.

The Panthers would keep the Eagles at bay over the final 12 minutes to hang on to the 4-3 victory and break their skid vs. RMA.

Senior Kobi Robbins scored three goals, and sophomore Kyler Robbins added the fourth goal on a free kick in the 48th minute.

Girls Soccer: Union County 2, Fannin County 2 - Feb. 25: The young Lady Panthers were a bit unsure of themselves coming into the season until a draw vs. rival Fannin County injected a boost of confidence into the program.

Desaray Patterson scored both Union County goals, the first coming in the 37th minute, but Fannin quickly notched the equalizer before the break.

Patterson struck again, this time making good on a penalty kick during the 53rd minute. The Rebels came back to force the tie, but the draw prevented head coach Tim Hunter's first 0-2 start in 21 years of coaching. After Fannin County, Union would win three-of-four before the season came to a halt in mid-March.

Baseball: Union County 3, Banks County 2 - March 3: Sitting at 0-3 in region play and 2-5 overall, the Panthers desperately needed a win at the defending region champs to avoid an 0-4 start.

After dropping game one of the doubleheader 14-1 at Banks County, Union's season was already on the ropes less than one month in. And trailing

2-1 in the sixth, the pressure continued to mount for the Panthers and second-year skipper Zach Odom.

Hope was kindled when Cayden Rich led off the inning with a walk, and Alec Youngblood bunted him to second. After advancing to third, Rich tied the game off a Hunter Young ground-out. Matthew Kelley followed with a bases-empty single and John Mancuso scored him with a two-out double to center.

Leading 3-2 in the seventh, Rich fanned the first two batters before surrendering a two-out double. Two pitches later, he induced a game-ending grounder to second, handing Union its first region win of 2020.

Isaak Mullinack got the start and pitched four innings, allowing one earned run. Lefty Zeke Swartz worked two scoreless innings before giving way to Rich to nail down the save.

Mancuso and Kelley had two hits apiece in the win.

Softball: Union County 6, Banks County 5 (8 innings) - Sept. 10: Trailing 3-0 after two innings, the Lady Panthers forced extra innings and won it in the eighth on consecutive two-out hits by Hannah Patton and Lexi Sisum.

Queen struggled in the circle during the first three innings but looked like her old self in crunch time, limiting Banks to just three hits and one run over the final five innings.

Patton finished 3 for 5 with 2 RBIs, a double and an eighth-inning triple. Chloe Potts went 2 for 4 with an RBI and a walk.

The final-inning heroics were set up by a Leopards' base-running blunder in the top of the eighth, turning a two-on, nobody-out scoring opportunity into an inning-ending groundout with one-on and two-outs.

Still even at 5-5 in the Union half of the eighth, a 1-6-3 double-play appeared to spoil any scoring chances. But Patton just missed a homer off the centerfield fence, resulting in a triple, and Sisum, who was hitless on the day, laced a walk-off RBI single to right-center.

The win ended a three-game slide to Banks and put Union in the driver's seat for the 8-AA Tournament's top seed.

Football: Heard County 31, Union County 28 - State First Round - Nov. 27: A patch-

worked Union County squad, ravaged by injuries, nearly pulled off the upset of the tournament when they took the 2018 State Champions down the wire in the Class AA first round.

The visiting Panthers scored 10 points in the final minute of the first half to swing momentum in their favor entering the break. The 10-point swing began with a Noah Underwood touchdown catch from backup quarterback Kaston Hemphill,

turning a 28-7 near-rout into a 28-14 contest. Then, Hemphill picked off a pass, setting up a 30-yard Mason McCombs field goal for a 28-17 halftime score.

Another McCombs field goal made it 28-20 in the third, but Heard got three points back to start the fourth. Trailing 31-20, Walker capped off an 80-yard scoring drive with a 5-yard touchdown run. Daniel's 2-point run found pay-dirt, and Union was suddenly in position to steal the

victory, down 31-28 with under five minutes left.

Unfortunately, Heard County recovered a potentially devastating fumbled snap on its ensuing possession, then picked up the necessary first downs to drain the final minutes off the clock and keep Hemphill and company on the sideline.

Union's senior QB finished with a career-high 252 yards passing. Daniel returned from injury to tally 110 total yards; Underwood hauled in seven grabs for 88 yards and a score; Walker added two touchdowns on the ground.

Volleyball: Union County 2, Rabun County 0 - Oct. 1: Union recorded its first-ever victory over Region/Area nemesis Rabun County to clinch the No. 1 seed and homecourt advantage in the Area Tournament.

Tied at 21-21 in the first set, the Panthers pulled away for a 25-23 victory. In set two, Union found itself in a 13-8 hole, but a 9-3 swing gave them a 17-16 edge. The Wildcats weren't finished, going back on top 19-18 before four-unanswered from Union put them ahead for good at 22-19 as they took the set and the match 25-21.

Saylor Noe (19), Riley Allison (17), Morgan Fussell (14) and Sofia Swartz (11) each tallied double-digit kills. Setting the table for them was Emma Whicker with 19 assists.

The Rabun match was the last time an opponent threatened Union County until the second round of State.

Next week: In the Jan. 6 edition of the *NGN*, we will list the top individual athletic performances of 2020.

NASCAR 2020

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

Herbst to drive the No. 98 for SHR

Riley Herbst will drive the No. 98 Stewart Haas Ford in the 2021 NASCAR Xfinity Series season.

Herbst is a 21-year-old racer from Las Vegas whose sophomore year in the Xfinity Series will come with the same team that in 2020 won a series-best nine races and led more than 1,000 laps with driver Chase Briscoe. Crew chief Richard Boswell, who has been a part of SHR's No. 98 team since its inception in 2017, will continue in his role with Herbst.

"Being on a team with such a strong run of success is the kind of opportunity every driver wants," Herbst said. "Expectations are definitely high, but the highest expectations are the ones I've set for myself."

Herbst began racing go-karts at age 5, competing in events up and down the West Coast. He soon followed in his family's footsteps, transitioning to off-road racing in 2006. His grandfather, Jerry, and uncles Tim and Ed, and father Troy, are all Southern Nevada Sports Hall of Fame inductees for being championship-winning off-road racers.

By age 10, Herbst sought a return to pavement. It began with Legends cars before moving up to Speed Trucks and Super Late Models, where in 2015 he was a regular at Irwindale (Calif.) Speedway, running both classes and winning the Speed Trucks track championship.

That set the stage for Herbst's NASCAR path, as he competed in the K&N Pro Series beginning in 2016 before moving to the ARCA Menards Series in 2017. Herbst won his first career ARCA race on June 9 at Pocono Raceway on his way to earning the series' rookie-of-the-year title. Another season of ARCA followed in 2018, along with a smattering of races across the NASCAR Truck Series, K&N Series and CARS Late Model Stock Car Tour. He made his Xfinity Series debut at Iowa Speedway, qualifying ninth and finishing sixth.

Herbst ran a similar schedule in 2019 before a full-time ride in the Xfinity Series in 2020. As a rookie running all 33 races, Herbst scored four top-five and 17 top-10 finishes, with his best result being a pair of second-place results, at Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, California, and Kentucky Speedway. He continued to run select ARCA races, earning his second career victory at Michigan.

"Riley has really just scratched the surface of his potential," said Greg Zipadelli, vice president of competition, SHR. "He reminds us a lot of Cole Custer and Chase Briscoe - two drivers who came to our Xfinity Series program with plenty of potential. Between the two of them, they won a lot of races and are now in the NASCAR Cup Series. Riley has the talent to emulate what Cole and Chase did in our equipment and we're going into 2021 with the expectation that we'll celebrate his first Xfinity Series win together."

Herbst will make his debut with the No. 98 Monster Energy Ford Mustang Feb. 13 in the Xfinity Series' season-opener at Daytona.

BELL STILL LOOKING FOR A WIN

Christopher Bell spent his rookie season with Leavine Family Racing. But after the team ceased operations, he moved to Joe Gibbs Racing.

The 26-year-old had hoped to win a race in 2020, but it just



Riley Herbst in 2020

didn't come to happen. He did earn two top-fives and seven top-tens in his rookie campaign however, ending the season 20th in the championship standings. One thing that surprised the 16-time NASCAR Xfinity Series winner about the Cup level was the depth of talent within the field.

"Everyone can sit here and tell you that it's a lot. I don't know what the right word is. I knew that the field was tougher. I knew there was a lot more capable drivers and cars, but just getting a feel for the depth of the series - that's something that nobody can really prepare you for," said Bell.

"I think if you look at 2020 as a whole, it was definitely a down year for JGR, compared to what 2019 was. 2019 was stellar. The 19, the 18 and the 11 were all in the final four. The 20 car won one or two races. That was a really good year, and then 2020 was definitely different. Martin (Truex) won Martinsville, and Denny (Hamlin) pretty much carried the banner, winning the majority of the races, and the 18 and the 20 had off years. I don't expect 2021 to be like 2020.

"I think that Joe Gibbs Racing is obviously a power house team and they are focused on getting back to where they were in 2019. But yeah, you just look at how the races played out in 2020 and Kyle (Busch) had multiple opportunities where he could have won, it just didn't work out for him. You will have that, so ultimately if we just keep putting ourselves in position and we are competitive enough, and we are fast enough, we have a good pit crew, we execute races and don't make mistakes, that's all we can ask for. Whether we win one time or we win eight times, just being competitive is the main goal."

He will team up with crew chief Adam Stevens, who served atop the pit box for Kyle Busch for the past five years. The duo won the Cup Series championship in both 2015 and 2019, but a change was made after Busch's lackluster 2020 season.

Meanwhile, NASCAR's recent change to the 2021 Cup Series schedule is evidence that modifications must continue in order to adjust to ongoing state by state COVID 19 restrictions.

NASCAR will start the season with the Daytona 500 on Feb. 14, followed by races on the 3.61-mile road course at Daytona Feb. 19-21. The Cup Series, Xfinity Series and Truck Series will compete on the road course at Daytona the week after the Daytona 500.

The road course was added to the NASCAR schedule as a replacement event for the canceled race weekend at Watkins Glen International in August of 2020 due to COVID 19 restrictions in New York state.

The NASCAR weekend at Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, Calif. scheduled on Feb. 26-28 has been canceled and replaced with a race weekend on the oval at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

Racing Joke: Kevin and his wife were traveling during the off season and stopped at a very exclusive hotel to rest for a while. They slept for about four hours and decided they had rested enough to continue on. When they checked out, the desk clerk handed them a bill for \$450.

Kevin exploded and demanded to see the manager.

The manager came out and explained about the Olympic-sized swimming pool and other amenities.

"But we didn't use them," protested Kevin.

"Well, they are here and you could have," said the manager. He went on to explain that they could have taken in one of the shows offered.

"But we didn't go to any of the shows," argued Kevin.

"Well, we have them and you could have," replied the manager.

This back and forth continued on for several minutes. Finally Kevin realized he was going to have to pay, so he wrote a check.

"But sir, the manager said, 'this check is only for \$100.'

"That's right. I charged you for kissing my wife."

"But I didn't."

"Well," Kevin replied with a sly smile, "she was here and you could have."

Racing Trivia Question: How many Cup Series championships did Jeff Gordon win?

Last Week's Question: What year was the NASCAR Truck Series started? The series was called the NASCAR SuperTruck Series in 1995, the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series from 1996 through 2008, the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series from 2009 through 2018, and the NASCAR Gander Outdoors Truck Series in 2019.

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UNION COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL WHOVILLE MEET HIGHLIGHTS

100 FREESTYLE

3rd Hannah Sheffield

State Qualifier & HS Record

4th Hunter White

200 FREESTYLE

5th Liam Smith

100 BREASTSTROKE

2nd Hunter White

State Qualifier

4th Rachel Reid

HS Record



500 FREESTYLE

4th Blake Caputi

10th Rachel Reid

100 BACKSTROKE

2nd Hannah Sheffield

200 MEDLEY RELAY

9th Preston Perren

Hunter White

Liam Smith

Blake Caputi

COMBINED SCORES

12TH OUT OF 21 TEAMS