

Sports

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Baseball: Panthers crack win column, 13-12 over Athens

Young Panthers get first taste of mountain rivalry in Tuesday doubleheader vs. Towns

By Todd Forrest
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Union County baseball picked up its first win of the 2023 season in a 13-12 Senior Night thriller over Athens Academy (11-9, 5-4) on Thursday, March 30.

The Panthers rallied from a 5-0 first-inning deficit to grab a 13-6 advantage before holding on courtesy of some late-inning defensive heroics.

Union County eventually dropped two of three in the Region 8-AA series, falling 10-0 in the Classic City on Tuesday, March 28, and suffering a 10-2 loss in the nightcap of Thursday's home doubleheader.

Panthers 13, Athens Academy 12 - Freshman Maddox Patton's diving catch on a sinking line drive to left field preserved Union's first win of the year and denied a would-be go-ahead single for Athens Academy in the top of the seventh inning.

The Panthers took a 13-11 lead into the final frame in the opener of Thursday's doubleheader, and after sophomore Hayden Hughes induced a groundout and a flyout to start the seventh, it appeared Union County would enjoy a drama-free end to its first win of the year.

But back-to-back singles up the middle and a base hit to left loaded the bases. Hughes quickly put the ensuing hitter in a 1-2 hole but missed the zone on his next three offerings to walk home a run.

With the go-ahead run in scoring position, Hughes got ahead with a first-pitch strike. But Athens Academy junior Om Patel laced the 0-1 offering into left field, where Patton laid out head first, getting just enough leather under the baseball to deny the two-run single with a back-handed stab.

Patton's web-gem was made possible by a spirited Panthers' rally that overcame a 5-0 deficit with three in the first, six in the second and four in the third. Leading 13-6



Union County baseball seniors (L-R): Will Duncan, Jordan Gilliam and Hunter Fleming during last week's Senior Night festivities.

through three, the Union's bats went scoreless the rest of the way, but it was enough for Patton and Hughes, who combined for 5 1/3 innings in relief.

The 3-7 hitters in the Union County lineup accounted for most of the evening's damage, combining for 12 RBIs and 12 of their team's 15 hits. Senior Will Duncan came through with a career-high 4 RBIs and his first career homerun during a 3-for-4 performance on Senior Night.

Hughes and Eli Gwynn each went 3 for 4, with Gwynn scoring three times and Hughes knocking in three. Lane Haney drove in three while going 2-for-4 at the plate; senior Jordan Gilliam doubled and scored twice during a 2-for-2 day.

The Spartans tagged freshman southpaw Gunnar Akins for five runs in the first on four singles, two walks, a leadoff triple and an error. But Union responded with three in the bottom half, ignited by Patton's leadoff walk and two stolen bases.

Hughes' one-out single

scored Patton in the home half of the first, but a pick-off of Hughes' courtesy runner emptied the bags. Gwynn picked his team up with a two-out base knock to left, allowing Duncan to launch a 1-1 offering over the left field fence for a 5-3 score.

Athens Academy manufactured a run in the second via a hit batter to start the inning, followed by a sacrifice bunt and a two-out single. But Gilliam wore a 1-2 pitch to lead off the Union half, sparking a six-run frame after the Panthers sent nine batters to the dish.

Fleming moved Gilliam to third with a one-out hit, and Hughes brought home the inning's first run on an opposite-field single. Gwynn's infield single plated Fleming and Duncan tied the game by going the other way on a 1-1 count.

Moses Stevens' infield single put Union out front to stay at 7-6, but they still weren't done with the inning, adding another run on a passed ball and a Haney groundout.

Patton, who entered and

recorded the last out of the second, worked around a lead-off walk in the third, bringing Union back up for a four-spot in the bottom half of the inning.

Gilliam sparked things with a leadoff double, then scored via an error off the bat of Patton. Hughes singled home Patton, and Gwynn put runners at the corners with his third hit of the game.

Duncan's fourth RBI came courtesy of an infield hit, and Haney knocked in his team's 13th run with a base knock to left field.

Gifted a 13-6 cushion, Patton fanned two during a scoreless fourth. Gilliam singled to begin the bottom half but a double-play ended the Union County threat.

Patton eventually ran into trouble following a five-pitch walk to start the fifth. Three singles, another walk and an error helped Athens Academy cut the margin to 13-10 before Hughes entered to record a punch out with two aboard and two away.

The Panthers went down

1-2-3 in their half of the fifth, and Athens Academy capitalized on two Union errors and a walk to add a run in the sixth.

A Haney single was all the offense Union County could muster in the sixth to take a 13-11 lead to the seventh.

Hunter Fleming went 1 for 2 with a run; Holton Fleming scored twice and Patton scored two runs and swiped two bags.

On the mound, Patton picked up the win while fanning three in 2 2/3 innings, allowing two earned runs, three walks and three hits.

Hughes tossed the final 2 2/3 to nail down the save, walking three and giving up three hits and one earned with one K. Akins got the start and lasted 1 2/3, yielding six hits, four earned runs, three walks and striking out one.

Panthers 2, Athens Academy 10 - The Spartans responded to the loss by putting up four in the first inning of the series finale.

Athens Academy added

one in the third, two in the fifth and another in the sixth before Union got on the board with two in the bottom of the sixth. The Spartans added two insurance runs in the seventh, finishing with 13 hits in the 10-2 win.

The Panthers were limited to three hits - one apiece from their 3-4-5 hitters in the lineup. Hughes tripled and went 1 for 3 with a run, Gwynn finished 1 for 2 with a run and Duncan drove home one during a 1-for-3 evening.

Duncan and Holton Fleming stole a base.

Gwynn sat down three over 2 2/3 innings on the mound, allowing seven hits and three earned runs. Duncan fanned four in 3 2/3, giving up five hits and two earned. Holton Fleming surrendered a hit and issued one free pass in 2/3 of an inning.

Panthers 0, Athens Academy 10 - Union County was held to two hits and gave up a four-spot in the first and fourth innings during a 10-0 five-inning loss in Athens on Tuesday, March 28.

Singles by Hunter Fleming and Gwynn, and an error off the bat of Kaden Combs accounted for Union's only two baserunners during the 10-0 loss to kick off the three-game region series.

Hughes lasted three innings on the bump, allowing six hits and three earned runs while punching out three and walking a batter. Combs surrendered three hits and three earned over 1/3 of an inning.

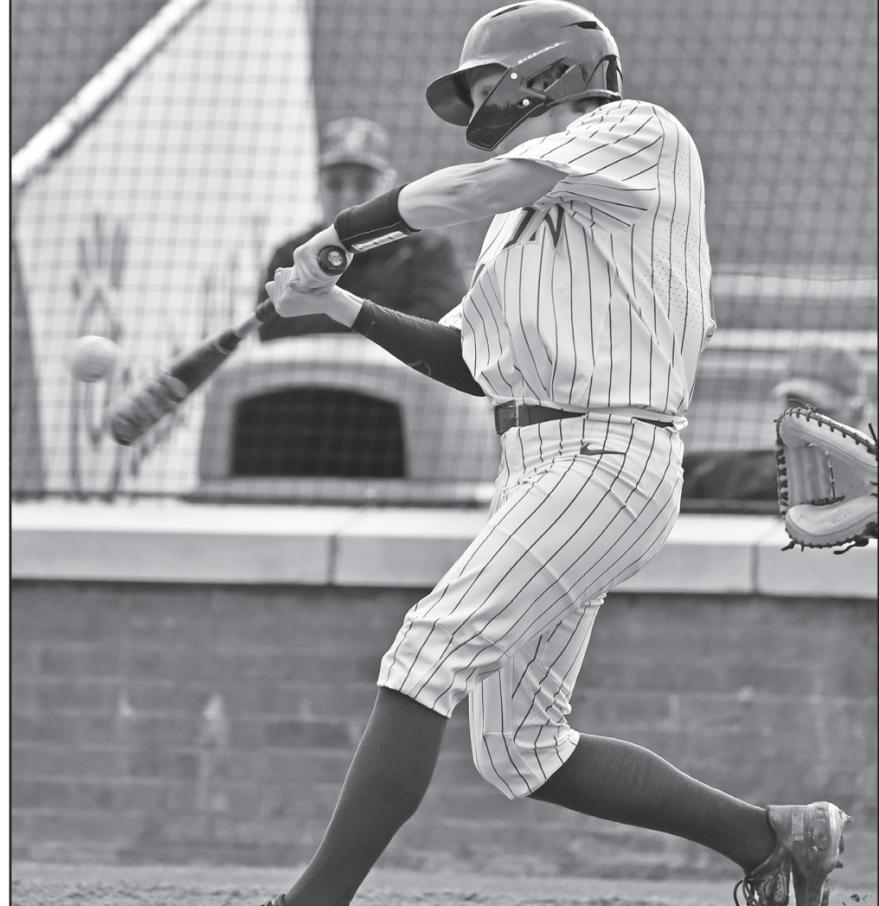
Gwynn allowed one hit and one unearned run in an inning of work.

Up next: The Panthers take a week off from Region play and will face Towns County in a doubleheader that was originally scheduled as a home-and-home until Mother Nature intervened. Union will host the Indians in a Tuesday doubleheader at 3 p.m.

Region 8-AA action resumes next Tuesday, April 11, when the Panthers host East Jackson, who is currently 0-9 vs. 8-AA competition.



Will Duncan turned in a Senior Night for the ages during Union County's 13-12 win over Athens Academy - driving in four while going 3-for-4 with his first career big fly. Photo/Todd Forrest



Eli Gwynn scored three times during a 3-for-4 day in the win over Athens Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest

'Superman' soars into Bristol for NASCAR Cup Series debut

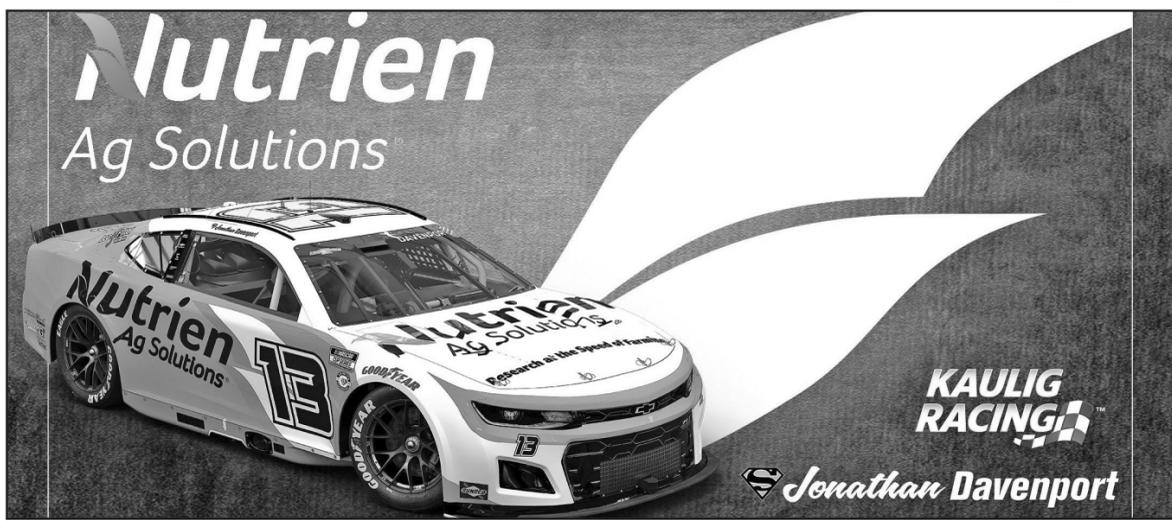
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Bristol, TN - Is Superman still faster than a speeding bullet?

This weekend he only needs to beat a speeding "Busch" when he challenges defending race champion Kyle Busch and the rest of the field in Bristol, Tennessee.

Blairsville native Jonathan "Superman" Davenport will attempt to make his long-awaited NASCAR Cup Series debut during Sunday's Food City Dirt Race at the Bristol Motor Speedway.

Behind the wheel of Kaulig Racing's No. 13 Nutrien Ag Solutions Chevrolet, the 39-year-old Union County High School graduate will make his first qualifying bid at a NASCAR Cup Series event during the Bush's Beans Qualifying races on Saturday night. Should all go as planned, Davenport



will be back under the lights for Sunday night's main event.

In a career that spans four decades, Davenport shined at an early age in local legends and late model racing, winning back-to-back Legends Car Semi-Pro National Champion-

ships in 1999 and 2000.

In 2004, Davenport began competing in Late Model dirt races, as well as part-time in the World of Outlaws Late Model Series.

As a full-time dirt racer, Davenport won Rookie of the

year honors in the Lucas Oil Late Model Dirt Series, eventually claiming three championships (2015, 2018, 2019), 69 wins, 191 top-fives, and 282 top-10 finishes in the series.

Additionally, Davenport has claimed five World 100

championships in 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021 and 2022. The race is widely considered one of the most prestigious late-model dirt track races in the country.

Davenport took home the checkered flag 24 times in 2022 in Super Dirt Late Model action,

including a record-breaking \$1,002,022 purse at June's Eldora Million race in Rossburg, Ohio.

In 2013, attempted to make his NASCAR Camping World Truck Series debut at Martinsville, Virginia, driving the No. 1 Chevy for Make Motorsports but failed to qualify.

Practice for Sunday's Food City Dirt Race begins Friday evening, followed by four qualifying races starting at 6 p.m. Saturday. The Food City Dirt Race is Sunday at 7 p.m. and will be carried live on FOX, and on the radio by MRN and Sirius XM. Local MRN affiliates include Gainesville's WDUN (550 AM and 102.9 FM).

Previous winners of the 250-lap, 133.25-mile race are Kyle Logano (2021) and Busch (2022).

For more details on Davenport and this weekend's race, visit his official website at jonathandavenport.net.

Track: Union secures four wins at White County's Yonah Invitational

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Cleveland - Junior Benton Gregory, freshman Lola Hunter and the girls' 4x800 relay team combined for four Union County gold medals at last Friday's Mt. Yonah Invitational.

Hunter took home first in the long-distance events - clocking in at 5 minutes, 40.78 seconds in the 1600M event and logging an 11:52.90 in the 3200M race. The Union County freshman didn't face much competition in her two wins, defeating fellow 9th-grader Keli George (Lumpkin County) by over 24 seconds in the 1600M before lapping the field in the 3200M event. Hunter collected gold by more than 2 minutes in the 3200M race over teammate Lydia Wagner.

As for Gregory, the junior crossed the line at 2:04.59 in the 800M race, edging Tallulah Falls senior Walker Bailey by nearly four seconds. The girls 4x800 relay team clocked in at 10:35.56, holding off White County by more than four seconds.

The girls' 4x400 team came in second at 4:36.00 - less than eight seconds back of first-place White County. With a time of 17.85 seconds, junior Linley Jones placed second in



Junior Benton Gregory during a recent meet. Photo/submitted

the 100M hurdles, finishing over three seconds back of first-place Madison Myers of Lumpkin County.

The guys' 4x400 relay team took home silver at 3:33.35 - one second back of White County. Senior Cooper Kluth placed second by an eyelash in the 110M hurdles with a time of 16.64 seconds, but White County's Vondre Nelson logged a 16.62 to earn gold.

Third-place finishes included the boys' 4x100 and 4x200 relay teams, Ellie Adams (800M), Jones (300M hurdles),

Sam Page (300M hurdles), Natalie Payne (1600M, 3200M), Zander Rotko (400M).

Fourth-place finishers were Hannah Kazmierzak (800M) and Ava Loyd (100M). Coming in fifth were Katie Byers (100M hurdles), Noel Hyatt (400M), Wagner (1600M) and Taylor Whitehead (400M).

Union County will take a week off for Spring Break before returning to action on April 11 at Gilmer. The Region 8-AA meet is at East Jackson on April 24.



Katie Byers (far left) competes in the 100M hurdles during a recent meet. Photo/submitted

Local Racing Report: Tri-County Racetrack

By Blake Lynch
North Georgia News
Racing Reporter

Brasstown, NC - The racing season has begun at Tri-County Racetrack in Brasstown, North Carolina.

The track received a facelift over the winter with new bleachers installed ahead of 2023's first two-night event.

Tri-County featured Class Sport Compact Racing for the first time last week. For those unfamiliar, it's a super fast front wheel drive class.

The race winner was No. 54 Brandon Dalton. Coming in second was No. 64 Andrew Smith. Third was No. 48 Newman Presnell. Fourth was No. 88X Shannon Barnhill. No. 18 Reid Christensen was fifth.

602 Class A: The winner of this class was No. 88 Ricky Smith. Second was another familiar name No. 44 Bobby Elkins. No. 71 Nick Sellers was third. No. 56 Colton Berrong placed fourth. No. 117 Dylan Beaver took home fifth.

602 Class B: The checkered flag went to No. 3L Mark Ledford. No. 43 Tim Ford was second. No. 7 Keith Rollins placed third. No. 98m Matt



Janssen was fourth. No. D33 Dale Phillips came in fifth.

Super Late Model: No. 8 Coach David Payne came home with the win. No. 22 Will Roland was second. No. 4 Dan Ledford was third. No. 38 Jamie Oliver was fourth. No. 00 Shaun Chastain was fifth.

Street Stock: No. 95 Alex Vance was the winner. No. 4 Roger Beaver was second. No. 64 Chuck Simmons was third. No. 01 Jacob Lynch came in fourth. No. 77 Eric Ray was fifth.

Crate: The No. 7 the real deal Jason Deal was the winner. No. 4 Danny Ledford was second. No. 12D Drew Deavers was third. No. 17 Brett Shook was fourth. No. 41 Parris Simmons rounded out the top five.

Open Wheel: No. 95 Stevie Clark was your winner. No. 22 Matt Sandefur placed second. No. X Brawley Stillwell was third. No. 1 Billy Payne was fourth. No. 49 Bo Stanley came in fifth.

FWD: The winner was No. 32e Jim Exum. No. 11 Jason Coates was second. No. 59 Matt Cordin was third. No. J32 Shannon Jones was fourth. No. J3 Josh Deese was fifth.

Pony: The checkered flag went to No. 01 Cornbread Chin. No. 35 Kyle Worley was second. No. 2 Colby McCulloch was third. No. 1B Brandon Lynch was fourth.

The next race is Thursday, April 6. Come out and support your local drivers and track.

Soccer: Regular season in the books; UCHS preps for rare first-round road trip

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The Lady Panthers gave Class A's top-ranked Commerce all it could handle during a 6-4 loss on Monday, March 27 in what could be their final home game of 2023.

Union County soccer is now preparing for the first round of the Class AA State Tournament, beginning next week. Both Union County soccer teams enter State as a 3-seed and will open the postseason on the road together for the first time since 2014 when the girls go to North Murray and the boys travel to either North Murray or Model.

Lady Panthers 4, No. 1 Commerce 6 - Union County scored the first two goals and held a 3-2 second-half advantage until the Tigers exploded for four goals in 23 minutes.

Sophomore Ariel McCarter returned to the starting lineup and needed only three minutes to make an impact, putting the Lady Panthers on the board off a feed from senior Kaylee Helton.

The score followed a save and a goal-kick by senior Avary Smith-Foot, leading to a

midfield give-and-go between junior Lara Turner and Helton, who pushed ahead to McCarter for a close-range goal into the back-left corner of the net.

Union County went up 2-0 during the sixth minute when McCarter dribbled down the far sideline and sent a cross into the box for Turner's right-footed point-blank score.

The Tigers responded with consecutive goals to even the contest at halftime - the first coming in the 14th minute and the equalizer during the 32nd.

Turner put the Lady Panthers back on top in the 41st when Crawford found her fellow junior near the penalty mark for a right-footed shot into the back of the net.

The score started with a Crawford throw-in that was returned by Helton and dribbled down the near sideline by Crawford, who sent a pass into the center of the field to Turner.

Commerce notched the equalizer in the 43rd before moving ahead in the 61st and making it a 5-3 game in the 66th. The Tigers extended the margin to 6-3 in the 70th, but Turner completed her hat trick 10 seconds later when Helton's kick on the restart caromed off a Tigers' defender for Turner's

90' shot.

Union County traveled to Rabun Gap later in the week and lost 6-1. The lone goal came via an Italia Salazar penalty kick earned by Maggie Payne.

The Lady Panthers finish third in Region 8-AA and will travel to Region 7-AA's No. 2 seed North Murray next week for state tournament action. The Mountaineers own a pair of victories over Fannin County - a 2-0 road win on Feb. 14, and a 3-0 home victory on March 21.

A shorthanded Union County squad blasted the Rebels 8-0 in Blue Ridge on Feb. 21.

The Union County men also finish as the No. 3 seed and will travel to either Model or North Murray in the first round of State next week, depending upon how 7-AA shakes out in the coming days.

Sixth-ranked Model owns a pair of 7-1 wins over Fannin County. The Panthers overcame a sluggish start in Blue Ridge to defeat the Rebels 5-1. North Murray defeated Fannin 3-0 and 1-0.

State tournament action is set to begin Thursday, April 13. Official times, dates and locations will be available in next week's newspaper.



Junior Lara Turner collects a hat trick with a late acrobatic goal vs. Class A's top-ranked Commerce last Monday, March 27 at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium. Photo/Todd Forrest



Ariel McCarter (4) celebrates her first goal of the year after the sophomore arrived late from basketball, then missed a month due to an injury in her second game back. Photo/Todd Forrest