

Sports

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Lady Panthers advance to Sweet 16 with bookend victories at PAHS

Union hosts Toombs County in best-of-three series starting Tuesday

By Todd Forrest
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Atlanta - Union County softball will make its second Sweet 16 appearance in three years on Tuesday when they host fourth-seeded Toombs County in the second round of the Class AA State Tournament.

The Lady Panthers earned the right to host their first Sweet 16 since 2010 by taking two of three from Region 6-AA runner-up Pace Academy, combined with Toombs County's upset of Region 4-AA champ Oglethorpe County.

In last week's round-one win at Pace Academy, sophomore ace Sierra Burnette started in the circle during both Union County victories - a 7-5 game one win and a series-clinching 5-1 victory in game three.

Lady Panthers 5, Pace Academy 1 (Game 3) - In Wednesday's deciding third contest, Burnette allowed four hits, four walks and one earned run during a 100-pitch, complete-game performance.

At the plate, seniors Ansley Collins and Emma Roxbury anchored the top-two spots in the batting order, combining for five hits and three runs as the Lady Panthers grabbed a 5-0 advantage in the fourth.

The first frame saw Collins and Roxbury both reach, allowing Burnette to double home Collins and junior Chloe Potts to plate Roxbury via a ground out.

Burnette preserved the early 2-0 lead by escaping a two-on, one-out jam in the bottom half of the first. After an inning-ending double-play ended the Union threat in the second, Burnette worked a pair of 1-2-3 frames in the second and third, allowing the offense to open up a 5-0 margin.

The Lady Panthers' three-run fourth started with an Aubrie Banton walk, a Gracie Gladding single and a Pace Academy error that led to the first run. With courtesy runner Jewell Massey on third with one away, Collins singled to left for a 4-0 advantage and later came around to



In five postseason games (17 AB), Kaelyn Jones leads Union in nearly every offensive category with a .529 batting average, .824 slugging percentage, .579 OBP, 1.402 OPS, nine hits, five doubles and no strikeouts. Photo/Todd Forrest

RBI. Burnette went 1 for 4 with an RBI double at the dish, and Kaelyn Jones also doubled and walked during a 1-for-3 performance. Gladding finished 2 for 3 with a walk; Banton walked twice and scored. Caley Davis reached on a walk and Massey scored once.

Lady Panthers 7, Pace Academy 5 (Game 1) - Tied at 2-2 entering the sixth, Union County put up a three-spot, followed by two more in the seventh to provide enough of a cushion in last Tuesday's series opener.

The Knights made things interesting with three of their own in the bottom of the seventh before Burnette induced a game-ending fly-out to centerfield with the tying run at second base.

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run. Burnette pitched around two walks in Pace Academy's half of the frame, but Union County stranded two runners of its own in the sixth. The Lady Panthers right-hander performed another Houdini act in the sixth after the Knights moved two into scoring position with one away. This time, Burnette induced a pop-up and a ground out to escape unharmed.

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Sierra Burnette recorded her first two state playoff wins last week during games one and three at Pace Academy. In 28 2/3 innings this postseason, opponents are hitting just .212 against the sophomore. Photo/Todd Forrest

An error off the bat of Davis put the Lady Panthers in business to open the fifth. After a Roxbury walk and a sacrifice bunt, Burnette plated Davis with a base hit to center.

All even after five, Potts, Jones and Banton opened the sixth with three consecutive singles to give Union its first lead at 3-2. An infield error loaded the bases and Collins drove in Jones with a force-out grounder to third. Sisum made it a 5-2 game after an infield single by Roxbury loaded the bases for the senior right-fielder, who singled home Banton.

A two-out single was stranded in the Pace half of the sixth and the Lady Panthers extended their margin to 7-2 in the seventh via Jacey Seabolt's run-scoring ground out and an RBI single from Davis.

Potts and Jones set the table for the Union seventh when Potts worked a base on balls and Jones moved runners to second and third with an opposite-field double.

The Pace Academy seventh opened precariously for

Burnette and the Lady Panthers as the Knights immediately loaded the bags with nobody out. Things looked extremely bleak when a run-scoring walk brought the tying run to the dish with the top of the order due up, but a ground ball to Davis at third resulted in a force out at home.

A run-scoring ground out to Potts made it a 7-4 contest with two away when an RBI double brought the winning run to the plate. Fortunately, Burnette wiggled out of trouble with a fly-out to Banton, preserving the game-one victory.

Jones finished with career-highs in hits (3) and doubles (2) during a 3-for-4 game-one performance. Banton drove home two and stole a base during a 2-for-4 day at the plate.

Sisum and Burnette each went 1 for 3 with an RBI. Roxbury and Potts both walked while finishing 1 for 3. Collins stole a base and drove in one.

Burnette went the distance, giving up eight hits, five earned and two walks.

Lady Panthers 13, Pace

Academy 21 (Game two) - Down 11-0, the Lady Panthers were an inning shy of suffering a mercy-rule loss when they exploded for 12 runs over the next three frames.

The two teams combined for 40 hits with the Lady Panthers raking 18 (14 singles) in the high-scoring nightcap on Tuesday, Oct. 12. With both squads regularly putting the ball in play, game two witnessed seven total errors - four coming from the Lady Panthers, who would play error-free in games one and three.

Collins and Burnette finished with three hits and two runs apiece. Meanwhile, Gladding and Jones each doubled and knocked in a career-best three runs in the loss.

Potts, Banton and Davis had two hits apiece, while Roxbury and Sisum each ended their evening 1 for 5. Courtesy runner Katie Byers accounted for two runs.

Senior Tori Tracy toughed it out in the circle, tossing 116 pitches over six frames. Freshman Sloane Dyer entered in relief and worked a 40-pitch seventh.

Union trimmed its deficit to 11-3 in the bottom of the fourth, then a six-run fifth made it a 15-9 game. But Pace Academy continued to keep the pressure on the Lady Panthers, adding two in the sixth before Union answered with three of its own. Behind 17-12 entering the seventh, the Lady Panthers faced their narrowest margin since allowing eight runs in the second.

Pace County answered with a four-spot in the seventh to build a 21-12 advantage while Union could only muster one run in the bottom half of the frame.

Tuesday's second-round opener vs. Region 2-AA's Toombs County begins at 4 p.m. with game two to follow. The "if necessary" game would be at 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Should Union advance to its first Elite 8 in six years, the Lady Panthers would open play in Columbus on Thursday, Oct. 28 at 11 a.m. vs. the Cook at Dade County winner.

Fall break, rain cut short UCMS softball season following 10-4 mark

By Todd Forrest
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The Union County Middle School softball team wrapped up its 2021 campaign last month with a 10-4 record.

Unfortunately, Union didn't participate in the postseason after rain washed out the league tournament, pushing the playoffs back one week. The reschedule conflicted with Union's fall break and head coach Jessica Stewart was unable to field a full roster due to players traveling out of town.

The Lady Panthers opened 2021 with a 14-11 victory over Fannin County, followed by a 14-2 loss to Lumpkin County. Union bounced back with three consecutive wins, including a 13-12 shootout over White County that came on the heels of a 10-2 win over Commerce and a 14-5 victory against West Hall.

Following a 13-7 defeat via Davis Middle School (Flowery Branch), the Lady Panthers edged Fannin 6-5, then avenged their earlier loss with a 7-6 victory over Lumpkin.

Union continued rolling along, extending its winning streak to five games with a 14-4 rout of Dawson County and consecutive victories over Gilmer



(6-4 and 11-6). The Lady Panthers split back-to-back contests with White County -- losing 11-6 before rebounding with a 13-9 win -- but eventually fell 10-6 to Pickens in the finale.

Riley Voss led the offense with a .476 average, 17 RBIs, 23 runs and four doubles.

Zady Ludlum hit .439 with four doubles and 16 RBIs. Payton Grisham knocked in 15 runs with

a homer and 19 runs scored. Her .625 slugging percentage led the team while her .425 average was third.

Jaslyn Roberts hit .382 with two triples and 15 runs scored; Jules Dyer hit .300 while Payton Murphy and Zady Diaz each batted .286 on the year.

Kaylee Rader scored 12 times with a .269 average. Ella Akins hit .250 with nine runs.

Izzy Anthros scored 15 runs via a team-best 10 walks. In the circle, she led the way with 93 strikeouts in 56 1/3 innings. Diaz fanned 16 in 14 1/3; Roberts tossed 2 1/3 innings.

Megan Davis drove in three runs on three hits. Clara Akins and Nomi Nelson added one hit each. Madylin Meeker and McKenna Hood also contributed for Strike County.

XC: Union set for Region 8-AA Championships after two-week hiatus



Sophomore Wes Seiler and the Union County cross country teams visit Banks County this week in the final tune-up race before next week's Region 8-AA Championships at Unicoi State Park. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

Union County cross country begins the home stretch of the 2021 season after its recent Oct. 7 race at Unicoi State Park suffered a cancellation when a week's worth of rain moved through north Georgia.

With the race's make-up date set for Oct. 12, Union elected to withdraw due to a lack of runners over fall break. So now, with the Region 8-AA Championships slated for Oct. 28 at Unicoi, both

Panthers squads will enter Helen coming off one final tune-up race - an Oct. 19 meet at region rival Banks County.

Any state qualifiers from Unicoi will compete on a Friday (instead of the usual Saturday date) in Carrollton next month as Union County makes its bid for another championship banner on Nov. 5. The guys begin at 9 a.m. The girls will race at 9:45 a.m. at Carrollton High School.

Football: First-half struggles prove costly in Panthers' loss at Elbert County

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Elberton - A gutsy second-half performance from an injury-riddled Panthers squad proved too little, too late as Elbert County thwarted the Union comeback bid with a 95-yard kickoff return and a back-breaking fourth-quarter scoring drive.

Trailing 38-7 with 8:41 left in the third, Logan Helcher and the Panthers refused to go away quietly, rallying to make it a two-possession contest at 38-22 by the quarter's end. Union County remained within two scores, trailing 45-29 at the 7:54 mark of the fourth, but the Blue Devils recovered an onside kick attempt and proceeded to finish off the visitors with a 51-yard scoring drive, resulting in a 52-29 final.

"I am really proud of these kids, especially going into halftime with the score being what it was," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "It would have been very easy for them to lay down, but they continued to fight and scored 22 points in the second half."

The Panthers' late surge began with a 13-play, 78-yard scoring drive that kept hope alive via a 38-14 score during the latter stages of the third.

Freshman Connor Schuknecht toted the rock seven times on the drive while senior defensive backs Eli Peugh and Trace Wright provided a pair of timely catches for a shorthanded receiving corps.

After Helcher connected with Wright for 13 yards early in the series, the senior quarterback hit Peugh for 33 yards on a third-and-7 deep post route. Inside the Blue Devils' red zone, Schuknecht moved the chains with a hard-fought 3 yards on fourth and 2, setting up first and goal from the six. On third and goal, Helcher fired a strike to Wright, who came open on a slant route in the endzone.

Moments later, the Union defense forced a rare three and out, resulting in a shanked punt that allowed Helcher and company to set up shop 30-yards from paydirt. And after going nowhere on the first two plays, Helcher hit junior Griff Young down the home sideline, dropping a 30-yard completion over a leaping defensive back and into the outstretched arms of his teammate.

Union converted the 2-point try when Helcher stepped up in the pocket and juked a blitzing linebacker, creating enough time for Peugh to get open in the endzone and pull the Panthers within two scores at 38-22 with the catch.

Making Helcher's second-half performance even more remarkable was the fact that Union County played most



Kooper Ashcraft (33) congratulates Eli Peugh on his fourth-quarter touchdown catch. Photo/Todd Forrest

of the final two quarters without two of its top-three pass catchers. The Panthers lost Jensen Goble to a season-ending knee injury vs. Banks County, then were dealt another blow at Elbert when senior Keyton Chitwood left early in the third with knee issues of his own.

Reeling from a 15-0 Union spurt that seized momentum and silenced the Granite Bowl crowd, Elbert County landed a retaliatory haymaker when they took the ensuing kickoff to the house and extended the margin back to 45-22 with 12 seconds left in the third.

The touchdown return benefited from a Union off-sides penalty that nudged the Panthers' kick team back five yards and altered a potential touchback into a 95-yard touchdown return.

Things could have easily unraveled for the Panthers at that point, but Coach Perry's squad remained composed, preventing the game from getting out of control early in the fourth frame.

Facing a fourth and 1 at the Blue Devils' 46 on the next Union County possession, Helcher kept it himself and appeared to extend the entire football across the 45-yard line. However, a poor spot ruled Helcher short of the 45, resulting in a turnover on downs.

Union came up on the wrong end of another questionable call when the Elbert quarterback lost control of the football while under pressure from Elijah Haynes. The fumble was immediately scooped up by David Heredia, but the turnover was ruled an incompletion and blown dead.

Luckily, Wilson Walker picked off the Blue Devils on the very next play when the junior safety read the quarterback's eyes from zone coverage and jumped in front of a comeback route at the Union 45.

Starting from the Elbert 48 with 9:28 remaining, Helcher went back to work connecting on consecutive bubble screens - the first an 18-yard throw to Wright, followed by a 13-yard catch and run by Young. With a first down at the 21, Helcher pump-faked the screen pass, then found Peugh downfield at the 4-yard line.

On third and goal at the four, Helcher went back to Peugh, hitting the senior in the numbers on a quick slant in the endzone that trimmed the margin to 45-29 with Kyler Robbins' point-after.

With 7:54 to play, Union elected to attempt an onside kick, but after catching Elbert napping to begin the half, the Blue Devils pounced on the football at the 49. From there, the home team burned more than four minutes as they put the Panthers away with a 51-yard scoring drive, capped by a 1-yard plunge on third and goal.

"We knew at that point we were going to have to steal a possession if we wanted to have a chance," said Perry regarding his decision to attempt the onside kick with 7:54 on the clock.

Helcher finished the second half 17 for 25 with 207 yards and three scores. Overall he connected on 28 of 44 passes for 283 yards, four touchdowns and no interceptions.

"We made some adjustments at halftime and starting

taking advantage of what [Elbert's defense] was giving us," Perry said.

The game opened with Union going three-and-out and Elbert grabbing a 7-0 lead on a 68-yard deep ball on its third play from scrimmage.

The Panthers' second possession ended with another punt after Helcher picked up a first down on a second-and-4 quarterback draw. Both offenses went on to exchange punts and the Blue Devils took over at the 38 with 3:52 to play in the first. Looking at third and 13 from just inside midfield, Elbert dialed up a running-back screen that resulted in a 48-yard catch-and-run touchdown.

Behind 14-0, Union County fumbled the ensuing kickoff, but the defense limited the Blue Devils to a 22-yard field goal at the 10:04 mark of the second.

Another Panthers' three-and-out led to an Elbert 40-yard touchdown pass with 8:01 on the clock, putting the visitors in a 24-0 hole.

Union County's first scoring drive ended with a 13-yard touchdown pass to Chitwood, capping an 11-play, 80-yard series. Starting at the 20, Schuknecht carried twice for 9 and 3 yards, then a screen to Caiden Tanner went for nine forcing Helcher to pick up the first with his legs.

Later in the drive, Chitwood hauled in a 16-yard completion and picked up 15 more via an Elbert targeting penalty. A 2-yard gain by Schuknecht and two incomplete passes put Union in a fourth-and-8 situation when Young made a sliding catch at the 13 to keep the offense moving. On second



Freshman Connor Schuknecht with a pair of Elbert defenders in tow during a third-quarter carry. Photo/Todd Forrest

down, Helcher connected with Chitwood in the back of the endzone to put the Panthers on the board.

Elbert responded with a 10-play, 71-yard drive to take a 31-7 advantage into the break.

Union caught the Blue Devils off-guard by recovering an onside kick to begin the third, but the drive stalled when Helcher was thrown for a loss on fourth and 2.

According to Perry, "we discussed [attempting an onside kick] at halftime and it was just a great decision by Coach [Mark] Wade, our special teams coordinator."

Taking over at its own 41 after the stop, Elbert needed just six plays to open up a 38-7 lead with 8:41 left in the third.

Peugh led all Union receivers with 82 yards and a touchdown on six catches. Young caught six passes for 72 yards and a TD; Wright had four grabs for 53 yards and a score.

Tanner caught six passes for 29 yards, Sam Page had two receptions for 15 yards and Schuknecht added 10 yards on two catches.

Chitwood finished with 22 yards and a touchdown on two catches - all coming in the first half.

Schuknecht led Union with 33 yards rushing on 13 carries; Helcher carried eight times for 11 yards. Overall, the Panthers rushed 24 times for 34 yards.

"I'm really proud of [Schuknecht], he did a great job protecting the football and is continuing to show progress and get better," Perry said.

Looking ahead: The Panthers are off on Friday be-

fore hosting top-ranked Rabun County on Oct. 29. With Banks County's 63-0 home loss to Rabun County on Friday, Union has wrapped up the No. 3 seed in 8-AA and will visit the No. 2 seed from Region 6-AA, which will likely come from the loser of next month's Columbia at South Atlanta contest.

Both Columbia and South Atlanta are led by a pair of standout backs, most notably South Atlanta's Keyjuan Brown, who has already amassed 1,434 rushing yards (204.9 yards per game) and 20 touchdowns through seven games. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Brown entered 2021 as one of the top-10 backs in Georgia after piling up more than 1,500 yards rushing as a sophomore.

The 5-foot-9, 175-pound junior leads the team with 186 yards on kickoff returns and entered the fall with offers from Arkansas and Virginia.

Meanwhile, Columbia's Royce Tolbert (5-8, 170) is no slouch either, leading the Decatur high school with 604 yards rushing (100.7 yards per game) and nine touchdowns through six outings. The junior is also a threat on special teams, piling up 255 yards on punt returns.

Injury report: Coach Perry is confident Chitwood will return for Rabun County on Oct. 29. In other good news, Perry believes junior lineman Noah Helton could be back in uniform by month's end.

"The bye week couldn't come a better time," Perry said, asserting that the team's health is his top priority. "We want to get everyone healthy that we can -- just get guys healthy."



Seniors Trace Wright (top) and Keyton Chitwood (bottom) were both on the receiving end of a Logan Helcher touchdown pass at Elbert County. Photos/Todd Forrest

Youth football results: Oct. 16

Union County's youth football teams hosted Mountain Athletic Conference (MAC) action last Saturday at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

K-1st grade: Lumpkin 20, Union County 0.
2nd Grade: Lumpkin 48, Union County 0.
3rd Grade: Lumpkin 40, Union County 6.

4th Grade: Union County 35, Lumpkin 0.
5th grade: Lumpkin County 28, Union County 20.
6th grade: Bye



The Union quarterback extends across the goal line during a recent 4th grade game. Photo/Todd Forrest



A Panthers defensive lineman recovers a fumble during an Oct. 2 game vs. Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest