

Sports

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Union 12U softball hammers its way to another state title

The Dizzy Dean World Series in Mississippi is on deck for the Lady Panthers in July

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Valdosta - If there was any debate over who's the best 12U softball team in the State of Georgia -- the Union County all-stars sent that discussion to bed without supper.

After outscoring their opponents 37-3 over three games at last weekend's Dizzy Dean State Tournament, the Lady Panthers have earned a spot in next month's Dizzy Dean World Series in Southaven, Mississippi.

"We rolled through the competition," Union County coach Tim Tracy said. "It was fun to watch but there was a lot of hard work that went into it. They worked very, very hard."

The South Georgia heat didn't faze the mountain girls not one iota as Union opened the state tournament with an 11-0 victory over Douglas County, followed by another one-sided beatdown over tournament host Valdosta by a score of 12-0.

As a reward for battling its way back into the championship game, Douglas earned a rematch with Union County, and despite posting three runs on the previously unscored upon Lady Panthers, it wasn't enough to keep pace with the explosive Union lineup.

The top six hitters in the UC batting order accounted for 11 of the team's 12 hits in the title game. Leadoff hitter Kaylee Helton sparked the lineup -- finishing the game 3-for-3 with 3 runs, a triple, double, and a RBI. Lexi Sisum, Allie Brey and Caley Davis each pounded out two hits apiece while combining for 6 runs and 3 RBIs.

Four different pitchers saw action from the circle with Brey getting the start and striking out four over 2 innings. Adaley Burnette replaced Brey and tossed a scoreless third inning before Tori Tracy and Sierra Burnette combined to work the fourth.

The Lady Panthers also wreaked havoc on the base paths with 8 stolen bases. Helton and Davis each swiped a pair of bags, Caroline Karnes, Brey, Jessica Lara-Noyola and Sisum each chipped in one steal apiece.

Union's aggressiveness on the bases and at the plate kept the opposition on the defensive. During the championship game, the Lady Panthers immediately put Douglas County in a five-run hole after just one-half inning. (There is a five run limit per inning. UC might still be at bat if there wasn't a limit.)

Helton and Sisum opened the contest with back-to-back doubles to grab a quick 1-0 lead. And they never looked back.

A one-out single from Brey scored Sisum, then later in the inning, two passed balls brought home Brey, along with Davis, who reached on a walk.

The fifth and final run of the first came via a Douglas County error off the bat of Rebekah Chambers that scored Lara-Noyola, who also walked.

A leadoff walk by Banton in the top half of the third jump-started another big inning for Union County after Helton drove her in with a triple to left field. The fielding woes continued for Douglas County as an error allowed Helton to tack on another



The Union County 12U softball team shows off its individual and team hardware from winning the state title in Valdosta over the weekend. Photo/submitted



Pitcher Adaley Burnette winds and delivers. Photo/submitted

run. Later, a pop fly by Brey gave Sisum a green light to tag up and advance to third -- where she would score on a passed ball to make it 8-0.

The Lady Panthers extended their lead to 10-0 when they took advantage of three fielding errors in the fourth -- scoring both Karnes and Tracy.

For once, Union County looked human when they surrendered 3 runs in the bottom half of the fourth when a bunt led to an error that trimmed a 10 run lead down to seven.

For one brief moment, the Lady Panthers nearly faced a challenge. That was until they saw Douglas County's three runs and raised them a 4-spot to end the game.

Six at bats, six base hits, four runs, and one Dizzy Dean State Championship was the result of Union's next half inning.

Helton led off the inning with a single, Sisum followed suit, and Adaley Burnette knocked in Helton with a base hit of her own. Sisum scored on a passed ball and an infield single by Brey brought home Adaley Burnette. A base hit by Davis put runners on the

corners for Lara-Noyola, who lined an RBI single into left field -- scoring Brey.

In the semifinal victory over Valdosta, the Lady Panthers scored five in the first and the third before closing things out with two more in the fourth.

Davis and Banton each homered in the win while Adaley Burnette finished 2-for-2 with 2 runs, 2 RBIs, and recorded the win from the circle. She also spotted herself an early lead with a two-run single in the top half of the first -- scoring Helton and Sisum -- before making it 3-0 by scoring on a Valdosta error.

Brey capitalized on another passed ball for a 4-0 advantage and Sierra Burnette made it 5-0 with an RBI double. A Brey hit led to another Union run in the third when her bloop single brought home Adaley Burnette, who reached on a one out base hit.

A two-run, inside-the-park homerun by Davis blew things open at 8-0, then a fly ball by Sierra Burnette was mishandled by the left fielder -- bringing home two more runs.

In the fourth, a one-out double to center by Jaycee Seabolt was followed by an inside-the-park homer by Banton to make it 12-0 -- more than enough run support for the Lady Panthers pitching staff.

Brey was handed the pitching duties with two down in the fourth and induced a game-ending ground out to keep Valdosta off the board and send Union into the finals.

The tournament opened with an 11-0 win over Douglas, where the Lady Panthers made quite a statement from the moment they stepped on the field.

In each of its three tournament games, Union County would reach the five run limit during the first inning. Although in game one, the Lady Panthers benefited from a bit of Douglas County stage fright and generated five first inning runs without a hit.

Benton MacKaye Group Hike

Saturday, July 1 - Benton MacKaye Group Hike, Jacks River from Dally Gap, 9 miles easy to moderate. Register with Hike Leader Ginny Smith at gmsmith123@hotmail.com; www.bmta.org.



Caley Davis slides into home plate. Photo/submitted

Back-to-back errors, followed by two walks and a hit batter were the result of Union's first six plate appearances - gift wrapping the Lady Panthers two runs.

Davis made it 3-0 when she brought in a run with a fielder's choice, Chambers was plunked on a 2-1 count to load the bases, Lara-Noyola scored on a passed ball, and finally Karnes drove in the fifth run on another fielder's choice.

Five more runs came in the third as Union pulled away 10-0. The inning got underway with three straight walks to load the bases with no outs.

A sacrifice fly from Lara-Noyola produced the first run. Davis came through with the first hit of the inning but it didn't result in an RBI because both base runners had already scored earlier in her at bat on passed balls.

Davis kept the passed ball trend alive by capitalizing on each pitch that bounced to the backstop, eventually stretching the lead to 9-0.

Chambers would cap off the inning when she reached on an error and crossed home by way of a Karnes double.

Sierra Burnette used a RBI ground out in the fourth to

score Tracy and award the Lady Panthers an 11-0 lead.

When the smoke cleared Union County had scored 11 runs on three hits. Two of those hits went for extra bases - a Sierra Burnette triple and the previously mentioned double by Karnes.

Regardless of the struggles at the plate in game one, the pitching staff remained clutch.

Douglas County could only muster one single off the pitching duo of Adaley Burnette and Tracy. The two combined for 7 strikeouts and just 2 walks over 4 innings pitched.

"As a group, for the tournament, our pitchers struck out 22 batters and only gave up seven hits and six walks," Tracy said.

It appears the only Georgia team that could compete with this group is Union County's 12U state champs from 2012.

In 2012, Union outscored its competition 38-9 over three games - an average of 13-3. This year, Union outscored the opposition 12-1, on average.

While the Lady Panthers dominance on the diamond can be chalked up to a remarkable overall effort, team chemistry, and talent, the teamwork and support from the Blairsville-Union County community helped raise

the funds necessary to take 12 young ladies to Valdosta for 3-4 days.

"We want to thank everyone for the donations and generous gifts that allowed the weekend to happen," Tracy added. "There are way too many to mention them all, but we are extremely thankful for everyone that generously donated their time and money."

Union County was coached by George Burnette, Robert Burnette, Holly Chambers and Tracy.

The players were chosen from the four Union County Recreation Department 12U teams.

The next step: The 2017 Dizzy Dean Softball World Series at Green Brook Park in Southaven, Mississippi.

For now, these young ladies can enjoy their performance at State but they'll soon find themselves preparing for the World Series, which begins on July 13.

Unlike district and state, Union County will not have the advantage of experience as they'll meet teams that have been playing together in this event since they were in the 6U division.

It's obvious that the Lady Panthers are red hot at the moment but they can't rest on their laurels. Everyone is a state champion at this level.

Can they get the job done and become Union County's first Dizzy Dean World Series champion? Certainly.

History even proves that local teams have enjoyed success at this tournament.

Last year's 12U world series featured Murphy, NC, who placed third behind champion Jasper (Alabama) and Batesville (Mississippi).

In 2015, Murphy, NC took home the 12U championship and just missed another title with a second place finish in the 10U tournament.

The last Georgia team to win it all was the Banks County 12U in 2014. Cedartown also took home the crown that same year in the 14U age group.

Towns County's 10U team qualified in 2013 and received the Sportsmanship Award.

In 2012 a team from Hall County finished as the runner up in the 10U division while Murphy, NC's 12U squad earned the Sportsmanship Award in 2011.

10 years ago, Jackson County's 10U squad also returned to Georgia as champions.



Allie Brey at the plate for Union County. Photo/submitted

Brannon Jones Memorial Football Camp

When: July 15, 2017; 10am-3pm (registration at 9)

Where: Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium (Union County football field)

Who: Any athlete that wants to improve their skill

How much: \$20 for pre-registered athletes. \$30 for day of athletes

(pre-registration ends July 1)

*Every athlete that pre-registers with payment will receive a t-shirt, everyone else will receive a water bottle.

**Snack lunch will be provided

This camp will be coached by current and former NCAA football players alongside coaches from the surrounding area.

Must have paperwork and copy of insurance to participate

Contact Luther Jones at (706)897-7041 or email acs76377@uga.edu to receive paperwork