

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Union County's athletic programs shine brighter than ever in 2013

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

The year 2013 saw success across the board for Union County and Woody Gap High Schools.

Once again, sophomore Emma Garrison laid waste to the field in Carrollton for her second straight Class AA Cross Country State Championship.

Three Union County teams reached the Sweet 16, baseball, boys soccer, and girls soccer.

Every single sport sent a representative from Union County last year. From winter sports such as basketball, wrestling, and swimming to baseball, soccer, tennis, and golf in the spring.

When school resumed in the fall, Union County's football, softball, and cross country teams all reached the State Tournament.

The one sport that failed to reach the State Tournament was boys basketball, however, the Panthers still won 18 games and just missed State after a two overtime loss to Washington Wilkes. Although, the hardwood Panthers weren't without their share of accolades.

After becoming the quickest player to reach 1,000 points at Union County, senior guard Rhet McCombs, along with Zach Odom made it onto the All Region Teams.

Individually speaking, four Union County athletes picked up Region 8-AA Player of the Year honors, beginning in March when Lady Panther basketball star Lauren Zollinger was selected as the most outstanding player by six of the seven coaches in Region 8-AA.

Odom, also the Panther shortstop, was selected as the 8-AA Player of the Year in May. The Young Harris College signee led Union baseball to its first Sweet 16 in 18 years.

Then last month, defensive lineman Luther Jones was selected as the 8-AA Defensive Player of the Year and Robert Prunier was named the 8-AA Special Teams Player of the Year after Panther football reached the State Tournament for the first time in 12 years.

The year opened with the Union County Lady Panthers finishing atop the Region standings, solidifying their fifth State playoff appearance in six years.

Led by Zollinger and 8-AA First teamer Jeanelle Arnold, Union County finished third in the Region Tournament after falling to eventual 8-AA Champion Rabun County in overtime of the semi-final round.

The Lady Panthers then routed Jefferson to lock up the No. 3 seed entering the Class AA State Tournament. The following week, Union County fell at Bremen in the opening round.

In other basketball news, Union County Middle School's Seventh Grade boys claimed first place in the Northeast Georgia League Tournament, while the 12&U boys reached the Final Four of the State Tournament.

The Panthers upstart wrestling squad sent three to the State Sectionals. Sam Whitmer competed in the 138-pound class, Chase Barnett at 182 pounds, and Keith Brewer at 285 pounds. Whitmer and Brewer advanced to the con-



Junior guard Lauren Zollinger was named the 8-AA Player of the Year after leading Union to a No. 1 seed in the Region Tournament.



Union County wrestling sent three to the State Sectionals. From left to right: Coach Michael Smith-Foot, Keith Brewer, Sam Whitmer, Chase Barnett, and Coach Justin Byers.

Swainsboro to face Johnson County at State.

Eli Gooch, fell in straight sets and Easton Wood was tripped up during his match after dropping the tiebreaker match 8-6. Dakota Etheridge was edged 4-6 consecutive sets, and Konnor Sosebee and Casey McKim's doubles match went south after an early ankle sprain handicapped McKim.

Panther baseball finished second in Region 8-AA after a pair of extra-inning marathons with Jefferson eventually turned in favor of the Dragons.

Union County hosted a young but gritty Bowdon squad in the first round and dominated the first game, but let the second contest slip away. After rain delayed the third and deciding match four days, Calvin Duckworth picked up the win thanks to the bats of seniors Jared Croskey, Cooper Patton, and T Bentley. Lane Everett came in relief of Duckworth and sealed the Panthers' 8-1 win.

In the Sweet 16, Union traveled to Rome to face Pepperell High School and squandered a late lead in a 2-1 Game One loss. The second meeting belonged to the Dragons 8-0 as the Panthers season came to a close.

Following the close of baseball season, Assistant Coach Casey Jones was named the Head Boys Basketball Coach and soccer standout Marissa Akin signed on to play at Piedmont.

Other signings included Arnold to Toccoa Falls College for basketball, Wes Aulet to Montreat College to play baseball, Rowe chose Young Harris College for golf, as did Cross Country's 8-AA Region Champion Jeremy Webb, swimmer Tanner Gay chose

Swainsboro to face Johnson County at State.

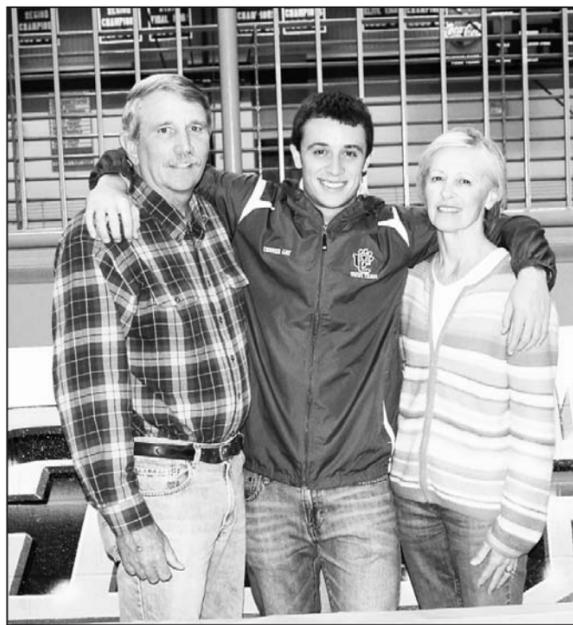
Union County's 14&U and 10&U baseball teams steamrolled the competition at their respective District Tournaments, en route to the State Tournament in July.

The Lady Panther softball team opened the season at the Lanier Point Invitational where they knocked off rival Fannin County before the second day of the tournament was washed out thanks to heavy rains.

The softball team would later get some much overdue revenge thanks to a freshman. Union County rallied to beat North Murray, who upset the Lady Panthers in the 2011 State Tournament, when Laken Chambers smacked a two-out game winning grand slam in the bottom of the sixth for a 7-6 win. Chambers went on to shutout defending 8-AA Champion Jefferson after the Lady Dragons stole the 8-AA crown away from Union County in 2012.

The football season kicked off with a strong showing against White County in a scrimmage contest. When the varsity teams were pulled after three quarters, the Panthers were on top 14-10. White County eventually went on to reach the Sweet 16 in Class AAA.

"The beatings continued," as the rock outside of U.C.H.S. so boldly put it. The Panthers blasted Towns County 41-13 after holding a 31-0 lead at the break. The Indians added a pair of touchdowns in garbage time



Tanner Gay with parents after signing with Lenior Rhyne College in April. The Union County senior competed in two events at State.



Lady Panther senior Marissa Akin led Union to the Sweet 16 and later signed with Piedmont College.

Lenior-Rhyne. Union County softball sent Hannah Hughes to North Georgia College, Amber Seeba to Georgia Highlands, and Carly Adams to Truett McConnell. In May, Chalonda Strickland became a member of the Young Harris College Cheer team.

Garrett Smith also proved that patience is a virtue as the 2011 Union County graduate signed on to play football at Reinhart College in Waleska.

As the graduation exercises commenced in May, the junior class was riding high after snatching the U-lympics title in the year-long academic and athletic competition. The results are based on grades, attendance, behavior, school spirit, and an athletic competition at the end of the school year.

Former Atlanta Brave and Atlanta Falcon Brian Jordan hosted a baseball/softball camp at Meeks Park in June.

Butternut Creek Golf Course hosted the Sunbelt Senior Tour and Fayetteville's Javier Sanchez led wire-to-wire to take home the \$2,000 first place purse.

In June, Union County hosted the University of Chattanooga Mocs' wrestling team for a Coach Jon Sioredas' training camp. Wrestlers from grades 6-12 were in attendance from not only Union County but Towns County, Fannin County, Murphy NC, Hayesville, NC, and coaches from Franklin County.

as the first game of the historic 2013 football season came to a close.

After suffering a losses at Fannin County and Washington-Wilkes, the Panthers went on to rally past Oglethorpe County, then rout Riverside Military Academy, Greene County, and Social Circle, clinching their first postseason berth since 2001.

In the meantime, the Lady Panther softball team swept Washington-Wilkes in a best-of-three series to reach State for the fifth straight year. Union eventually fell at Lovett after taking the first game but dropping games two and three. Chambers was named First Team All-Region, while Courtney Busbee, Halle King, and Karley Nix made the second team. The Middle School softball team added its third straight League title to keep the pipeline flowing to U.C.H.S.

In Gainesville, Garrison began her quest for a repeat by dominating the field at the 8-AA Region Meet at Riverside Military Academy. Both Cross Country teams qualified for State for the second consecutive year. The Middle School boys also took home the first place in the region earlier in the month.

Garrison would go on to take the Class AA Individual State Championship at Carrollton in November.

The Lady Panther sophomore would cross the finish line in 19:10, Lovett's Serena Tripodi followed 37 seconds later. Garrison completed the course 38 seconds quicker than her 2012 State Championship pace.

The Panther men were led by junior Cristian Garcia who finished in 72nd place, coming in at 19:35, leading Union to a respectable 14th place finish out of 28 teams.

Six days later, Union County football traveled to Lovett for the State Playoffs where they fell to the eventual State Champion Lions 56-21.

Senior lineman Luther Jones was selected to the All-State Team for the second time after competing in the North-South All-Star Game in December. Jones was also named the Region 8-AA Defensive Player of the Year for the second consecutive season.

Junior punter/kick returner Robert Prunier was named the 8-AA Special Teams Player of the Year. Junior wide out Jacob Rogers, junior linebacker Chase Barnett, and sophomore quarterback Mancuso made the 8-AA First Team and sophomore receiver Sam Gilbert was named Honorable Mention.

The Lady Panther basketball team opened its season 7-1 with two wins over Towns County, stretching their win streak over the Lady Indians to three games - the longest streak in 18 years.

The Panthers knocked off the Indians for the 33rd straight time with three wins over the Indians, with the final victory coming during the Battle of the States.

The Lady Panthers extended their win streak over Towns to four games with a 53-25 win during the Christmas Tournament.

Union basketball will tip-off 2014 with a game in The Pit on Saturday, which is certain to make headlines and appear in next year's Year in Review.

Hopefully, Union will be preparing for its second game in The Pit at this time in 2015.

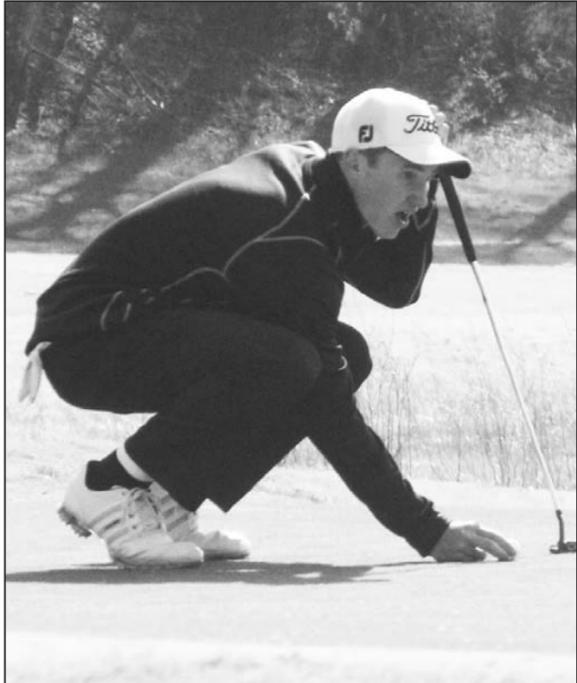
Pictures continued on Pg. 11A



The Woody Gap Falcons men's tennis team reached the State Tournament in 2013.



T.J. Smith with his post-goal celebration after smashing the game winning penalty kick against Oglethorpe County.



James Rowe advanced to the State Golf Match last May after placing third in the Region 8-AA match at Social Circle.