

# Sports

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## Union Co. Panthers Spring Football is in the books

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The Union County Panther football team has completed its spring sessions and the key word among its coaching staff is "accomplished."

All month long the coaching staff has been preaching the importance of fundamentals and technique, so Panthers Head Coach Brian Allison wanted to make sure this team was fundamentally sound, and solid in its technique, before making a decision on a spring scrimmage game.

Last Tuesday, Coach Allison rewarded his squad with a short, 50-play scrimmage game.

"Things were sloppy," said Allison. "But we also got some things accomplished that we wanted to get accomplished."

The Panthers were only able to practice eight times due to two rainouts but overall the coaching staff is pleased with the results of the spring.

"We were happy with the scrimmage on Tuesday but you can't expect everything to be clean and pure and how you like it after eight days," said Panthers' Offensive Coordinator Howard McCombs. "I think going in, with the goals we had for the spring, we accomplished a lot of what we wanted to get done."

Linebacker/Running Backs Coach Justin Byers added that the depth chart is never set in stone and is always evolving.

"The depth chart will continue to change," said Coach Byers. "Players mature and they step up and



Union County quarterbacks work on throwing drills during spring practice. Photo/Todd Forrest.

do different things, but as for the spring and my positions, I walked away with a good feel for what my kids are capable of and the things that we need to work on."

Now Coach Allison has a better understanding of what the depth chart will look like when official practice begins in late-July.

Until that time, Coach Allison expects his Panther squad to hit the weight room.

"We've got an idea of where we're at on our two and three deep depth chart," said Coach Allison.

"Now if they will come in this summer and do what they're supposed to do then, I think we've got a chance to be successful in the fall."

Coach Allison sees a very bright future when he when he speaks about the incoming Freshman Class.

"They had a great spring," said Coach Allison. "They are probably as good as any upcoming freshman class that we've ever had as far as not being apprehensive about getting out there and competing. We threw some of them in with

the varsity and they all responded well."

With a successful spring behind them and the season still three months away, the only thing the Panthers can accomplish now is having a productive summer and remaining healthy.

"We're going a couple of weeks without any football," Coach Allison said. "We will stay in the weight room until school is out then get back to work on May 28th. We have a passing camp in Jefferson on June 12th. We're going to keep working. We're committed as coaches and we're committed as players to being better technicians on the field."

"We want to master our technique and the fundamentals of tackling, blocking, throwing, and catching," he said. "We need to get better and be more disciplined in our technique. Then we'll work on getting in better shape so we can play four quarters. I feel like we have a team that's committed to be the best that they can be."

Officially, the first regular season practice begins on July 23rd with five days of conditioning. Then the first day in pads will be August 1.

The Panthers will host White County for a Thursday night scrimmage on Aug. 23rd before squaring off with its two rivals to open the regular season. Union travels to Towns County on Aug. 31st then plays host to Fannin County on Sept. 7th.

If the Panthers can kick off the 2012 campaign with wins over its two arch rivals that would be an accomplishment to build on as they begin Region 8-AA play.



Head Coach Brian Allison conducts tackling drills during spring practice. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Coaches hope for the return of The Purple Swarm

By Todd Forrest  
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The Union County Panthers will be improved on the defensive side of the ball in 2012, Head Coach Brian Allison said.

"Defensively we wanted to improve our tackling, and even though we didn't get a whole lot of live work in, I think we got that improved," he said. "As a team, our goals were technique, fundamentals, and discipline."

"For sure we improved on the fundamentals and technique of tackling," Coach Allison said. "Overall, I thought we met the majority of the goals that we set before spring practice."

Running Backs/Linebackers Coach Justin Byers, who was enthusiastic after two weeks of spring practice, remains elated regarding the results of the spring.

"It was a very successful and positive spring" said Byers. "It's kind of a funny thing for me because they (linebackers and running backs) are the same people, so I've got my guys running into each other and tackling each other."

Coach Byers still sees the need for improvement in some areas but is confident that his linebackers will be prepared to punish the opposition in the fall.

"Our linebackers worked on reads, being able to identify blocking schemes, being able to tell where the ball is going to be, and never being late at the point of contact," Coach Byers said. "We didn't accomplish everything, but we accomplished a great deal of it. You don't want to have everything

done by spring, we want to be able to continue working and be perfect when we step on the field."

With most of the accomplishments of the spring taking place between the hashes, possibly the most important one has taken place between the ears. Coach Allison and his coaching staff have bragged all spring about the leadership role that his seniors have taken upon themselves.

"I thought this spring practice was most encouraging because the attitude of all the players was really great," said Allison. "We had a couple of guys stand up and show some leadership ability out there."

Keep in mind that the Panthers have a hungry group of upperclassmen who are starving for success. The upcoming senior class hasn't tasted a winning season since their freshman year and the coaching staff sees a winning attitude developing amongst the seniors.

Coach Byers is hoping this new mindset will become contagious among the younger players. "My older guys showed a lot of leadership and I think we have a good chance at having a very successful season," he said. "The younger guys weren't afraid to jump into the mix and absorb some things. When you're coming up from middle school to high school, things move faster. They did a great job and I am very proud of the older guys."

"We have some definitive goals to work towards going into the summer training session," Coach Byers said. "Overall, I was pleasantly pleased with the efforts and accomplishments on both sides of the ball."

## The Potent Panthers' Offense is back on track

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For the most part, the Union County Panthers' spread offense will look the same as it did last year but with a few new wrinkles, Head Coach Brian Allison said.

"We had a couple of goals in mind on offense," said Coach Allison. "We're trying to work on our vertical passing game a little bit, plus adding some running plays. I think we accomplished that. The offense will look similar to last year but we have more depth at the receiver position."

The Panthers' deep receiving corps still has a lot of work ahead and Offensive Coordinator Howard McCombs was quick to point out that there is more to the position than running routes and catching the football.

"We worked extensively with our receivers on blocking while we had the pads on," Coach McCombs said. "We'll throw a lot this summer, but while we the pads were on, we worked on their blocking, especially in the screen plays. I really feel like we accomplished our two primary objectives."

Coach Allison noted that spring practice can be used as an opportunity to try new things and



Union County's running backs go through a series of drills at spring practice. Photo/Todd Forrest.

use players at multiple positions to get a feel for what each player is capable of doing.

"Spring Practice is also about experimenting," said Coach Allison. "We experimented a little with our offense and defense as well as experimenting with players and seeing where they can play."

Experimenting becomes less

problematic when you have an experienced signal-caller running your offense. Quarterback T Bentley will return for his third year as the starter and Coach McCombs is hoping the combination of Bentley and his receivers will add even more firepower to the Panthers offensive arsenal.

"Our third goal was work-

ing on the vertical passing game and I really feel like the work that we needed to get done was accomplished," said Coach McCombs. "I was pleased with the spring and am happy with the direction we are going in."

With a deep receiving corps, combined with Bentley at quarterback, and last season's leading rusher, Jonathan Hughes returning, the Panthers are expecting to bring a potent offense into the 2012 season. The only question mark is in the trenches, where the Panthers return only one starter to the offensive line.

"We're going to spend this summer getting our offensive line ready to go," said Coach Allison. "We only have one starter back, so we'll not only be young, we'll be inexperienced."

The young line will be charged with protecting Bentley all season long so Allison had hoped to get Bentley some work throwing under pressure during the spring but was unable to accomplish that goal. "We wanted our quarterback to get more pressure put on him but we didn't get to that," said Coach Allison. However, the Panthers accomplished priority No. 1 entering the spring, keeping everyone healthy.

"The most positive thing out of all of it was we got some live work in and nobody got seriously hurt," said Coach Allison.

## Lady Panther Softball Team to begin summer leagues

By Todd Forrest  
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On May 31st, Coach Jessica Stewart and her Union County Softball Team will begin preparation for its third consecutive Region 8-AA Title.

Coach Stewart is hoping her team can play 20 games over the summer at North Georgia College, Lumpkin County High School and Walnut Grove High School.

Most of the Lady Panthers squad has been participating in traveling leagues throughout the summer and will get some rest before summer-league begins in June.

"I will give them a little bit of a break to be a kid," said Stewart. "In June we will only play two or three times a week with no practicing, just games. In July we will go to four days a week, and in August we'll start just about every day. We will use the games to see who performs well in game-like situations. We will rotate three pitchers in-and-out and move players around to see where they need to be, come August."

The Lady Panthers season will open on Aug. 11 with the Lanier Point Invitational. Union County is the defending Gold Division Champion of the tournament and will face West Hall in the opener. However, with Angie Hughes and Callie Dyer graduating and taking nearly every team record with them to college, combined with the loss of Becca Merritt, and Catie Tanner, Coach Stewart knows she has some gigantic holes to fill before August.

"We will try our best to get prepared for the upcoming season," Stewart said. "The senior class that is graduating has been an important part of our success here for the past four years. Angie (Hughes) has pitched varsity for all four years, Callie (Dyer) played center field for four years, Becca (Merritt), in right field for four years, and Catie (Tanner) has been on varsity for three years. The girls have been playing travel ball this spring and we will continue a summer league to help them develop without the four



Union County Lady Panther Softball Coach, Jessica Stewart and her squad are set to begin preparation for the 2012 season.

(seniors) we lost to graduation."

Without Hughes mowing down the opposition and Dyer, Merritt, and Tanner patrolling the outfield, Union must find replacements at all four positions.

"Angie Hughes was one of the best pitchers in the state of Georgia and there will be no replacing her," said Stewart. "However, I have three pitchers that are certainly going to give their best effort and have been working extremely hard

to make their own name. "I think the five seniors I have this year will compete and step up," she said. "All five have started varsity and are playing travel ball to improve. Travel ball is a very important part of our program. Coach Kevin Hughes will not be helping us in the fall so he took over the 16-and-Under travel team and did a great job with them," she said. "That is a great opportunity before summer league to make the

adjustments of playing without those seniors. The middle school did go undefeated last year and we should have some freshman coming in that will help us."

The three pitchers that Coach Stewart speaks of are Bailey Byers, Chelsea Cook, and Crystal Busbee. Unfortunately, when you have a pitcher like Hughes, the other pitchers don't get a lot of work. But regardless of who takes the circle for Union County, they will be throwing to a familiar battery-mate. Rising sophomore and Second Team All-Region selection, Courtney Busbee returns behind the plate.

Along with Courtney Busbee, the Lady Panther infield remains intact. First Team All-Region selection, Hannah Hughes brings plenty of pop from the left-hand side of the plate and is steady at first base. Leadoff hitter Carly Adams is at second base, Shawna Brown is at shortstop, Amber Seeba is at third, along with reserves Madison Rich and Byers, give Union plenty of experience in the infield.

Union County will begin its quest for a Region 8-AA three-peat when they travel to Washington-Wilkes on Aug. 14th to open Region 8-AA play.

## 1st Annual Derrick Whittle Memorial Softball Tournament

The First Annual Derrick Whittle Memorial Softball Tournament will be held at Meeks Park, Blairsville, GA on Saturday, June 16, 2012. The entry fee is \$125, deadline for registration is June 13, 2012.

Tournament information: Any 44 core ball, any bat, except Ultra and Ultra II. The count will start at 2 balls and 1 strike with an extra foul, time limit will be 1 hour and 15 minutes with double elimination, it's defensive pitching, and pitchers will pitch behind

a screen. Eight home runs per game, anything after 8 will count as an out. The entry fee is due before your first game is played. For any additional information or to register your teams contact Derek (Goob) Richards at 706-994-2445.

Proceeds to benefit the Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship Fund. Deputy Derrick Whittle #221 was a Deputy in Union County, GA who lost his life in the line of duty in 2011.

CA (N/May23,25)

## Beta Club Beauty Pageant

The Beta Club held their annual Beta Beauty Pageant for girls in Kindergarten through second grade on Saturday, May 5. This year the event took place at the Union County Primary School gym starting at three in the afternoon. Each of the 19 girls received a flower, sash and tiara. The wonderful food at the event was provided by members of the Beta Club.

The Beta Club would like to thank the Flower Garden for donating long-stem carnations and the Union County Primary School for providing the space for the event. (N/May23,21)CA

## UC Elementary School holds Field Day

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Union County Elementary School held its annual Field Day Events last week at the UCES Playground located at the old baseball field.

UCES Physical Education Teacher, Jessica Stewart commented that Field Day is a way to reward the kids for all of their hard work throughout the school year, along with teaching good sportsmanship,

and the benefits of physical fitness.

Students participated in a series of events that ranged from jump rope, sponge-toss, basketball dribbling, to sack races, before the grand finale, tug-of-war tournament at the end of the day. Each class from third grade through fifth grade competed against each other in a single-elimination tournament. The champion from each grade were: Rhonda McCarter's Third Grade class, Carla Colwell's Fourth Graders, and for Fifth Grade, Kim Hood's class.



Rhonda McCarter's 3rd Grade class, Tug-of-War Champions.



Carla Colwell's 4th Grade class, Tug-of-War Champions.



Kim Hood's 5th Grade class, Tug-of-War Champions.