

Sports

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Lady Panthers sweep; will play for third consecutive 8-AA Title

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Fourth-ranked Union County will play for its third consecutive Region 8-AA Championship on Thursday at 5 p.m. in Blairsville.

After sweeping Washington-Wilkes on Saturday, the Lady Panthers will host Jefferson in a one game, winner-take-all Region title game.

Union County took Game One over Washington-Wilkes 3-0, then held off a furious Lady Tiger rally in a wild Game Two, 8-6.

In the opener, Union County got off to a tough start offensively after striking out in nine of their first 11 plate appearances. It wasn't until the bottom of the fourth inning when Hannah Hughes gave Union its first hit of the day by stroking a two-out, solo homer over the center field fence.

"We got off to a slow start but Hannah's home run really sparked us," Union County Coach Jessica Stewart said.

Pitcher Bailey Byers provided Union with a magnificent outing during yet another clutch performance by the senior. Byers allowed six hits in her second shutout of the season.

Byers took the ball in Union's regular-season 8-AA-clinching victory over Social Circle and tossed a shutout. Less than three weeks later, Byers took to the circle again and tossed another shutout in the first playoff start of her career.

Union added two insurance runs in the sixth when Carly Adams singled, Madison Rich bunted, and Hughes was intentionally walked, to set the table for Shawanna Brown.

The senior shortstop made them pay by smacking an opposite field triple to score Adams and Hughes.

Washington-Wilkes opened the final frame with consecutive doubles but Byers answered by sitting down the next three Lady Tigers and preserving Union's Game One victory.

In the second game of the best-two-of-three series, Union jumped out to a 2-0 lead before the Lady Tigers came unraveled. In the fourth inning,



Union sophomores Hallye King (top) and Crystal Busbee (bottom) did the most of their damage from the plate in Union's 8-6 Game Two victory. Photos by Todd Forrest

Washington-Wilkes' pitcher was ejected while at the plate, she was quickly followed to the bus by her coach for arguing.

The Lady Tigers were forced to turn to an inexperienced No. 2 pitcher and Union County opened up an 8-1 lead before Washington-Wilkes posted five runs in the seventh thanks to a grand slam.

Chelsey Cook threw 6 1/3 innings before giving way to Byers following the slam. After a walk, Byers was able to induce a double-play ball to end the game and the series.

In the game, Union was

led offensively by the sophomore duo of Hallye King and Crystal Busbee. King went 3-for-5 with three RBIs, while Crystal Busbee finished 5-for-5 with a run and an RBI.

"Hallye and Crystal really carried our offense for us," Coach Stewart said. "The bottom of our lineup had a great game."

Hughes was walked four times, Adams added two hits and a run, while Courtney Busbee finished 2-for-4 with two RBIs.

Union got on the board in the third inning thanks to



Bailey Byers stares down the opposition in her Game One shutout win.



Shawanna Brown starts the game-ending 6-4-3 double play in Game Two.

a single from Adams, a bunt by Rich, walks to Hughes and Brown, then a two-out, two-RBI double by Courtney Busbee.

During a crazy fourth inning, a Washington-Wilkes batter was called out for stepping out of the batter's box before she made contact with the pitch.

The next hitter, who just happened to be the pitcher, continued arguing the call made on the previous batter. After the umpire warned her and her coach, her artistic side came out when she proceeded to begin drawing new batter's boxes in the dirt with her bat. The umpire almost let it slide until she walked to the other side of



Hannah Hughes continues to get the job done at the plate and in the field

the plate and began working on the left-handed batter's box. For attempting to show-up the umpire, the player was ejected and immediately the Lady Tiger coach came roaring out of the third base coaches box to argue the ejection. After he called the umpire the magic word, which apparently was a "joke," that was all she wrote, and he also was tossed.

The ejections left Washington-Wilkes stunned and allowed Union to add three more runs in the fifth. The Lady Tigers' new pitcher was forced to face Hannah Hughes right off the bat. The Union slugger was walked on four pitches. Courtney Busbee reached on a fielder's choice and Amber Seeba was hit by a pitch. Crystal Busbee singled to load the bases for King. The sophomore lined a two-RBI single to the left-center gap – scoring Courtney Busbee and Seeba. Allie Stroman followed that up with another single – scoring Crystal Busbee.

Union increased its lead to 6-0 when Hughes walked, Courtney Busbee doubled, Seeba walked, Crystal Busbee singled, and King singled.

A solo-homer by Washington Wilkes made it a 6-1 game after six innings but Union added two more in the seventh after Rich was hit by a pitch, Hughes walked, Brown reached on an error, Courtney Busbee walked, and Crystal



Junior Madison Rich has provided stellar defense all season in left field.

Busbee singled.

Leading 8-1 with three outs between Union and its third consecutive Region Championship game, Chesley Cook gave up a lead off walk, a fielder's choice, consecutive singles, before the grand slam brought Byers in to nail down the save.

"I thought Cook pitched well up until the final inning, where she just ran out of gas," Coach Stewart said.

Union County has now clinched home field advantage in the first round of state for the third straight season, and a win on Thursday will guarantee Union home field until the Elite-8.

The Lady Panthers will host Jefferson at 5 p.m. on Thursday. The Lady Dragons made quick work of Social Circle, defeating them by a combined score of 15-0 in two games.

Union County and Jefferson have faced off three times this season with Union winning two of them. Although, the last meeting was taken by the Lady Dragons in extra innings.

"I think Jefferson will be ready to play on Thursday," Coach Stewart said.

"They are on fall break so they will be up here early and ready to go. We've played them three times with each one being decided in the final inning, so I'm expecting another hard fought contest."

Washington-Wilkes' defense too much for Panthers in 8-AA opener

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Union County (3-1) fell 36-0 thanks to a relentless defensive effort from 6th-ranked Washington-Wilkes (5-0) on Friday.

The Tiger defense forced three turnovers that led to three short field touchdowns, a safety at the end of the third quarter, and only allowed the Panther offense to move past mid-field once.

The Panther defense proved they were no pushovers either as the Tigers were unable to drive the length of the field for a score.

The longest scoring drive of the night for the Tigers was a 50-yard drive during the first quarter. The rest of their scoring drives came off turnovers – resulting in a short field.

"Our guys played their hind-ends off for four quarters but we didn't expect to give up that many points and not score ourselves," Union County Coach Brian Allison said. "We came out here expecting to win the ball game and that didn't happen."

The Panthers' opening possession showed some promise when they moved to the 50-yard line but were stuffed on fourth-and-inches, giving the Tigers the ball at mid-field. Union's defense forced Washington-Wilkes into a punting situation but the Panthers were forced to punt back to the Tigers.

The Tiger offense took over at mid-field where Union's defense snuffed out a first down run, but on the ensuing play, the Tigers completed a pass to the Union 12-yard line that set up a 4-yard score for the Tigers.

The extra-point was blocked by Josh Kim and the Panthers trailed 6-0 with 4:42 to play in the opening frame.

Union punted on its next drive but the defense held strong thanks to a fourth down sack by Luther Jones, handing



Jonah Whitmer and Matthew Spiwak bring down a Washington-Wilkes ball carrier. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Union County Pride of the Mountains Marching Band entertains the crowd at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium before, during, and at halftime of the games. Photo/Todd Forrest

the ball back to the offense. Unfortunately, T Bentley's pass was intercepted on the first play – setting the Tigers up on the Panther 20-yard line.

Washington-Wilkes would eventually score on a 16-yard touchdown strike, and following a successful two-point conversion, the Tigers led 14-0 at the 7:19 mark of the first half.

Both teams would exchange punts before a Union County fumble at its own 15-yard line set the Tigers up for a 15-yard scoring pass with 2:31

to play in the half.

The Panther defense would keep Washington-Wilkes out of the end zone in the final seconds of the first half to leave Union with a manageable 21-0 deficit at halftime.

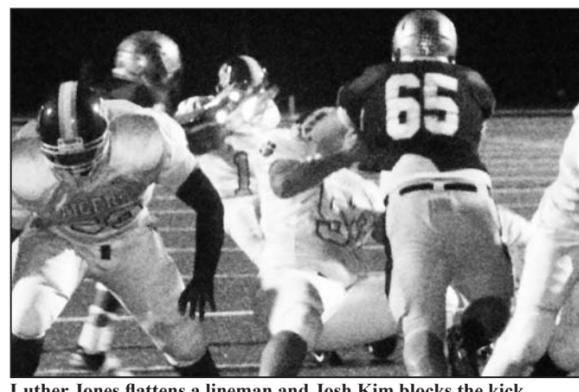
"I'm not happy but I'm proud of how the kids played out there tonight," Coach Allison said. "I thought we played the run good. We sold out to stop the run and they threw it over our heads a little bit. That's something we need to work on."

Union's defense came

out of the locker rooms strong, forcing Washington-Wilkes to punt thanks to a third down sack by Cody Davenport. The Tiger punt would be downed inside the 1-yard line and Union could only advance six yards before another Eric Hougrand punt.

Washington-Wilkes stretched its lead to 28-0 on a 40-yard scoring drive, mid way through the third quarter.

Union's best field position of the evening came on the ensuing kickoff, when Kim returned the ball to the 30-yard



Luther Jones flattens a lineman and Josh Kim blocks the kick.



Receivers Jared Croskey and Robert Prunier line up. Photos by Todd Forrest

line, where an extra 15-yards was tacked on for a late hit.

The Panthers started at their own 45-yard line and advanced 8-yards to the Tiger 47-yard line where the Union offense was unable to convert another fourth down.

Union stopped Washington-Wilkes on a fourth down, deep in Panther territory but it only resulted in another three-and-out for the Union offense.

Following a three-and-out by the Tigers, Union was again pinned inside its own 1-yard line where the Tigers got into the Panther backfield and caused a safety on the final play of the third quarter.

During the fourth, Washington-Wilkes connected on a 22-yard touchdown pass with 6:33 to play. The extra-point was again blocked by Kim but the damage had been done and the Tigers took home a 36-0 victory.

"That's a good football team over there at Washington-

Wilkes," Coach Allison said. "They are ranked No. 6 in the state for a reason. They are fast on defense, they are big on defense, and that's a good football team that we just got beat by. I have no doubt that they are as good as advertised. I wasn't happy with the outcome but I know that our guys played hard."

On Friday, Union travels to Oglethorpe County to take on the Patriots. Last week Oglethorpe defeated Riverside Military Academy 31-12. The Patriots also sit at 3-1 on the year with their only loss coming at the hands of Johnson, 36-21 in the season opener. Oglethorpe has won three straight, including a 43-20 victory over Fellowship Christian. Fellowship and Union have a common opponent in Towns County, who dropped a close one at Fellowship, 17-12.

Union County won the last meeting with Oglethorpe, 42-28 in 2009.