

Lady Panthers 9th-10th grade wins Piedmont’s FCA tourney

By Todd Forrest
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Demorest - The Union County Lady Panthers sent two teams to last week’s Piedmont University Fellowship of Christian Athletes camp, where both squads finished 5-1 in pool play and the younger squad took home first in the final day’s Overtime Tournament.

“It went very well,” Union County head coach Thomas Nelson said. “It was a varsity tournament but our younger team only lost one game over three days. The older team lost only two games all week.”

Competing against the same varsity competition as the rising-11th-12th graders, Union County’s younger team came out on top after winning five of six over the first two days.

Despite playing without rising-sophomore Samantha Combs and upcoming-freshman Scout Henry, Union County’s 10/11 team defeated Hart County in the championship round of day three’s Overtime Tournament.

The young squad was led by rising-sophomores Lilly Cook, Gracie Miller and Emry Sosensky. The freshman class was anchored by Bristol Davis, Hailey Marshall and Mya



The Union County Lady Panthers attend church services at last week’s FCA basketball camp at Piedmont University.

Totherow. “It’s a big step from 8th grade to high school and they got in there and got after it,” Coach Nelson said.

Rising-sophomore Livia Haney played with the junior-senior group that featured senior Mady Adams, juniors

McKenna Hood, Ella Akins, Regan McCarter, Nomi Nelson, Reagan Trlica and others.

Over the first two days, both Union County squads defeated East Jackson, Franklin County, two Habersham Central teams (young/old) and Percy Julian (AL).

Both teams lost to a Class 5A private school from Alabama that didn’t participate in the Overtime Tournament.

The older group were eliminated by a combined Habersham Central team in the first round of the OT tourney via a halfcourt shot at the buzzer.

“We only had one practice before the camp but I just wanted to see us compete,” Coach Nelson said. “We’re going to be a young team, predominantly freshmen and sophomores. I just wanted to make sure they would go out there and get after it and play

together.” The Lady Panthers host a three-day youth camp through Wednesday. Then, on Friday and Saturday, Union will participate in a tournament at LakePoint Sports in Emerson. The Lady Panthers open the weekend with Sumter County.



The Lady Panthers join together in prayer at last week’s FCA basketball camp. Photo/Thomas Nelson

Mountain Lions Land Academic Honors and Coaching Talent

Young Harris College Athletics continues to rack up milestones that reflect a season of growth, excellence, and new beginnings in the Enchanted Valley. A couple of departmental updates this week include softball academic excellence and an addition to the coaching staff for the women’s basketball program.

Two Mountain Lions Selected to CSC Softball Academic All-District Teams: Young Harris softball standouts Gracie Hughes (1B/P) and Shelby Duncan (3B) have been named to the 2025 College Sports Communicators (CSC) Academic All-District Softball Team, recognizing their excellence both on the field and in the classroom. The CSC Academic All-District program honors the nation’s top student-athletes across four divisions for their combined academic and athletic achievements. Hughes and Duncan were among the 32 student-athletes from Conference Carolinas selected for this honor.

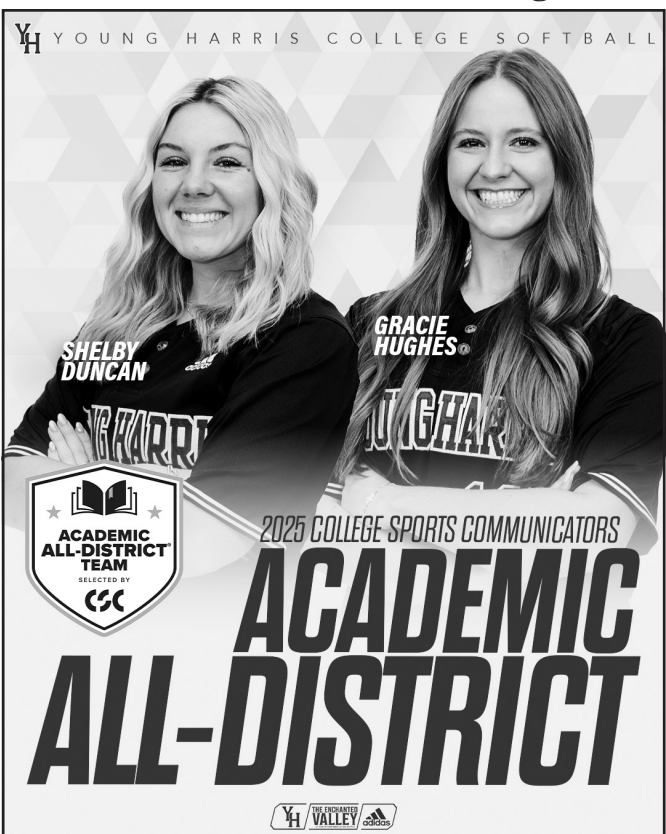
Hughes, a junior pitcher and first baseman from Woodstock, Georgia, earned a spot on the Conference Carolinas All-Defensive Team following a career-best season. She tallied 344 putouts, nine assists, and just one error defensively, while posting a .388 batting average with 14 home runs and 59 RBIs across 44 games. Hughes also notched a .784 slugging percentage and contributed to the circle with three wins and two saves over 13 appearances. Off the field, she excelled academically with a 3.98 GPA.

Duncan, a junior third baseman, started all 45 games this season and was named to the All-Conference Second Team. She finished the regular season with a career-high .421 batting average, collecting 64 hits – including 13 doubles, three triples, and four home runs – while driving in 21 runs and stealing 15 bases. Duncan also posted a .625 slugging percentage and maintained a 3.58 GPA in the classroom.

Both student-athletes will now advance to the CSC Academic All-America ballot. National Academic All-America® honorees will be announced on June 17.

YH Welcomes Teal Davis to Women’s Basketball

The Young Harris College women’s basketball program has added Teal Davis to its coaching staff ahead of the 2025-26 season. Davis will serve as an assistant coach



and lead the newly established Developmental Women’s Basketball team. Originally from Belton, South Carolina, Davis brings a wide range of coaching, leadership, and ministry experience to the Enchanted Valley.

“I’m really excited to have Teal join our coaching staff,” said Head Women’s Basketball Coach Lindsey Huffman, “She has a passion for recruiting and for the student-athlete. Her work ethic and recruiting experience will be very impactful on our program. Teal is a great person and a winner. I can’t wait to see her do big things in the Enchanted Valley!”

Davis played collegiate basketball at Milligan University from 2017–2021, where she earned a degree in Exercise Science. She later completed her master’s degree in Sports Management from East Tennessee State University. Following her playing career, Davis created and launched Team Unlimited, a Tennessee-based AAU basketball

program, which she has successfully led since 2021. Over the last five years, she has also served in various sports ministry and nonprofit roles throughout the region, using basketball as a tool for impact and empowerment in Tennessee. Most recently, Davis was the assistant coach and JV head coach at Montreat College for the 2024–25 season, where she gained collegiate coaching experience while continuing to develop players on and off the court. Now, Davis joins the Mountain Lions during a time of growth and opportunity for the women’s basketball program. She will oversee the day-to-day operations and competitive development of the new developmental team while assisting with recruiting and varsity support.

Davis shared, “Super excited to join the Young Harris’ Women’s Basketball staff! I’m looking forward to joining a winning culture led by Coach Huffman, and I’m excited for an opportunity to grow and learn!”

Each day focused on fundamentals like serving, scoring, and returning the ball, but it didn’t stop there. The camp introduced the kids to critical lessons in teamwork, strategy, and resilience, ensuring they left the courts stronger in both mind and body. “It was so fun playing with other kids!” said Ethan Erwin, 10. “I really love this sport, especially the serving and returning. I started playing when I was 9, and I think more kids my age will start playing it as they get older.”

Ethan’s sister, Bristol, had her own proud moment: “In this class, there was one part I was struggling with, and I finally got it right after about 10 tries. I was so happy!” She’s now weighing her options between pickleball, tennis, and soccer. “We play pickleball about three times a week, and I love it. I also like tennis, so I’m deciding which sport I want to focus on more seriously. Maybe soccer too—I don’t know yet!”

The camp gave kids not only the physical tools to succeed in a sport but also life lessons that extend far beyond the court. “Teaching middle school kids to play pickleball is about more than just the game,” said Margaret Ralph, an IPTA Certified Pickleball Instructor who volunteered as a camp coach. “It fosters teamwork, strategic thinking, and resilience—all essential qualities for success in life. It’s amazing to see how quickly these kids picked it up.”

Along with exercises to strengthen hand-eye coordination and improve fitness, the camp encouraged kids to manage their emotions under pressure, work together as teammates, and celebrate each other’s achievements. Many of the players left the camp feeling more confident than when they arrived, ready to step into bigger challenges both on and off the courts.

Martina Gibboney, Club Vice-President and a certified pickleball coach, loved seeing the kids dive into the sport. “Pickleball is about more than staying active—it’s about building connections,” she said. “It was heartwarming to watch these kids encourage each other and grow, not just in their skills but in their confidence. Some of them are already talking about teaching their families how to play!”

For some kids, pickleball ignited an entirely new love for sports. They learned that staying active can be fun,

Local Kids Discover Energy, Fun, and Life Skills at Pickleball Camp at the Union County Recreation Center

Last week, local kids swapped their video game controllers for pickleball paddles and hit the courts at a five-day youth camp hosted by the Blairsville Pickleball Club. The excitement was palpable as young players jumped into learning the basics of one of the fastest-growing sports in America.

Held in collaboration with the Union County Recreation Center and the local 4-H club, the camp wasn’t just a place for casual fun—it was a launchpad for kids to discover a new passion, hone athletic skills, and make new friends. Packed with activities, laughter, and encouragement from volunteer coaches, the camp created an environment where kids could thrive both as athletes and as individuals.



whether it’s through playing matches, practicing serves, or cheering each other on.

The Blairsville Pickleball Club also offers free beginner classes for kids (with a participating adult) and adults throughout the summer, with sessions every Tuesday night at 6 p.m. at the Union County Recreation Center’s outdoor courts. The classes are a great opportunity for families to pick up a paddle together and learn why pickleball captures

the hearts of players across all ages and skill levels.

For kids like Ethan and Bristol, pickleball isn’t just another summer activity—it’s a door to new experiences, friendships, and opportunities to grow into confident young athletes. Next time you’re looking for a way to keep kids active, learning, and smiling, try putting a pickleball paddle in their hands—you never know what they might discover. (NJun11Z17)CA

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