

# Sports

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## Volleyball opens summer scrimmages with strong core, new talent

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Coming off the program's fourth Elite Eight appearance in six years last fall, Union County volleyball participated in the first round of summer scrimmages last Wednesday and Thursday at White County High School in preparation for the 2025 season.

The Panthers may have lost four key seniors from last year, but they return a strong core for the upcoming campaign. The team is led by seniors Reese Jones and Mady Adams, along with junior Sofia Foster. Additionally, Union County will benefit from three new players — Austin Beal, Blair Hedden and Amie Sauers — joining the program, as well as a promising group of sophomores and freshmen.

Last week, fourth-year head coach Megan Brown got her first look at the 2025 squad in action. Over two days, the team faced four different opponents at White County, going 2-1-1 against Chestatee, East Hall, Trinity Classical and White County. According to Brown, the early July scrimmages were quite informal, with each match consisting of just two sets and no win-by-two rule.

On Tuesday, July 8, the Panthers won both sets against East Hall before dropping two to White County. The following day, Union County split two sets with Chestatee and swept Trinity Classical School.

"Our only loss was to White County, who is always tough, but we actually played them really well," Brown said. "I took all my girls, so I mixed in a lot of JV players with the varsity. None of the coaches there were going for the win and playing their starters all game. It was about getting experience and seeing the girls on the court, especially the younger ones, because it's still so early. A lot of the girls were nervous, first-game jitters and all, but we did really well and I am proud of the girls."

This week, the Panthers will host three teams for a Tuesday afternoon scrimmage at the new elementary school gym, where they will play their home matches this season. Union County will welcome Murphy (N.C.), Andrews (N.C.) and Rabun County beginning at 2 p.m.

"It's going to be a low-key scrimmage," Brown said.



Rising senior Reese Jones is looking for a healthy 2025 season after battling injuries throughout much of her junior campaign last fall. Photo/Todd Forrest

"A lot of those girls play together in the offseason so we're just going to get together and have a round-robin scrimmage."

On July 22-23, Union County will travel to Gainesville High to face Cherokee Bluff, Dawson County, Gilmer and Pickens in additional pre-season tune-ups.

When the season gets underway in early August, Coach Brown expects to lean heavily on Jones, a senior who battled injuries for much of her junior year.

"She's definitely going to be a go-to player this year," Brown said. "She played all offseason without any issues and is healthy, so I'm hoping she can stay that way through the fall. But she'll definitely be a key player for sure."

The other two seniors this fall are Adams and Jordan Beaver.

"I feel like our experience level this season is going to vary between never-played and a lot of varsity experience," Brown said. "Jordan just transferred in last year and then we have Mady, so I'm excited with what we have with the upperclassmen this year and what we have to work with over the next three or four years. But as a group, they all have a good attitude and they've all put in a lot of work over the summer. Hopefully it will pay

off for us."

Coach Brown expects Foster, a 6-foot-1 force at the net, to continue progressing following a breakout sophomore campaign.

"She never played before her freshman year, so I think we're going to see some really good things from her."

"We only have three seniors this year but we do have a few that have transferred in," Brown said. "I'm really excited to see how they fit in. We also have 12 freshmen, but of course, they'll be split between varsity and JV."

Looking ahead to Region 7-AA, Union County remains in a tough group that featured three teams advancing to the Elite Eight. The Panthers were eliminated by region foe Ringgold, while region champion North Cobb Christian reached the Sweet 16 of the private school state tournament.

"I know we're going to be seen as the underdogs this year in the region, but that's not a bad thing," Brown said. "I feel like it's a tough region, but I also feel like we'll be able to compete. I'm looking forward to the season. The girls are excited and I think they have a lot to prove this season."

Union County will need to replace four three-year starters in Lily Brookshire, Katelyn Brown, Charlei Robinson and Mallory Rouse. However,

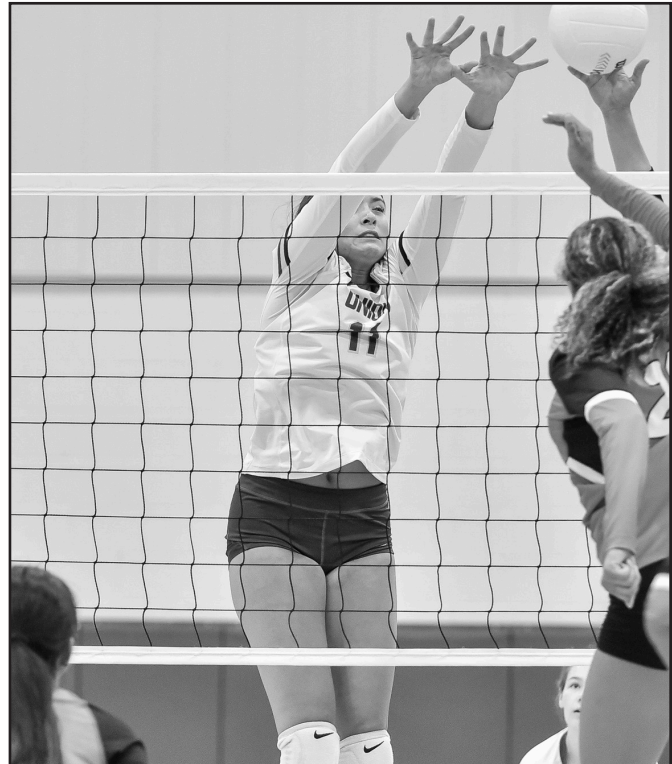
Foster and Jones appear ready to step up in 2025. Foster finished the year with 108 kills and 61 blocks as a sophomore. While Jones had 78 kills, 48 aces, 237 assists and 144 digs, despite missing several games to injury.

Another key returner is the 6-footer Adams, who had 32 kills and six blocks in 2024.

Meanwhile, rising sophomores Samantha Combs and Emry Sosensky made significant contributions as a freshmen. Combs finished with 20 aces and 38 digs; Sosensky had 13 aces and 83 digs.

Livia Haney, another rising-sophomore, also saw varsity action as a freshman.

This week, Union will also host a youth camp at the elementary school. As of Sunday, 38 youngsters had signed up to attend.



Rising junior Sofia Foster came on strong as a sophomore last year in just her second year of organized volleyball. Photo/Todd Forrest



Rising senior Mady Adams hopes to build on a solid junior season that saw her collect 32 kills. Photo/Todd Forrest

### UCHS 2025 Volleyball Schedule



Aug 4	@ Franklin County vs Franklin Co. / Banks Co.	5 PM
Aug 12	@ Rabun County vs Rabun Co. / Lumpkin Co.	6 PM
Aug 14	Home vs. Dawson County and Gilmer	5 PM
Aug 19	@ Rabun Gap vs Tallulah Falls and Rabun Gap	5 PM
Aug 21	Home vs. Franklin County and Pickens	5 PM
Aug 26	@ Stephens Co. vs Stephens and Flowery Branch	5 PM
Sept 2	@ Fannin County vs Fannin and TBD	5 PM
Sept 4	@ Dawson County vs Dawson Co and Winder	5 PM
Sept 9	@ Sonoraville vs Sonoraville and Rockmart	5 PM
Sept 11	Home vs Rabun Gap and Lumpkin Co.	5 PM
Sept 16	Home vs Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe and Ringgold	5 PM
Sept 18	@ Pickens vs Pickens and Woodland	5 PM
Sept 20	@ Gainesville (Big Red Rally Tournament)	TBD
Sept 23	@ North Murray vs North Murray and Murray	5 PM
Sept 25	@ Gilmer vs Gilmer and Flowery Branch	6 PM
Sept 30	Home vs North Cobb Christian & Coahulla Creek	5 PM
Oct 2	Home vs Stephens Co & Fannin Co (Senior Night)	5 PM

Oct 7	@ TBD REGION TOURNAMENT	TBD
Oct 9	@ TBD REGION TOURNAMENT	TBD
Oct 11	@ TBD REGION TOURNAMENT	TBD

Oct 14-15	@ TBD STATE TOURNAMENT 1ST RD	TBD
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Union County finished 2-1-1 during summer games at White County last week. Photo/UCPanthersVolleyball



# Community rallies behind Nicole Schuknecht, raises \$5K at softball benefit

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In a heartfelt show of support, the Union County community raised \$5,000 at last weekend’s benefit softball tournament to help Nicole Schuknecht, a local teacher, as she continues her fight with cancer.

“I just want to say ‘thank you’ for all the love and support we’ve received from the community,” Schuknecht said, fighting back tears. “It’s a real testament to this community, and we want everyone to know that we are very grateful.”

Hosted by Meeks Park, the tournament got underway at 9 a.m. Saturday with nine teams, and not even heavy afternoon thunderstorms could deter the participants, who finished up after midnight. McClure’s Processing took home the first-place trophy with a win over Nottely Crue.

Organizers thanked the following sponsors: John Megal, Alexander’s Store, Booger Hollow Store, Tony Hughes and the Union County Recreation Department, Cooper’s Creek Sportsmen and Tapestry Hospice.

According to Nicole’s husband, Mason Schuknecht, the softball tournament came as a surprise to the family.

“We didn’t know they were doing this until a couple weeks ago,” he said. “And when I first heard about it from Susan Stalcup (UCRD Head of Athletics), I had to go look it



McClure’s Processing took home first place, defeating Nottely Crue in the finals of Saturday’s benefit softball tournament. Photo/Kaitlynn Blackwell

up on Facebook. We’ve been overwhelmed (dealing with insurance and social security), and the community has been amazing.

“We understand that everybody is going through their own stuff, but for everyone that has given their time and resources — that they could have spent elsewhere — it re-

ally means a lot.” Anyone interested in donating to the family may do so at: [www.gofundme.com/f/support-nicole-give-the-gift-of-time-and-peace](https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-nicole-give-the-gift-of-time-and-peace).

The GoFundMe was organized by Rachel Arthur and Rebecca Colwell and, as of Monday, July 14, had raised more than \$26,400.

Nicole Schuknecht is currently battling stage 4 cancer, which doctors at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston have identified as stemming from a rare genetic mutation that leaves the cancer permanently switched “on.” As a result, she will remain on chemotherapy indefinitely unless a clinical trial targeting

this specific mutation becomes available.

Even if such a trial is developed, her doctors say she would have just a 1-in-6 chance of qualifying as a candidate.

Following her diagnosis in 2023, Schuknecht was denied long-term disability benefits during the next open enrollment period. Now, as she

faces an aggressive treatment schedule and mounting medical expenses, she’s also grappling with the loss of her income.

Proceeds generated from the tournament, GoFundMe and other sources allow Nicole Schuknecht a chance to focus fully on her health and spend time with her husband, Mason — a wildland arson investigator with the Georgia Forestry Commission — and their four school-aged children.

According to the GoFundMe page, friends, coworkers, local churches, businesses and other caring members of the community are rallying around the Schuknecht family to provide much-needed support.

“Whether through one-time donations, monthly pledges, prayers, or simply spreading the word, every gesture helps,” the page reads. “We are stepping out in faith, believing that the generous community of Blairsville, along with God’s amazing grace, can make it possible for Nicole to be able to stay home during the upcoming school year and focus on quality time with her family and rest her body.

“Donations and pledges can be made through this GoFundMe or dropped off directly at River City Bank in Blairsville, where an account has been set up for them. Please prayerfully consider contributing to this meaningful cause.

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” — Galatians 6:2”



Union County Fire Department’s Hudson Henderson smashes a homer to left during their blowout win over the Union County Sheriff’s Office on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest



Jeff Fortenberry deals for the Union County Fire Department during his team’s win over the Sheriff’s Office. The tournament featured a pitch-to-your-own-team format, putting Fortenberry in the pitcher’s circle while his teammates batted and the UCSO backed him up in the field. Photo/Todd Forrest

2025 UNION FOOTBALL

SCHEDULE

vs.

GILMER CO.

AUGUST 22ND

BOBCATS

vs.

LEO LAKEVIEW-FORT-OGLETHORPE

SEPTEMBER 26TH

LEO

@

FANNIN CO.

AUGUST 29TH

F

vs.

RINGGOLD

OCTOBER 3RD

R

@

MURRAY CO.

SEPTEMBER 5TH

MURRAY

vs.

COALHULLA CREEK

OCTOBER 17TH

C

vs.

ROCKMART

SEPTEMBER 12TH

ROCKMART

@

SONORAVILLE

OCTOBER 24TH

S

@

N. MURRAY CO.

SEPTEMBER 19TH

N

@

NO. COBB CHRISTIAN

OCTOBER 20TH

NC



Donations to the Schuknecht family can be made on GoFundMe or dropped off at River City Bank.

## Serve Up Support: Local Businesses Rally for Kids through Pickleball - Upcoming September Tournament

The Blairsville Pickleball Club is fortunate in that it has three certified IPTPA kids’ pickleball coaches trained to work with kids to help them learn how to play the sport. In June, these coaches coordinated with the Union County Recreation Department to organize two summer camps for our youth. Following the camp, some of the kids fell in love with the sport and requested additional tutoring. Maddie Derrico and Jameson Maney, spent an extra week with certified kids’ coaches, Margaret and David Ralph, to improve their games.

The Blairsville Pickleball Club will be organizing its fifth annual Picklin for a Cause Pickleball Tournament this September 19-21 at the Union County Sports Complex.

The event will bring in approximately 300 players from Blairsville and the surrounding counties and Atlanta’s northern suburbs all weekend. The tournament is even beginning to attract players from outside the State. Having indoor courts available in case it rains means that players are guaranteed to play their matches, unlike other tournaments that don’t have back-up indoor courts. That makes Blairsville a hot ticket as a pickleball venue. Spectators and players will enjoy music from Hammer Sound, a food truck will be on site for players and spectators to enjoy and everyone will have an opportunity to bid on some awesome raffle items, income from those tickets going directly to the Webster Fund.

This tournament is all about celebrating community, competition, pickleball joy - and our local kids. Last year, the Club was able to raise \$20,000 for the Webster Fund which provides financial assistance to young athletes in Union County. The fund ensures that financial barriers don’t prevent children from joining sports, covering costs such as uniforms, equipment and travel expenses. So far this year, the Webster Fund has helped over 50 deserving kids.

We want to give a big shout out to the following organizations that have already stepped up to support the 2025 Blairsville Picklin’ for a Cause Tournament!



Jameson Maney, Dave and Margaret Ralph

Platinum Sponsors: (\$1,000) - Selkirk Sport, Skin Care Centre of North Georgia, Georgia Urology, Nelson’s Tractor, David & Margaret Ralph, Pat Gray Painting, Chuck Herrera, Union General Hospital, Hammer Sound, Mountain Ship & Pack; Gold Sponsors: (\$500) - Mike’s Market & Grill, United Community Bank, Mark Price; Silver Sponsors: (\$300) - Trinity Primary Care, Mr. Clean Car Wash, Gearbox, Sharon Harkavy; Bronze Sponsors: (\$100) - America’s First Homes, Blairsville Nutrition, Pinnacle Bank, Butternut Creek Golf Course, Castoff Pet Rescue, Downtown Pizza, Motor Sports Plus, State Farm – Jerry Henderson, Chop-

house Murphy / Hawg Wild, Kings Home Pharmacy; Court Sponsors: G & G Bakery, Margaret and David Ralph. There are still opportunities to host a court. This is a great opportunity to have your banner on one of our eight courts; Raffle: Toccoa Glow.

If you would like to become a sponsor, please contact Michele Nylander at [finzf fanatic@hotmail.com](mailto:finzf fanatic@hotmail.com) or Grace Simmons at [gracesimmons79@gmail.com](mailto:gracesimmons79@gmail.com).

Our team is ready to work with you to make your contribution meaningful to our youth in Union County. Come join in on a very exciting weekend of pickleball.

## Mike Forster Bowls a Perfect 300



Mike Forster, 79 year old bowler, bowls a perfect 300

This past Wednesday, July 9th one of our bowlers at Galaxy Bowling had a perfect 300 game, 12 strikes in a row. His name is Mike Forster. This has only happened one other time in this league. Members of the league must be 55 plus.

Mike’s average was 178 on the day he bowled this honor score.

USBC, the organization that governs leagues in the country, will send Mike a ring for his great accomplishment. Mike will be 80 next year.