

Sports

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Baseball: Opening week a wash out following losses at Commerce

By Todd Forrest
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COMMERCE - Union County baseball opened 2019 with a pair of losses at Commerce last Monday, Feb. 18 before a wet weather pattern set it in and washed out the remainder of the Panthers' opening week.

The clouds are hopefully giving way to sunshine, both literally and metaphorically, as reinforcements are on the way before the Panthers are slated to hit the field Tuesday at Fannin County.

With the Union County basketball team reaching the postseason for the first time since 2016, first-year Panther baseball coach Zach Odom traveled to Commerce last week with a somewhat depleted pitching staff as returning right-handers Coleson Daniel and Cayden Rich were less than 72 hours removed from the hardwood and unavailable to throw on opening day.

When it was all said and done Monday, it wasn't the lack of arms that stymied the Panthers, but an anemic offense that managed only five hits -- none for extra bases -- during the doubleheader at Commerce.

Panthers 0, Commerce 2 (Game 1) - Sophomore Issac Mullinak got the nod in game one and scattered five singles over five innings of work while allowing two earned runs with three strikeouts and a walk.

Senior Ean Harkins spelled Mullinak after five and worked a scoreless sixth, issuing one walk with one punchout.

At the dish, base hits by Mullinak and fellow sophomore Austin Garrison along with a Matthew Kelley walk and a dropped third strike to Harkins was all the offense Union County could muster through the middle of the fourth frame.

The Tigers would finally break open the scoreless tie with two in the bottom half of the fourth via two singles, a hit batter and an RBI groundout. In the Panther half of the fifth,



Union County first year head coach Zach Odom (center) prior to last year's game at Coolray Field in Lawrenceville. Photo/Todd Forrest

sophomore Zeke Swartz was stranded following a one-out walk.

Mullinak worked his way out of trouble in the bottom of the fifth after giving up a two-out walk followed by an infield single.

The Panthers were retired in order in the sixth and seventh innings as Harkins survived a leadoff error and a two-out walk in the Tiger half of the sixth. Chase Bridges recorded the win for Commerce, working five shutout innings and fanning five. Tucker Maloch picked up the save with two no-hit innings in relief.

Mullinak added a stolen base for Union County.

Panthers 1, Commerce 4 (Game 2) - The Tigers struck for two in the second before Union posted its first run of the season in the third. Trailing 2-1 after six, Commerce tacked on two insurance runs in the top half of the seventh to sweep the twin bill with a 4-1 victory.

Swartz and Garrison were the victims of four Panther errors as the duo combined to surrender four unearned runs off five hits while fanning eight and walking five.

Swartz went five strong, allowing just two hits and two walks with four strikeouts. Meanwhile, it was feast or fam-

ine for Garrison, who took the mound in the sixth and labored through 45 pitches over two innings, giving up three hits and three walks while striking out four.

Swartz escaped trouble early on after he yielded a base hit and a double to lead off the game. He would respond with a pair of strikeouts before his 1-0 offering was bounced to shortstop Alec Scott to end the inning.

Mullinak worked a one-out walk then stole second in the bottom of the first. With one down and runner in scoring position, Harkins lined out to short, doubling off Mullinak with a flip to second.

After playing with fire in the first, Union County suffered self-inflicted wounds in the second when three errors and a walk resulted in two Tiger runs. Swartz escaped without further damage when he picked off a runner breaking for home. After applying the tag at the plate, catcher Alec Youngblood fired to second to gun down the runner from first.

A Hunter Kelley walk was the only Panther baserunner in the second but John Mancuso and Mason McCombs began the third with consecutive infield singles. Mancuso would later score after swiping

third and tagging up on a Scott sacrifice fly.

Still trailing 2-1 after five, Garrison entered in the sixth and worked around a pair of walks to keep Union County within a run. Mullinak led off the bottom of the sixth with a base on balls but was eventually left stranded at second base.

Garrison would freeze the leadoff hitter with a called strike three to open the seventh but three singles and an error stretched the Tiger lead to 3-1 and loaded the bases with one down. Another strikeout was followed by an RBI walk before Garrison retired the side with his third punchout of the inning.

The Panthers had something brewing in the seventh when Kelley drew a five-pitch walk and senior Jonathan Everett reached on an error - bringing the tying run to the plate with nobody out.

The Tigers would turn to the bullpen to silence the rally as a Mancuso sacrifice moved the runners up 90-feet but they would both be left aboard after consecutive fly outs ended the game.

Mancuso would finish 2-for-2 with a run and two stolen bases, McCombs went 1-for-3, Kelley and Mullinak each drew a pair of walks. The lone RBI belonged to Scott.

Nate Ray picked up the win for Commerce in six innings of work. Colby Rogers replaced him with two on in the seventh and recorded three-straight outs for the save.

The Panthers would leave six runners on base while Commerce stranded eight.

Looking ahead - Up next for Union is a trip to Blue Ridge on Tuesday to face the rival Rebels at 5 p.m.

The Panthers are scheduled to host Gilmer on either Wednesday or Thursday, but as of this writing, the coaches were still hammering out the details. Region 8-AA play is scheduled to get underway Friday when the Panthers travel to Banks County for a 5 p.m. doubleheader.

(Union Co. stats are located on page 3B.)

Union County 2019 Varsity Baseball Schedule			
Date	Opponent	Home/Away	Start Time
Feb. 18	Commerce	Away	5:00
Feb. 19	Commerce	Home	5:00
Feb. 21	Gilmer	Home	4:00
Feb. 26	Fannin	Away	5:00
Feb. 28	Gilmer	Away	4:00
Mar. 1	*Banks (DH)	Away	5:00
Mar. 4	Fannin	Home	5:00
Mar. 5	West Hall	Home	5:55
Mar. 8	*Social Circle (DH)	Away	5:00
Mar. 11	Murphy	Home	4:30
Mar. 15	*Monticello (DH)	Home	5:00
Mar. 22	*Elbert (DH)	Away	5:00
Mar. 25	West Hall	Away	5:55
Mar. 27	Rabun Gap	Home	5:00
Mar. 29	*Putnam (DH)	Home	5:00
Apr. 4	White County	Young Harris College	5:00
Apr. 8	Lumpkin	Away	5:55
Apr. 10	Lumpkin	Home	5:55
Apr. 12	*Oglethorpe (DH)	Away	5:00
Apr. 16	White County	Away	5:55
Apr. 19	*Rabun County	Home	5:00
Apr. 24 - 26	State Tournament	TBD	TBD

Bold
*Region Games

Union County 2019 JV Baseball Schedule			
Date	Opponent	Home/Away	Start Time
Feb. 14	Dawson	Away	5:30
Feb. 18	Commerce	Home	4:30
Feb. 19	Commerce	Away	4:30
Feb. 21	Gilmer	Away	4:00
Feb. 26	Fannin	Home	5:00
Feb. 28	Gilmer	Home	4:00
Mar. 4	Fannin	Away	5:00
Mar. 5	White	Away	5:00
Mar. 7	Lumpkin	Home	5:00
Mar. 11	Lumpkin	Away	5:00
Mar. 18	Pickens	Home	5:30
Mar. 21	Dawson	Home	5:30
Mar. 25	Pickens	Away	5:30
Mar. 26	White	Home	5:00
Mar. 28	JV Tourney Begins		5:00
Mar. 30	JV Tournament Final 4	White County	

Bold = Home
JV Tourney:
• Top seed hosts on Thursday March 28.
• Winners play at White County on Saturday, March 30 --- 11:00, 2:00 and 5:00

Renny Bryner inducted into Rome-Floyd County Sports Hall of Fame

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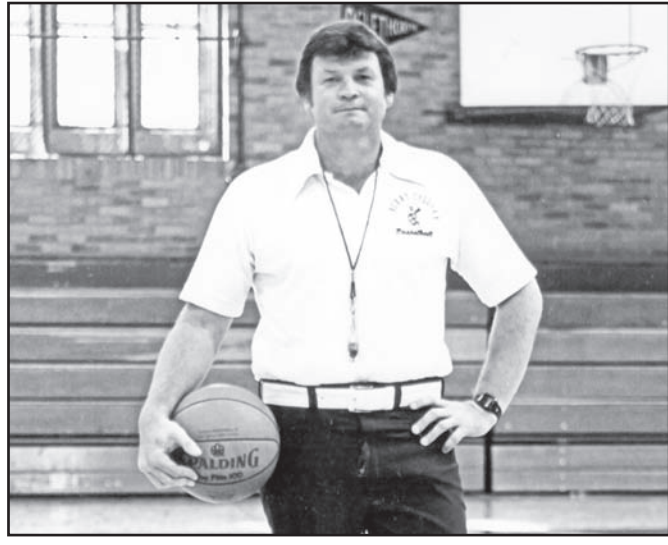
ROME - Former Union County boys basketball coach Renny Bryner was enshrined into the Rome-Floyd County Sports Hall of Fame on Monday, Feb. 25 for his achievements while attending Mt. Berry High School and Berry College.

Prior to arriving at Union County in 1987, Bryner was a standout prep athlete at Mt. Berry School for Boys, earning an invite to the North-South All-Star basketball game. Later, he was named one of the top-five players in Mt. Berry history.

Despite never playing organized basketball until 9th grade, Bryner was a three-year letterman at Mt. Berry, where he was named team MVP twice while receiving the Highest Free Throw award both years with a percentage above 80-percent. He also led the team to the 1961 State Tournament, finishing with a 24-3 record.

Bryner would find success off the hardwood as the two-time baseball team MVP with a .536 batting average his senior year. He was also a two-year letterman on the Mt. Berry track team, competing in multiple events.

"I had a lot of fond memories of high school but probably



Renny Bryner as head coach of Berry College from 1978-1982.

my favorite one was scoring 28 points in the state tournament vs Dublin," Bryner said. "We got put out (by Dublin) but I showed that I was capable of playing with those guys."

Following a successful career at Mt. Berry, he attended Rome's Berry College where he earned All-Conference honors and was eventually named to the Berry Wall of Fame.

During his time at Berry College, Bryner was also a member of the baseball and track teams.

He was a three-time basketball team MVP, leading the

team in scoring and free throw percentage while picking up outstanding defensive player honors two-straight years.

Bryner was a three-time GIAC All Conference and NAIA Honorable Mention as a senior, becoming Berry's all-time leading scorer in the process.

As a member of the baseball team, Bryner was team MVP three times, all conference four times and a member of the NAIA All District 25 team.

Bryner would also earn All Conference track and field honors in hurdles, relay and the javelin.

While at Berry College,

Bryner would become friends with the eventual Union County School Superintendent Earl Odom, which would help Bryner land the UCHS job two decades later.

After graduating college, Bryner tried his hand on the business side of sports, building a golf course while coaching a variety of sports at the high school level in Barnesville and Titusville, FL.

Upon returning to Berry in 1978, Bryner found success as the basketball, men's track and cross country coach.

"The transition was a little difficult," he said. "(Berry) called and offered me the job and I didn't think I could do it. But they had confidence in me so I took the job."

In 1980 he guided the men's basketball team to its first conference championship.

Bryner's track teams won three conference titles while the cross country squad won two conference championships.

Bryner arrived at Union County High School by way of Armstrong St. College in 1987. He would remain at the helm of the Panthers' boys basketball program through the 1993-94 season.

During his tenure at UCHS, Bryner and his son Russell were responsible for tagging the high school gymnasium with the unofficial title of "The Pit" which eventually gave rise to the "Pit

Crew," a name that has stuck with the Panther student section since the early-1990s.

"We always played hard and we always had great crowds," he said. "It didn't matter if it was during the week or on the weekend, the gym was usually standing room only."

"Our teams were never athletic but the guys took me in right away and they gave me everything they had. Those kids also wanted to make a difference, on and off the court. A lot of them have gone into the ministry or criminal justice. The best players played regardless of who they were."

His time at UCHS wasn't without tragedy, however, as Russell was killed at 22-years old in an automobile accident over Christmas break in 1992.

The Bryner coaching tree includes current Lady Panther soccer coach Tim Hunter, a former player under Bryner who coached boys basketball from 2006-2010 and is the school's all-time winningest soccer coach.

Bryner also coached UCHS teacher and 1,000-point scorer Chris Adams along with Union County School Resource Officer Chad Berry.

Unfortunately for Bryner, his teams were often overshadowed by the talented Lady Panther

squads of that era. The girls team spent much of the 80s and early 90s flirting with the state rankings, eventually culminating with a Class A Elite 8 appearance as the champions of Region 8-A in 1994.

In 2007, Bryner would return to coaching in North Georgia when he took over the boys program at Gilmer High School in Ellijay.

During the 2007-08 season, he coached against Hunter's Panthers in a preseason scrimmage. The Rome-Floyd Sports Hall of Fame was started in 1971 in order to recognize amateur and professional athletes and those who contribute to the growth and development of sports.

Each year, new members are added to the Sports Hall of Fame and inducted during an evening ceremony and banquet. Bryner is one of five inductees in the Class of 2019.

Notable members of the Rome-Floyd County HOF include current University of South Carolina head football coach Will Muschamp and the 23rd pick in the 1977 NBA draft, Mike Glenn.

Bryner is retired but still lives in the area and tries to attend Panther games when possible. He and his wife Judith will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in October.