

# Sports

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## Lady Panthers claim fourth Region title in eight years

By Todd Forrest  
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**Elberton** - The Lady Panthers clinched their fourth Region 8-AA championship since 2015 with a 6-1 victory at Elbert County on Friday, March 25, awarding head coach Tim Hunter his seventh region soccer title -- six coming with the Union County girls, one with the boys.

With the No. 1 seed secure during the upcoming Class AA State Tournament, the Lady Panthers (9-3-1, 5-0) have clinched home-field advantage through the first two rounds. According to the Georgia High School Association's website, Union County will host Region 6-AA's No. 4 seed on April 14.

The Lady Panthers will likely meet either Coretta Scott King, Therrell or Washington in the first round. The second round would have Union facing the winner of Region 2's second seed or Region 4's third seed. Currently, East Laurens, Bacon County and Toombs County are fighting for second place in Region 2 behind fifth-ranked and undefeated Jeff Davis.

In Region 4, Laney is the favorite to take home third behind former Region 8-AA programs Oglethorpe County



Sophomore Avery Murray scored a goal during Union's region-clinching victory at Elbert County. Photo/Todd Forrest

**Lady Panthers 6, Elbert County 2** - Sophomore Lara Turner recorded her first career haul - scoring both of Union's two first-half goals, then adding a pair after halftime in the 52nd and 76th minutes. Tied at 2-2, sophomore

Avery Murray opened the second half with a goal during the 51st minute. Turner's third goal of the night came 27 seconds later, spotting the visitors a 4-2 advantage.

Still leading 4-2, senior Melia Whitener gave Union a 5-2 lead in the 82nd minute, and



Senior Melia Whitener's goal in the 82nd minute gave Union County a 5-2 lead at Elbert County on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

Turner put the finishing touches on the Region 8-AA championship four minutes later, scoring her fourth goal off a feed from freshman Ariel McCarter.

It wasn't all smooth sailing as Union County needed two Turner goals to force a tie at the intermission. The Lady

Panthers' first score came in the 11th minute when junior Avery Smith-Foot's assist set up a Turner breakaway goal.

Elbert County answered immediately with the equalizer, but Madison Torres found Turner for a 2-1 score in the 19th minute. Once again, the

Blue Devils refused to back down, using a corner kick to even the score at 2-2 entering the break.

"I challenged the girls pretty hard at halftime," Hunter said. "I reminded our seniors of how we struggled to win the region at Social Circle when they were freshmen. For as poorly as we played in the first half, we were equally superior in the second."

"Loralei [Skinner] missed a [penalty kick], but Avery Murray hit a huge direct kick to put us in the lead and we never looked back."

**Up next:** The Lady Panthers visited Rabun County on Monday, March 28 to finish off their Region 8-AA schedule.

**Throw ins:** With a win, Union finishes undefeated in region play - giving the Lady Panthers a perfect record during each of their last four 8-AA title runs.

\* Union County has won six region championships -- all under Hunter -- since claiming the program's first title in 2000. The Lady Panthers also took home 8-AA's top spot in 2004, 2015, 2016 and 2019.

\* Since 2010, Union has compiled an 8-7 mark in State Tournament play - advancing to three Elite Eights and five Sweet 16s.

## Baseball: Game two heartbreak headlines Banks County's sweep of Union

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Union County stumbled to 0-6 in Region 8-AA and 2-14 overall following last week's three-game sweep at the hands of Banks County (11-4, 8-0).

The Panthers dropped Tuesday's series opener 15-4 in Homer before suffering two Friday night losses in Blairsville by scores of 8-7 and 11-4. Union County will attempt to keep its postseason hopes alive during the upcoming three-game set vs. 1-11 Riverside Military Academy (RMA), beginning on Tuesday, March 29 at UCHS.

**Panthers 7, Banks County 8 (Game two)** - Adding insult to injury, the Panthers failed to preserve a five-run advantage, surrendering three runs in the fourth and five in the seventh despite building comfortable margins of 5-0 after three and 7-3 through six.

Senior Lake Hughes fired six masterful innings, carrying a two-hitter and a four-run edge into the seventh, but the Union ace ran out of gas, forcing head coach Zach Odom to pull his starter after 103 pitches.

The tough-luck seventh got underway with a single off the glove of diving third-baseman Tyler Loyd, followed by a base hit to right field. After Hughes loaded the bases with his second walk and 98th offering of the game, Odom elected to stay with his senior southpaw. But when a five-pitch, bases-loaded walk trimmed the margin to 7-4, the Union skipper called upon junior James McPherson with no outs and the tying run at first.

With McPherson on the hill, Union's bad luck continued when the Banks County leadoff hitter beat out a slow chopper to shortstop, cutting the lead to 7-5 with the heart of the order coming up. A groundout to second made it a 7-6 game, then McPherson fanned the No. 3 hitter, moving the Panthers within an out of escaping with the win.

With a base open and



Senior shortstop Connor Shields vs. Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

cleanup hitter Tripp Williams at the plate, Union elected to take its chances with the Leopards' slugger. Unfortunately, the 6-4, 220-pound Chipola College commit made the Panthers pay on the first pitch he saw from McPherson -- lacing a two-run double down the third-base line.

Union escaped the top half of the seventh without further damage when McPherson ended the inning by inducing a pop-fly to center.

The Panthers stranded a runner in scoring position during the Union seventh after senior Caleb Towe briefly kept hope alive via a two-out opposite-field single, followed by a stolen base three pitches later.

Towe finished 2 for 4 with a run and a steal while fellow senior Logan Anderson drove in two during a 3-for-4 game. Hughes ended his day at the plate 3 for 4 with a run, a steal and a ribby. He struck out three Leopards in six-plus innings on the bump, allowing four hits, four earned runs and three walks.

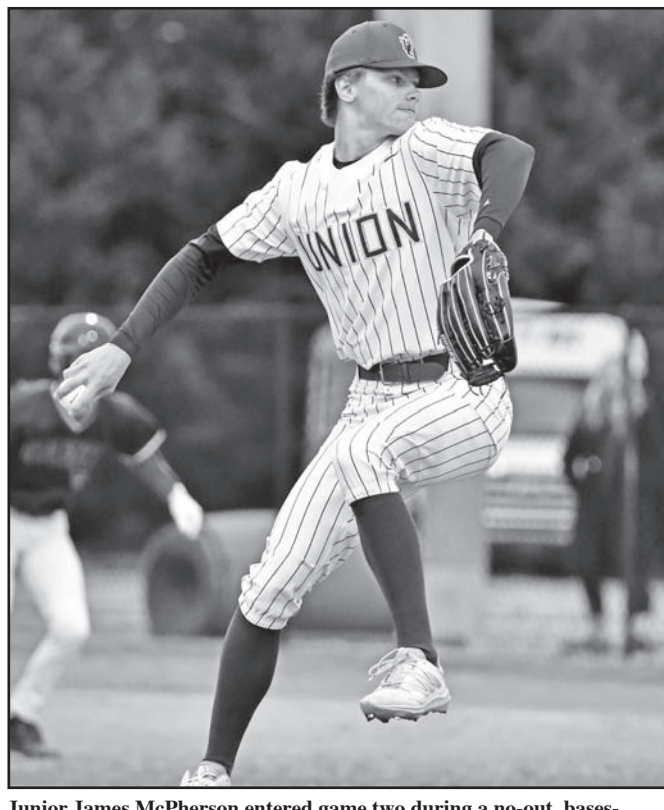
Hughes worked around a

leadoff walk with two strikeouts in the first, then sparked a two-run bottom half with a base hit up the middle. A Loyd single put runners at the corners with one away, allowing Hughes to come around on a Williams wild pitch. Anderson knocked in Loyd via a two-out single, serving a 1-1 pitch into right-center for a 2-0 Union lead.

Towe opened the second with a base hit then came around to score on a Leopards' error off the bat of Bailey Brown, who scored on Hughes' second base knock of the game.

Working with a four-run lead, Hughes' second-straight 1-2-3 inning allowed Union County to mount a 5-0 advantage when Chris Fletcher singled and later scored via a two-out bases-loaded walk to Brayden Sweat.

Hughes suffered a tough break in the fourth when a swing-and-miss was ruled a check-swing ball, resulting in a 1-2 single with one away. Williams put Banks on the board when he ripped the first pitch of the AB past senior shortstop Connor Shields. Later in the



Junior James McPherson entered game two during a no-out, bases-loaded situation. Photo/Todd Forrest

inning, with two away and Williams at second, a dropped fly ball resulted in the Leopards' second run. Then a two-out, RBI double cut the Union County lead to 5-3 before a line-out to senior Thomas Dyer closed the three-run frame.

The Panthers responded with two in the bottom half thanks to a pair of Leopards' errors and singles by Anderson and Dyer. Loyd and Fletcher also reached on an error in consecutive trips with Dyer coming around to score courtesy of an E-4 off the bat of Fletcher. Anderson's single brought home Loyd, extending the Union County cushion to 7-3 after four innings.

Neither lineup reached base again until the bottom of the sixth when Hughes singled to lead off the inning then advanced to second on a throwing error. But the Panthers were unable to score Hughes, who was left stranded 90 feet away when Fletcher's frozen rope up the middle was snagged by the Leopards' pitcher in self-defense.

Fletcher finished 1 for 4 with a run and an RBI; Dyer also scored once during a 1-for-4 evening that included a stolen base. Brown added a run and a steal; Sweat walked and recorded one RBI.

McPherson fanned one Leopard while allowing two hits and one earned run during an inning of work.

**Panthers 4, Banks County 11 (Game three)** - Union County scored two in the first but the Leopards responded with seven unanswered to build a 7-1 advantage in the fourth inning.

The Panthers chipped away with a run in the bottom of the fourth and another in the sixth before Banks County put the contest out of reach with another seventh-inning explosion.

Dyer went 2 for 3 at the dish with two steals, one run and an RBI. Will Duncan earned the nod in game three and tossed six innings, giving up eight hits, five earned runs, one walk while fanning three.

A base on balls to Hughes and a Dyer hit-by-pitch put two aboard to begin the Union

County first, allowing Fletcher's infield single to plate Hughes for the game's first run. Anderson's grounder to third resulted in a run-scoring error, but a pop-up and a line-out kept the tally at 2-0 after an inning.

Banks County did all of its second-inning damage with two away, beginning with a two-run double that knotted the score at 2-2. Following a passed ball that put the visitors on top 3-2, the Leopards added on with a solo homer to left.

Both squads stranded a runner during the third and Banks started to pull away in the fourth, tacking on three runs courtesy of four singles, a sacrifice bunt and an error. Trailing 7-1, Union finally stopped the bleeding when catcher Jacob Vinez cut down a would-be base-stealer to end the inning.

The Panthers loaded the bags in the bottom of the frame but came away with only one run when a Hughes sacrifice fly brought home Shields. The lone run came by way of consecutive one-out singles from Shields and Duncan, plus a Brown hit-by-pitch that set the table for Hughes' RBI.

Duncan tossed a 1-2-3 fifth, then escaped following a two-out error in the sixth, allowing Union to add another run in the bottom half of the frame.

ASweat walk and a Brown single put two aboard for Dyer, who scored Sweat on an 0-2, two-out single. The Panthers failed to add on when Brown was thrown out trying to score from second on Dyer's hit.

Loyd was greeted by an outfield error after replacing Duncan on the mound to begin the seventh. Following a strikeout, Banks County extended its margin to 11-4 via three singles, a walk and another Union fielding error.

Loyd allowed three hits and one earned run in the seventh, striking out two and issuing one free pass. Duncan and Brown each finished 1 for 2 at the dish with Brown chipping in a stolen base.

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# Panthers on the cusp of second straight 8-AA championship

Region play concludes this week with visits to Rabun County and Riverside

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**Elberton** - The sixth-ranked Union County men were one win away from locking up a second-straight Region 8-AA title when they traveled to Rabun County on Monday, March 28 (results came after press time).

Last week, the Panthers (11-2-1, 6-0) moved within a game of clinching the No. 1 seed with a 5-1 victory at Elbert County on Friday, March 25. Senior Kyler Robbins turned in a first-half hat trick during the win to move within four goals of 50 for his career.

Junior Wilson Walker and freshman Antonio Solorio added a second-half goal for Union County, while sophomore Benton Gregory and senior MJ Delatte recorded one assist apiece.

Locked in a scoreless tie during the 30th minute, Robbins put the Panthers on the board with an unassisted goal. Seven minutes later, Robbins did it himself one more time, spotting Union a 2-0 advantage in the 37th.



Senior Kyler Robbins shows off his ball skills during Union's win over Riverside. Photo/Todd Forrest

Gregory and Robbins hooked up during the 40th minute to build a 3-0 lead entering the intermission.

Delatte found Walker in the 46th for the Panthers' fourth goal, then an unassisted shot from Solorio made it 5-0

during the 52nd. The Panthers surrendered a penalty kick late in the second half to deny Union its eighth shutout of 2022.

The Panthers have won 14 straight games against Region 8-AA competition, out-



Junior Wilson Walker attempts a header as sophomore Seth Rutan (5) looks on. Photo/Todd Forrest

scoring the opposition 96-5 during the streak.

**Up next:** Union County and Rabun County faced off on Monday night in Tiger. The results were unavailable as of Monday's deadline.

The Panthers will wrap

up the Region 8-AA schedule when they travel to Gainesville to face Riverside Military Academy on Thursday at 7 p.m.

**Throw-ins:** With Friday's hat trick, Robbins has reached 125 career points.

\* Solorio recorded the fifth goal of his freshman season at Elbert County, matching the ninth-grade totals of teammates Zurriel Mancillas and Robbins, who each recorded five goals, respectively, during their first year.

## Track and Field: Abercrombie and Jones shine at Gilmer meet

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The Union County track and field teams collected 11 first-place finishes during last week's meet at Gilmer on Monday, March 21.

Union County took home seven gold medals in men's events, headlined by senior Kanon Abercrombie's first-place finishes in the 110 and 300-meter hurdles. Abercrombie paced the field in the 110M race at 18.63 seconds; he also edged teammate Nolan Thompson in the 300M event, crossing the finish line at 46.67 - one second ahead of the runner-up Thompson.

Taylor Whitehead placed second in the 200M race at 24.66, and Brady Guild's 57.03 set the pace in the 400M event. Hunter Hartzog came in first at 800M, clocking in at 2:01.76. Union took home each of the top four spots in the 800M race, with Benton Gregory in second (2:07.91), Zander Rotko in third (2:11.96) and Trace Wright in fourth (2:16.08).

The 4x400 relay team placed first with a time of



Union County senior Kanon Abercrombie took home first place in two events during last week's Gilmer meet. Photo/submitted

3:35.60 and Gage Barnes' distance of 38-feet, 8 inches was good enough for a gold medal in the shot put. Teammate Tyler McBride came in second with a throw of 35-8.5.

On the ladies' side, Linley Jones picked up two gold medals in the 300M hurdles (53.15)

and the triple jump (31-7). Mia McCombs placed second in the triple jump with a distance of 30-4.

Jones also finished second in the 100M hurdles with a time of 19.42.

Natalie Payne was victorious at 1600M with a time

of 6:24.63. Ashely Shipes' 14:06.96 paced the field in the 3200M race, edging Payne, who came in second at 14:21.75.

Other girls' performances included Hana Gregory's second-place time of 2:40.43 in the 800M. She also came in third at 1:06.55 in the 400M event.

Noell Hyatt placed third in the 800M race at 2:46.50.

Shipes was third in the 1600M race at 6:36 and Andrea Barrera placed fifth at 7:24.

Lexi Sisum finished third in the 100M dash (13.71) and Allie Brey was fourth (1:07.78) in the 400M event. The 4x400

relay team came in second while the 4x100 team placed third.

Brey was third in the high jump at 4-8. McCombs (13-11.5) and Ellie Adams (13-6.5) placed fourth and fifth, respectively, in the long jump.

Mattie Brookshire came in second in the discus throw at 81-2. Meanwhile, her distance of 27-11.5 was good enough for third in the shot put.

Other Union County men's competitors included Rotko, who came in third in the 100M dash at 11.74. Sam Page was fourth in the 200M at 25.15, and Thompson's 20.81 placed him fourth in the 110M hurdles. Maddox Young turned in a top-five performance with a time of 52.13 in the 300M hurdles.

The 4x100 relay team finished second at 46.49; the 4x800 squad came in third at 3:35.60.

Daniel Snow (5-8) and Hayden Payne (5-6) were fourth and fifth, respectively, in the high jump. Van Marevka came in fourth in the long jump at 18-1; Hayden Payne placed fifth with a distance of 16-9.25. Marevka also finished fourth in the triple jump, clearing 36-5.

## Swimming: Hannah Sheffield inks scholarship with Piedmont University



Union County senior Hannah Sheffield (center) during her signing ceremony at the Union General Hospital Wellness Center on March 14. Photo/submitted

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Union County swimming standout Hannah Sheffield will spend another four years in the pool as a member of the Piedmont University Swim team.

Surrounded by family, friends and coaches, Sheffield put pen to paper during a signing ceremony at the Union General Hospital Wellness Center on Monday, March 14. The *North Georgia News* spoke with Sheffield later in the week about her decision to team up with the upstart Lions' program that enters its third season next winter.

According to Sheffield, she found herself on Piedmont's radar when a COVID-19 outbreak temporarily closed the Wellness Center pool in January 2021. And with the State competition right around the corner, Sheffield needed to remain in peak physical condition, so she elected to drive to Habersham County's Ruby Fulbright Aquatic Center for her daily workouts.

As fate would have it, Piedmont University held its swimming practices at the same location, and coach Teddy Guyer immediately took note of Sheffield's talent. However, it was her dedication and work ethic that

really caught Guyer's attention after learning Sheffield was driving from Blairsville each day to hone her craft.

"While I was there I met the team and the coach, and after I kept coming back, the coach came up to me and said, 'wow, you're really devoted to your sport; I want you on my team,'" Sheffield said.

At the same time Sheffield was commuting to Clarkesville, Piedmont's swim team was competing in its first season, which turned out to be a factor in Sheffield's decision.

"I actually got to swim with the [Piedmont] team once or twice and they were a brand new program then," she said. "So just knowing that I'll be able to grow with them is something that really stood out to me."

Over the next year, Sheffield remained firm on her commitment to Piedmont, despite the people in her ear encouraging her to consider other schools.

"I listened to their advice and thought, 'I really should look at other schools,' but there was always something about Piedmont that kept drawing me back in. I just knew that Piedmont was the one."

Sheffield will major in theater, but could also see herself entering the teaching field

someday.

"For now, I'm majoring in theater arts, but I do have a strong interest in teaching or becoming a swim coach," she said. "But honestly, I'm just going to see where the world takes me, because I really don't know for sure what I'm going to do [after graduation]."

"When I toured the campus, they gave me a ticket to see one of their shows. I got to meet the theater teachers and the students, they were all so warm and welcoming. It was awesome."

Athletically, Sheffield's primary goal is to contribute to Piedmont's first conference swimming title.

"I want to help the team in any way possible as a freshman, but I would also like to bring a conference championship to Piedmont before I leave."

In closing, Sheffield thanked her family and coaches for helping her achieve her goals.

"My parents devoted their time and their weekends to me, and they were the ones cheering me on the hardest," she said. "I want to thank my first swim coach, Kathy Mancuso. She was always there for me, even on the days that I hated swimming. I also want to thank my current coach, Barry Gay. I wouldn't be where I am today without him."

## Baseball... continued from 2B

Fletcher drove in one during a 1-for-4 game; Hughes recorded two steals, one run, a walk and an RBI.

Anderson knocked in a run and finished 1 for 3; Shields scored and went 1 for 3. Brown went 1 for 2.

**Panthers 4, Banks County 15 (Game one)** - The Leopards jumped out to a 10-1 advantage after four innings, scoring three in the first, five in the third and two in the fourth as they cruised to a six-inning victory in Homer.

Union County put up three runs in the sixth but the Leopards ended the game via the mercy rule - posting a five-spot during the bottom half of the frame.

Anderson notched his first career big fly during a 1-for-3 performance when he opened the sixth inning by launching a solo home run to left field.

Sweat doubled, scored and drove in one during a 1-for-3 game. Dyer went 1 for 3 with an RBI and a hit-by-pitch; Brown was also plunked during a 1-for-3 evening.

Lloyd walked twice and scored during a 1-for-2 game. Towe singled and scored; Hughes walked, scored and stole two bags. Fleming, Fletcher and McPherson each drew a walk for

Union County.

Grisham started on the mound and lasted two-plus innings, giving up seven hits and five earned runs before exiting with nobody out in the bottom of the third.

Trailing 3-0 in the top of the third, Brown's single placed runners at the corners after Hughes reached on an error with one down. Dyer put the Panthers on the board moments later when he grounded out on an 0-2 pitch that scored Brown.

Back-to-back walks by Loyd and Fletcher loaded the bags but an inning-ending groundout preserved Banks County's 3-1 lead.

A leadoff homer and consecutive singles pulled the plug on Grisham, bringing McPherson to the mound facing a 4-1 deficit. Banks County worked an eight-pitch walk to load the bases, then blew things open with a two-run double and an RBI groundout. The Leopards would use a two-out single to make it 8-1, but Sweat ended the inning by throwing out a potential base-stealer at second.

Two singles and a double saw Banks extend its lead to 10-1 in the fourth. Union County stranded two in the fifth and

McPherson retired the side in order during the Leopards' half of the inning.

The Panthers' three-run sixth began with Anderson's solo shot, followed by a single from Towe and an RBI double by Sweat. With one away, McPherson drew a walk and Brown was hit by a pitch to load the bases. After a pop-fly failed to score a run, Loyd's two-out base hit to left brought home Sweat, trimming the deficit to 10-4.

Towe took the mound in the bottom of the sixth and defensive miscues put two aboard to start the inning. A walk and an RBI single made it 11-4, then a one-out grand slam ended the contest at 15-4.

**Up next:** Union County hosts Riverside for Senior Night on Tuesday at 5:55 p.m. to kick off a three-game series that could eliminate one of the two teams from playoff contention. The Panthers can clinch a playoff berth by taking two of three from the Eagles in a series that concludes with a Thursday doubleheader in Gainesville. Two weeks ago, RMA lost three games to Banks by a combined score of 50-5.

The week ends with Towns County paying a visit to UCHS at 5:30 p.m. on Friday, April 1.



Senior Caleb Towe leads off from first base before swiping second off Banks County pitcher Tripp Williams on the next pitch. Photo/Todd Forrest