

Sports

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Soccer: Panthers, Lady Panthers cruise into Sweet 16

Union County dismantles its first-round opponents, host second round this week

By Todd Forrest
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Both Union County soccer teams are back in the Sweet 16 for the third consecutive season following a pair of one-sided home victories during the Class AA State Tournament's opening round.

The sixth-ranked Union County men (14-2-1) scored the first eight goals in an 8-2 win over Elite Scholars Academy on Friday, April 15, just one day removed from the Lady Panthers' 10-0 win over Therrell on Thursday.

Union County advances to this week's second round, which kicks off at 5 p.m. Wednesday when the Lady Panthers host Region 2 runner-up, East Laurens (Dublin). The Union men also host the second seed from Region 2-AA, squaring off against 10th-ranked Woodville-Tompkins (11-4-1) on Thursday.

Lady Panthers 10, Therrell 0 - Sophomore Lara Turner recorded a hat trick, senior Savannah Evans collected a brace and sophomore Zoe Crawford chipped in three assists during Union County's 10-0 rout of Region 6-AA's No. 4 seed, Therrell (Atlanta).

"Lately, our girls have been playing with an edge," Lady Panthers head coach Tim Hunter said. "Over the last couple games, we've played very physical, we're getting after everything, moving the ball very well and playing with pace. And I told the girls that the edge is the difference; when we play with an edge, we're pretty explosive."

The Lady Panthers (11-3-1) raced ahead in the early going thanks to a Turner goal, courtesy of Crawford's corner kick in the fourth minute. Senior Lorelei Skinner found freshman Ariel McCarter a minute later, and sophomore Avery Murray built a 3-0 advantage with a rebound goal in the seventh.

Crawford's second assist came during the 16th minute, setting up a score by fellow-sophomore Maggie Payne.

Murray added an assist with a feed to senior Melia Whitener for a 5-0 margin in the 19th minute. In the 27th minute, a Skinner rebound capped off the first-half scoring, awarding the Lady Panthers a 6-0 lead.

Junior Italia Salazar fed Turner early in the second half, and then Turner completed the



Junior Wilson Walker finished with two goals during Union County's 8-2 victory over Elite Scholars Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest

hat trick with a goal in the 50th minute via a Skinner assist. Union County's final two goals belonged to Evans, the first a penalty kick in the 54th, and her second coming via Crawford's third dime, ending the contest at 10-0 with 24:33 remaining.

"We've been very solid on the backline, at midfield and with our ball handling, but lately, we've turned it on, and if we can keep that focus, we have a very good chance at advancing a few more rounds," Hunter said. "When you get to this level, yes, it's always about talent, but it also comes down to who is still willing to play for each other."

"And one of the biggest things that helps us is, our second team is very strong. So when you come out here for practice everyday, you're battling every moment. So I really have to give credit to those kids for providing a consistent challenge everyday. And like I've said, I think our second team is probably the second-best team in the region, third-best at worst."

Panthers 8, Elite Scholars Academy 2 - Union County jumped out to a 6-0 halftime margin before handing off to its reserves for the entire second half. The backups would battle the Region 6-AA No. 4 seed to a 2-2 deadlock over the final 40 minutes.

"Our varsity team came out and did their job in the first half and I was very happy with

them," Union County head coach Chris Robbins said. "And then, for the second year-in-a-row, I was able to play my entire second team and they scored two goals, which was very impressive."

"That is very exciting for me, the assistant coaches, our kids and their parents. This is the end of the season, so there won't be many more opportunities to get those younger kids some playing time. We're all one team in the end, but both team-one and team-two accomplished what we needed to accomplish today."

Following a nine-minute drought, Union County sophomore Zuriel Mancillas and senior MJ Delatte teamed up to kick off the scoring when a Mancillas feed set up a right-footed screamer from Delatte.

Kyler Robbins returned the favor for Delatte in the 15th when he found Mancillas for a 2-0 advantage over the Jonesboro school. During the 16th minute, sophomore Benton Gregory fed freshman Antonio Solorio for a 3-0 lead, and 21 seconds later, junior Wilson Walker scored courtesy of a Mancillas assist.

Kyler Robbins' second dime came in the 34th when he connected with Mancillas in the box for a 5-0 margin, and Mancillas' third assist capped the first-half scoring via Walker's header during the 39th minute.

"We've had some good



Senior captain Savannah Evans gives her team a 9-0 lead over Therrell with a second-half penalty kick. Photo/Todd Forrest

practices over the last two weeks, but like I've always said, 'we're a knife' and nobody likes a dull knife, so we want to be as sharp as possible. At this point of the season, we're just trying to sharpen our skills and do the right thing, there isn't a massive amount of learning."

Zack Depalma accounted for both of Union County's second-half goals, and sophomore Austin Whitener chipped in one helper. Depalma built a 7-0 lead for the home team with an unassisted goal in the 48th, then he made it 8-0 in the 69th courtesy of Whitener's assist.

ESA's two goals came during the 78th and 80th minute, denying Union County its third consecutive shutout.

"Coming in, we couldn't find any info about [ESA], and when you don't know anything about them, you can't take them for granted," Robbins said. "We know all too well about what a No. 4 seed is capable of. We were in that position in 2019 and you saw how far we went."

"I told the guys [before the ESA match] that we need five wins to be the State Champion. Now, it's four wins. And each round, the competition gets a little bit tougher, but the thing is, our guys love competition. Some people just want us to go out and win 10-0, but if you're a real athlete, win or lose you want to measure yourself against other real athletes, and that's how we coach these boys."

The Panthers host 10th-ranked Woodville-Tompkins (Savannah) on Thursday at 5 p.m. in the second round of the

Class AA State Tournament. Woodville-Tompkins marks the third straight top-10 opponent Union County has faced in the Class AA Sweet 16, where they split the previous two meetings. The Panthers rallied to edge No. 8 Gordon Central on the road in 2019 but fell 2-0 at home to second-ranked Lovett a year ago (the 2020 tournament did not take place due to COVID-19).

Woodville-Tompkins recorded a 7-1 victory over Region 4's third-seeded Jefferson County in the previous round. The Wolverines are led by sophomore Luis Lopez (No. 19), a preseason Class AA Honorable Mention selection. Lopez is responsible for 19 goals and seven assists this spring.

Another player to keep an eye on is No. 17, senior Cole Ritchie-Smith (10 goals, three assists).

"We'll come back to practice [this week] and start sharpening that knife again, as long as we stay healthy," Coach Robbins said. "We've been blessed by the Lord, so far, and I pray that we can continue to remain healthy."

As for East Laurens' girls, they dismantled Laney by an 11-0 score in the opening round. The Falcons (11-6) feature a balanced scoring attack that includes four underclassmen, most notably the team's leading scorer, junior Emily Brown (No. 32).

Others to watch are the sophomore trio of No. 30 Madison Cheek, No. 19 Madison Johnson and No. 10 Zamani

Williams.

"[East Laurens] pretty regularly advances two or three rounds and is usually one of the better soccer teams from south Georgia," Hunter said.

In other Class AA first-round action, Rabun's men blanked Towers, 6-0, while Riverside suffered an 11-1 loss to second-ranked Pace Academy. Region 8-AA's fourth-seeded Elbert County accepted a forfeit instead of driving to Paces Ferry to have the score run up by top-ranked Lovett. On the girls' side, second-seeded Elbert County survived a 2-1 affair vs. Elite Scholars Academy. Third-ranked and No. 2 seed Pace Academy dealt No. 3-seed Rabun County an 11-0 loss; top-ranked Lovett easily took care of Banks County, 11-0.

In other classifications, the Towns County girls pulled off a road upset at second-seeded Armuchee by a score of 1-0. Top-seeded Social Circle and second-seeded Commerce join Towns County in the Sweet 16 from Region 8-A Public.

Fannin's girls blanked Haralson County 9-0 and will host Thomasville in the Sweet 16. Lumpkin County routed Sandy Creek 11-1 in AAA girls action. White County suffered a 5-0 loss at GAC.

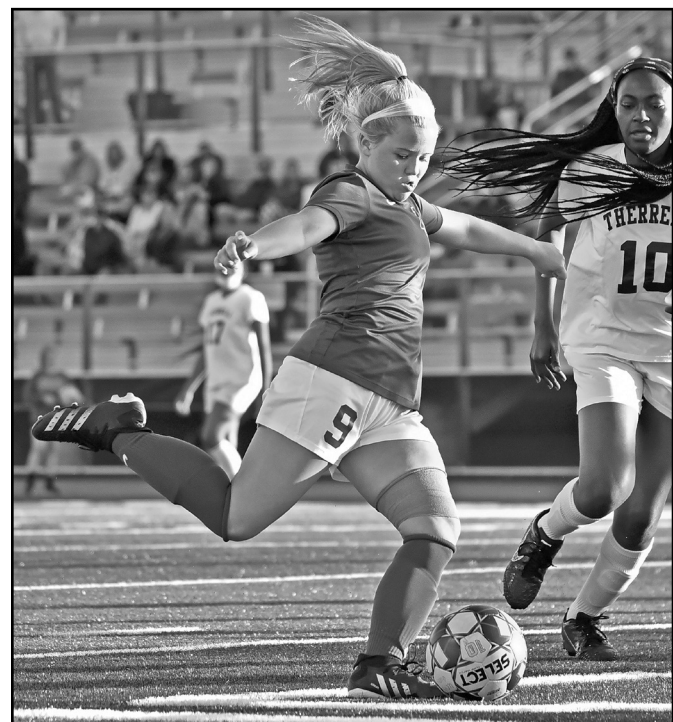
In Class AAAA, the Pickens girls fell 5-4 to Luella and East Hall lost 7-0 to Marist.

Future Region 8-AA programs, Fellowship Christian and Athens Academy each won their first-round girls match. Fellowship mercy-ruled Prince Avenue by a score of 10-0. Athens Academy took down Mt. Pisgah, 3-0.

In other local boys' results, future Region 8-AA member, East Jackson, shut out Sonoraville 3-0 in Class AAA. Other future region foes to advance were Athens Academy (4-0 over Mt. Pisgah), Fellowship Christian (7-1 over Tallulah Falls) and Providence Christian (10-0 over Mt. Paran) in Class A-Private.

Union County 2022 non-region opponents, Gilmer and Murray County both lost convincingly in Class AAA. Meanwhile, the only teams to defeat Union County, East Hall and Pickens, both advanced in Class AAAA road matches.

Pickens destroyed second-seeded Luella, 11-1 and East Hall escaped top-seeded Druid Hills with a 2-1 victory. Should the Dragons and Vikings each win their respective Sweet 16 contests, Pickens would host East Hall in the Elite Eight.



Sophomore Zoe Crawford dished out three assists during the first-round win over Therrell. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Zack Depalma (L) celebrates his first career goal during the second half of Union's win over ESA. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Lara Turner scores her second of three goals to extend the Union County lead to 7-0. Photo/Todd Forrest

Baseball: Panthers win two over Rabun, finish third in Region 8-AA

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Union County baseball locked down a No. 3 seed in next week's Class AA State Tournament by taking two of three from Rabun County during last week's three-game series to close out the Region 8-AA schedule.

With the postseason locked up, the Panthers have three final tune-up games ahead of their first-round visit to second-ranked Lovett. Union County will host a future region foe in Class-A Private's fifth-ranked Fellowship Christian (18-2) on Tuesday before Murphy, North Carolina pays a visit to UCHS on Wednesday. The week concludes on Thursday with a trip to Roswell to face Fellowship Christian.

Panthers 8, Rabun County 4 (Game one) - Union County defended its home field in Tuesday's opener, taking control of the series behind 5 2/3 innings from senior Lake Hughes and a clutch three-run double by fellow-senior Thomas Dyer.

Hughes scattered six hits and fanned six Wildcats in the win, giving up four unearned runs and two walks during a 112-pitch outing. However, five errors hindered Union County pitching, keeping Rabun in the fight up until a game-ending, bases-loaded double play.

Offensively, the Panthers' lineup seized a 2-0 advantage after one inning, beginning with a leadoff single and a stolen base from Hughes, followed by an RBI groundout by senior Tyler Loyd and three consecutive Rabun County errors.

The Wildcats added a run in the second via two singles and two Union errors, but Hughes escaped the two-on, two-out jam without further damage. The Panthers stranded two runners in their half of the second, and Rabun County took advantage of another Union County error, tying the score at 2-2 with a bases-loaded sacrifice fly. Once again, Hughes kept the Wildcats from putting up a crooked number in the second, recording a backward "K" to end the inning.

Rabun County senior Grayson Carver kept Union off the board in the third following Logan Anderson's leadoff single. Meanwhile, Hughes induced a chopper to senior shortstop Connor Shields to spark a 6-U twin-killing to close the Wildcat fourth.

A two-out error off the bat of Dyer scored senior Bailey Brown and put Union back on top, 3-2 heading to the fifth. And on the heels of a 1-2-3 fifth inning from Hughes, the Panthers blew things open in the bottom half of



Senior Tyler Loyd fires to first base. Loyd signed with Emmanuel last week - his signing story will be in next week's paper. Photo/Todd Forrest

the frame, putting up a five-spot and knocking Carver from the mound. The Rabun County ace lasted 4 2/3 innings (100 pitches), giving up five hits, five earned runs and four walks. The fifth opened with promise for Carver, who fanned Anderson, then allowed an infield single to senior Caleb Towe. But things unraveled quickly as a single by first baseman Chris Fletcher put runners at the corners and Shields knocked in Towe with a base hit to center.

Hunter Fleming scored Fletcher on a sacrifice fly, and with two away, Brown drew a four-pitch walk to pull the plug on Carver. The Wildcats gambled by walking Hughes to load the bases and Dyer made them pay by stroking a bases-clearing double to left-center, breaking things open at 8-2.

However, Hughes couldn't survive the sixth, exiting with an 8-4 lead after a passed ball brought home a run and a two-out RBI single plated another. Will Duncan replaced the Union ace and proceeded to load the bags via a walk and a hit batter before finally getting out of trouble by snagging a hard-hit grounder back to the mound.

Clinging to an 8-4 advantage, things nearly went south in the seventh when consecutive errors backed Duncan into a corner to open the frame. An opposite-field single brought the tying run to the plate with no outs when Duncan froze the next hitter with a fastball at the knees for strike three.

With the top of the Rabun order lurking, the Union defense provided Duncan a much-needed

double play when the Wildcats' No. 8 hitter, Parker Smith, laced a 1-2 pitch down the first-base line. Luckily, Fletcher was in position to make a back-handed grab and quickly step on first to double off the runner and end the game.

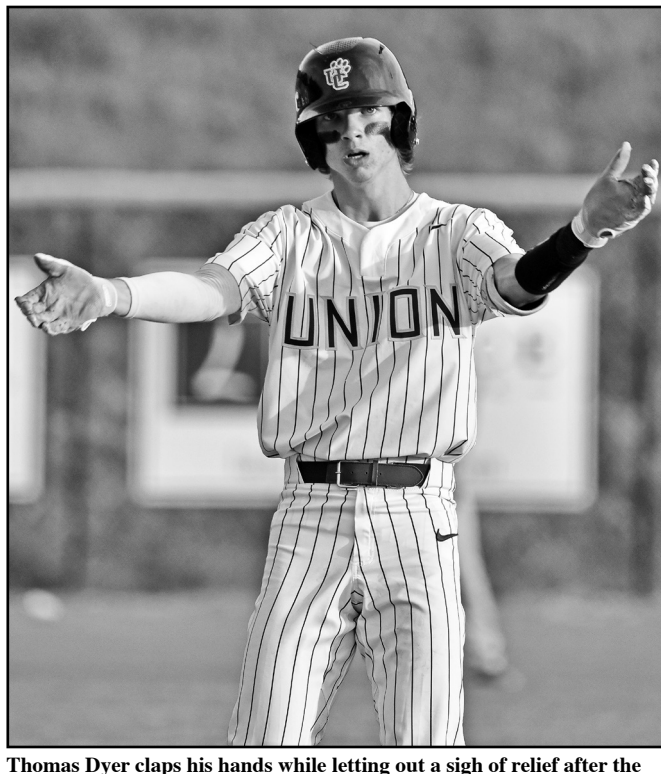
"Overall, our mindset as a team is a lot different than it was [earlier in the year], so I believe our guys were confident they would get the job done," Odom said when asked if Union's past late-inning struggles crossed his mind when Rabun loaded the bases. "But I'm glad it worked out the way it did, because when that ball came off the bat, I thought, 'oh my gosh.' But Fletcher was there and made the play."

Dyer finished 1 for 4 with a three-run double, Loyd knocked in a run during a 1-for-4 game and Shields finished 1 for 3 with a run, a ribby and a stolen base. Brown walked three times, scored twice and stole a base; Anderson and Towe each scored a run and swiped a bag during a 1-for-4 evening.

Hughes walked twice, scored a pair of runs and stole a base during a 1-for-2 game. Fletcher went 1 for 3 with a run; Fleming finished 0 for 2 with an RBI.

Jarrett Giles led Rabun County with a 3-for-4 day at the plate. Trevor Reese finished 2 for 4 and Grant Britton scored a pair of runs.

Panthers 8, Rabun County 0 (Game two) - Junior James McPherson notched the first complete-game shutout of his career and turned in the program's first seven-inning shutout since March 22, 2019 (Zeke Swartz at Elbert County) during an 8-0 win in Tiger on



Thomas Dyer claps his hands while letting out a sigh of relief after the senior's bases-clearing, fifth-inning double erased a hitless evening vs. Rabun County in game one. Photo/Todd Forrest

Friday, April 15. McPherson went the distance in an efficient 73-pitch performance, striking out five and allowing five hits without issuing a walk.

"The biggest thing with him, he was just filling [the strike zone] up," Odom said. "He threw 75% strikes and was just dealing. He got ahead [in the count] all day and he stayed ahead. He's also been working on a change-up all year and he was able to work it in when he needed to."

Providing the offensive support for his masterpiece was the first three-hit game of Loyd's career. The Emmanuel signee finished 3 for 4 with a double, two runs and an RBI.

Dyer and Towe each recorded a pair of two-hit games while Hughes scored twice and drew a pair of walks.

Back-to-back doubles from Dyer and Loyd moved Union County out front 2-0 in the top of the first - more than enough for McPherson and the Panthers, who haven't lost a region series to the Wildcats in more than a decade.

The third frame saw Hughes lead off with a walk, followed by base hits from Dyer and Loyd to extend the margin to 3-0. Loyd later came around to score on an error and McPherson took a no-hitter into the bottom half of the frame.

Rabun's first hit came with one down in the third but the rally was thwarted by an unconventional 4-6-5 double play. Shields made it a 5-0 game in the fourth when he doubled and later scored on Brayden Sweat's sacrifice fly.

Two Wildcats' errors re-

sulted in two Union County runs in the sixth while McPherson stranded a two-out double in the Rabun half of the inning.

The Panthers tacked on a pair of two-out insurance runs in the seventh via an error and base knocks by Anderson and Loyd. With his team ahead 8-0 in the bottom half, McPherson picked up two outs on four pitches before closing the game in style with a strike-three looking.

"You have to give a shout-out to our defense," Odom said. "That was our best defensive game in a long time. Overall, that was one of the cleanest, best played games that we've had in while."

Panthers 6, Rabun County 7 (Game three) - With the series wrapped up, Union County couldn't secure the sweep, giving up a walk-off single in the bottom of the seventh.

The Panthers jumped out to a 5-1 lead in the third but Rabun County responded with three in the fourth. Union added one in the sixth for a 6-4 advantage when Rabun tied things up with two in the bottom half, then won it in the seventh.

Hughes went 2 for 4 with a run and a ribby. Anderson walked twice and scored during a 1-for-2 game; Towe doubled and scored during a 1-for-4 performance. Parker Grisham scored and went 1 for 3. Shields walked, scored and plated one run; Duncan went 1 for 1 with two walks and one RBI. Jace Vinez finished 1 for 3 with an RBI and Hunter Fleming drew a walk and scored.

Union County failed to add an insurance run in the seventh despite putting two aboard with one away. Rabun opened

the bottom half with a double then scored the game-winner via a one-out single to center.

Early on, a wild pitch brought home Towe, and back-to-back run-scoring singles by Vinez and Hughes put Union on top 3-0 in the second. The Panthers extended it to 5-1 in the third with an RBI groundout from Shields and a Duncan single.

A walk, a hit batter and an error allowed Rabun to move within a run in the fourth, but Hughes scored on an error in the fifth to keep Union in front at 6-4. The Wildcats tied the game with a two-run, two-out, 3-2 single in the sixth, capping a seven-pitch at-bat by Cooper Welch.

Duncan started on the mound and lasted 3 2/3 innings, giving up five walks, three hits and three earned runs (four runs total) while fanning two. Towe struck out four Wildcats in two innings but allowed two hits, one earned run (two total) and a walk. Anderson yielded one hit in 1/3 of an inning.

Panthers 0, Towns County 7 - Indians sophomore Zane Floyd fired a two-hit shutout on Monday, April 11 in Hiwassee.

Grisham got the start for Union and tossed three shutout innings before finding trouble in the fourth. Towns County scored three in the fourth, three in the fifth and one in the sixth.

Towe closed the game for the Panthers, fanning four batters, walking three, and allowing one earned run in two innings.

Grisham's day ended after giving up five hits and three earned over four innings.

Anderson and Towe were responsible for Union's only two hits at the dish. Dyer added a walk and Hughes had a stolen base for the Panthers.

Up next: Tuesday's home meeting with Fellowship begins at 5:55 p.m. Then, Union hosts Murphy, NC on Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. before traveling to Roswell at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday to close the regular season with a rematch at Fellowship Christian.

"Fellowship is going to be the top-dog in the region next year so it's a chance to see what we're up against," Odom said. "Plus it's a chance to play a good baseball team going into the playoffs. We're going to see some very good competition this week as we get ready to go to Lovett [in the state playoffs] the following week."

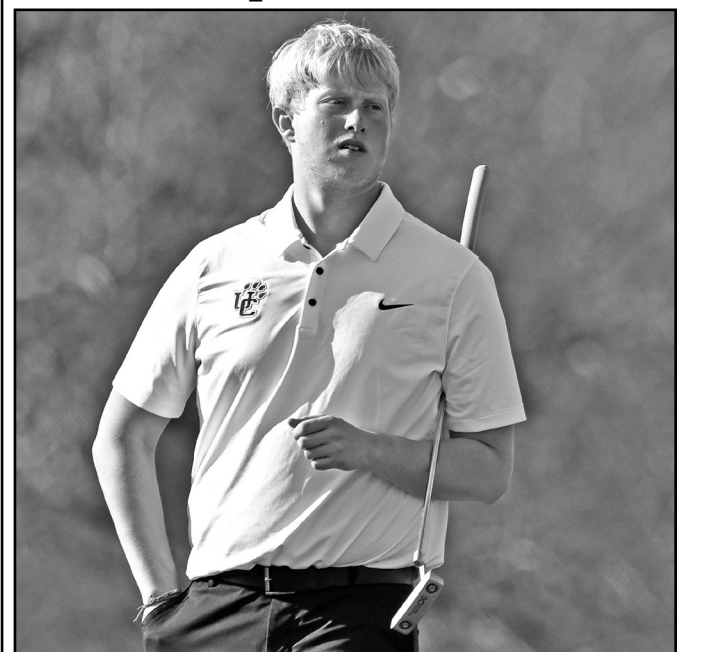
"We've also had some guys who haven't had a chance to pitch very much, and going into [State], you're going to need everybody. And with the way Lovett hits the ball, our pitch counts will be up so we'll need everyone, and we hope to get those guys a few innings this week."

Track results: Buford's Dexter Wood Invitational

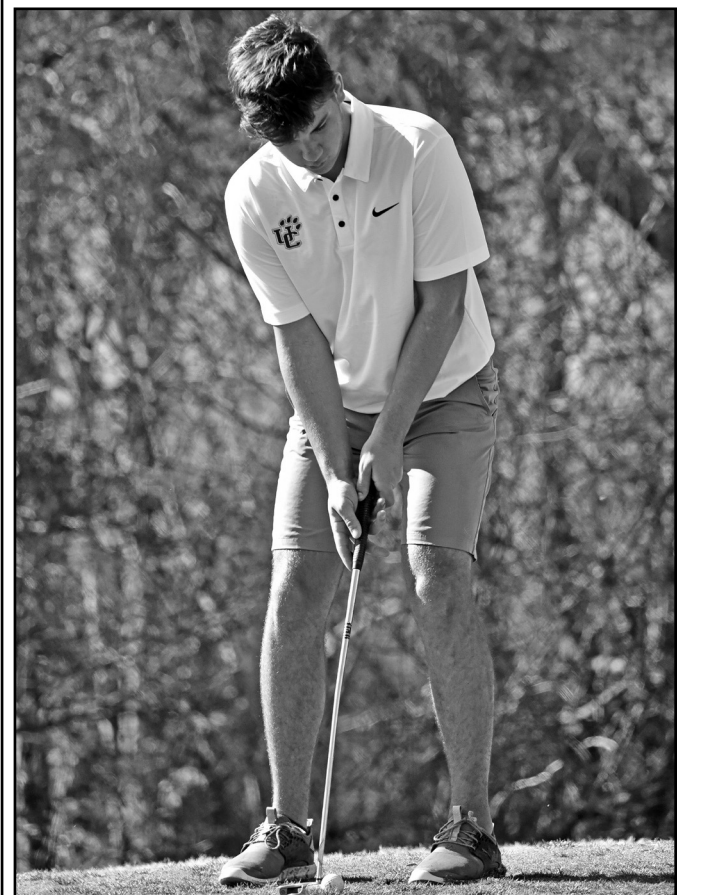
GIRLS	ATHLETE	PLACE
100 METER DASH		
13.53 SB	Lexi Sisum	12th
14.46 SB	Giovanna Salazar	19th
200 METER DASH		
28.52	Lexi Sisum	10th
31.45 SB	Katelynn Rash	18th
32.12	Giovanna Salazar	19th
400 METER DASH		
1:09.01	Noel Hyatt	7th
1:21.23 SB	Andrea Barrera Jimeno	12th
800 METER RUN		
2:37.27	Hana Gregory	3rd
2:41.74 SB	Allie Brey	4th
2:44.48	Ellie Adams	5th
1600 METER RUN		
6:30.92	Natalie Payne	6th
6:54.98	Lydia Wagner	7th
7:24.52	Ashley Shipes	8th
3200 METER RUN		
13:29.22	Natalie Payne	2nd
14:12.81 SB	Lydia Wagner	4th
100 METER HURDLES		
18.15 SB	Linley Jones	5th
18.32	Hannah Long	6th
22.77 SB	Katie Byers	10th
300 METER HURDLES		
51.05	Hannah Long	5th
52.27	Linley Jones	7th
1:00.58 SB	Katie Payne	10th
4X100 METER RELAY		
1:02.70	Relay Team	7th
4X200 METER RELAY		
1:56.35	Relay Team	4th
4X400 METER RELAY		
4:38.13	Relay Team	4th
4X800 METER RELAY		
10:36.18 SB	Relay Team	2nd
DISCUS		
82-2	Mattie Brookshire	2nd
64-9	Brooklyn Brown	8th
SHOT PUT		
25-8	Mattie Brookshire	3rd
23-3 SB	Brooklyn Brown	5th

BOYS	ATHLETE	PLACE
100 METER DASH		
11.84 SB	Taylor Whithead	14th
12.20 SB	Jonah Keluth	19th
12.93 SB	Tyler Grasty	21st
200 METER DASH		
23.90 SB	Zander Rotko	12th
24.51 SB	Eli Peugh	16th
25.05	Taylor Whithead	19th
26.43 SB	Tyler Grasty	21st
400 METER DASH		
53.99 SB	Trace Wright	9th
56.14	Zander Rotko	15th
59.18	Brady Guild	19th
800 METER RUN		
2:04.22	Hunter Hartzog	1st
2:09.90	Benton Gregory	5th
2:30.46 SB	Michael Kronz	16th
1600 METER RUN		
5:34.87 SB	Noah Payne	10th
5:36.81 SB	Ivan Garcia	11th
5:45.70 SB	Ethan Hill	14th
3200 METER RUN		
12:34.73 SB	Alec Wilder	6th
13:30.65	Brady Mull	9th
14:06.93 SB	Logan Duckworth	10th
110 METER HURDLES		
17.97	Kanon Abercrombie	8th
19.83 SB	Sam Page	12th
20.61	Nolan Thompson	13th
300 METER HURDLES		
46.05	Kanon Abercrombie	12th
47.05 SB	Nolan Thompson	13th
50.69	Maddox Young	16th
4X100 METER RELAY		
47.44	Relay Team	7th
4X200 METER RELAY		
1:36.75	Relay Team	4th
4X400 METER RELAY		
3:44.30	Relay Team	4th
4X800 METER RELAY		
8:28.70 SB	Relay Team	1st
DISCUS		
103-8 SB	Gage Barnes	8th
90-11	Eli Underwood	11th
90-2	Tyler McBride	12th
SHOT PUT		
40-0	Gage Barnes	7th
39-2.5 SB	Tyler McBride	8th
36-11 SB	Eli Underwood	14th

Golf: Braedon Gay's 39 leads Union men past Gilmer, 179-209



Braedon Gay (39) earned Low Medalist honors during last week's match vs. Gilmer at Butternut Creek Golf Course. Photo/Todd Forrest



Other Union scores during the win over Gilmer at Butternut: Huston West 46, Jett Busbee 47 and Kyler Robbins 47. With an overall tally of 179, Union County turned in a team-low for the season. Meanwhile, the Union girls lost a close match to Gilmer. Photo/Todd Forrest