

Sports

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Softball: Mitchell takes the reins as summer league gets underway

Union County softball adjusts to its first coaching change in 12 years

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For the first time since 2006, Union County softball opened summer league play under the direction of a new head coach.

In March, Union County High School introduced Stephen Mitchell as its new head softball coach, taking over for Jessica Stewart, who resigned last winter following 12 years at the helm.

Mitchell comes to Union County by way of Bowdon High School, where the Lady Red Devils saw a 13-win improvement in year one under Mitchell.

Bowdon posted its second consecutive 25-win season in 2017 and reached the Class A State Elite 8 in Columbus, where they finished with one win and two losses.

Now Mitchell is tasked with rejuvenating a Lady Panther program, that, less than a decade ago, were perennial state title contenders. Unfortunately, the 2017 season saw Union miss the State Tournament for the first time since 2008.

Returning the program to greatness won't be easy, however, due to the Lady Panthers graduating a pair of All-Region pitchers in consecutive seasons. In 2016, senior Laken Chambers and junior Jillian Lawn provided Union plenty of stability in the circle. Lawn returned in 2017 where the senior ace was one of the few bright spots on a Lady Panther squad that suffered its first losing season in 12 years under Stewart.



New Union County softball coach Stephen Mitchell holds a conference on the mound during the White County game. Photo/Todd Forrest

Now each Lady Panther player begins with a clean slate under Mitchell. As a result, the returning starters are working harder than before to retain their jobs. Meanwhile, the other girls have been put on notice that every starting position is officially an open competition.

"It's a blank canvas for the girls and it's a blank canvas for me," Mitchell said. "I don't know who does what well, so we're trying to focus on finding the best two (players) at every position and build a little depth if we can."

"We're just trying to get ourselves ready to play a softball game because we're not ready. It's nobody's fault, it's

just the terminology and the different things we have to work on to be ready by August 6."

Official practice gets underway on Aug. 1 and less than a week later, the Lady Panthers open their season at Habersham Central on Aug. 6. The limited amount of time to prepare can make the preseason difficult on a new coach. However, there are some advantages to entering a situation where the coach has no prior knowledge of any players.

"This is a good program and it's been run correctly but I think it gives (the players) a little extra juice knowing they've all got a shot (at a starting job). We've tried a lot of dif-



Rising senior Aladriel Arnold makes a running catch in left field vs Habersham Central. Photo/Todd Forrest

ferent people at a lot of different positions and we're just trying to find what works. We're hoping to find the best nine or 10 players but it could also be the best group that plays, we don't know yet.

"I'm happy with where we are; I'm excited about where we are. We're all aware that we have a long way to go so we've got our nose to the grindstone right now. The girls are really working hard and as long as we continue to do that, we'll get where we need to be. I don't know when that will be, but we'll get there as long as we keep working hard."

Last week Union County participated in summer league

doubleheaders at Habersham Central and Stephens County.

No scores were kept in the games.

This week, the Lady Panthers return to Habersham on Tuesday where they will face Lumpkin County at 5:30 p.m. and Jefferson at 7 p.m.

Thursday, July 19, Union County visits Banks County for a 7 p.m. contest with Elbert County and an 8:30 p.m. matchup with Banks.

On Tuesday, July 24, the Lady Panthers travel to Jackson County for games at 5 and 6:30 p.m.

Union County will visit Franklin County on Thursday, July 26 to wrap-up summer ball

with a 4 p.m. doubleheader.

"We worked on our offensive philosophy last week," Mitchell said. "We're just trying to establish what it is that I want to do. We're focusing on having quality at bats right now, not our batting average."

"This week, we'll throw in our defensive philosophy, next week will be our Panther Pride week, where we'll focus on us. We haven't been able to focus on a lot of offensive in-game strategy. We've got a lot of things to do and if you think about the grand scheme of things it can be a little overwhelming, so we're just taking things one day at a time."

Football: Summer workouts winding down; conditioning begins July 25

Story on Page 3B. Photos by Todd Forrest.



Chad Buzzard scores a touchdown in 7-on-7 play.



Rising-junior QB Pierson Allison vs Murphy, NC in 7-on-7.



Chayton Schafer goes up high to pick off a pass in 7-on-7 action.



Union County rising-senior Isaiah Garrett loses his helmet while mixing it up with a Fannin County lineman during the UCHS Offensive Lineman Camp last week at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

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