

# Sports

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## Expectations soar ahead of upcoming UCHS volleyball season

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@ngame.com

Last year's senior class marked the final pieces from the program's 2017 inception, stamping their last go-round with a historic 2020 campaign that included Union County volleyball's first state semifinal appearance and area title in its fourth year.

Second-year head coach Anna Chapman is back at the helm this fall, where the expectations have reached an all-time high after the graduation of only one senior starter from a squad that dropped just one set against area competition during the regular season and postseason.

Aside from the outgoing seniors, Union County sadly bid farewell to a would-be four-year starter in Riley Allison, who joins her father, former football coach Brian Allison, at East Forsyth High School. The Lady Panthers also said goodbye to rising seniors Molly Kay West and Emma Blocker. West and Blocker fulfilled their academic obligations to UCHS and graduated one year early.

But according to Chapman, the program will greatly benefit from the arrival of a skilled transfer from Utah in junior Kaylee Ashcraft.

"She is very talented," Chapman said. "She's going to fill some of those gaps, for sure."

Leading the way among returnees is senior Morgan Fussell, a State Player of the Year contender that tallied a school-record 136 kills in 2020 (Adelia Pyle - 113 in 2019) despite playing seven fewer matches due to COVID-19.

In the role of quarterback (or point guard, depending on your preference) is senior setter Emma Whicker, who shattered a school record last season with 347 assists (Maci Williams - 160 in 2019). Along with Fussell, breakout juniors Saylor Noe and Sofia Swartz are back to provide Whicker with plenty of assist opportunities at the net.

Throughout their sophomore campaigns, Noe and Swartz showed steady improvement, helping turn Union County into a well-oiled machine by the postseason. Speaking of October, Noe saved her best performance for when it mattered most -- notching a team-



Head coach Anna Chapman and assistant Seth Merritt conduct practice at the UCHS gymnasium last Thursday, July 22. The Lady Panthers have increased their win total, state seeding and final ranking in each of the previous four seasons. If the trend continues, Union will play for a state championship on November 6 in Cartersville. A full 2021 schedule is on page 3B. Photo/Todd Forrest

high 12 kills in the Elite Eight victory at Davidson Fine Arts in Augusta. In addition, Noe opened the month by turning in a then-career-high eight kills in Union's first-ever win over rival Rabun County. Then, one week later, she contributed seven kills during the Area title match against Oglethorpe County. When the dust settled, Noe's 86 kills were good enough for second on the team.

Swartz, meanwhile, finished fourth with 68 kills (Allison was third with 84). Like Noe, Swartz came through in crunch time by delivering a career-high seven kills in the Sweet-16 victory over 4th-ranked Armuchee. However, her personal best lasted all of four days as she topped her mark with an eight-kill afternoon at Davidson Fine Arts.

Another up-and-coming youngster is sophomore Sofia McNabb, who filled in nicely as a freshman, most notably during a critical late-season stretch after Allison suffered an injury

on Sept. 21.

According to Chapman, Union County will feature a handful of freshmen that should immediately contribute to the junior varsity team, despite the lack of a feeder program.

"We have a few freshmen that came out, even though it's difficult not having a middle school program because that leaves us only looking for athleticism and skill," she said. "But we have a couple of freshmen that have attended summer camps and worked out with other coaches. They came in with some skill and look really strong. And they bring us some height, which is awesome."

Chapman and her squad have been holding workouts in the gym since July 5 as they prepare for the start of official practice in early August. The season gets underway on Aug. 14 when the JV visits North Oconee. The first home contest is a varsity-only tri-match against Murray County and Lumpkin County on Aug. 17.

Union County hosts Dawson County on Aug. 19 before visiting Chestatee on Aug. 24.

Area competition opens Sept. 9 at Washington-Wilkes with a tri-match including Rabun County.

Chapman admits her team flew under the radar for much of 2020, but acknowledges the gigantic target placed upon their backs after running roughshod over much of Class AA/A last fall.

"We felt like underdogs last year; but this year, we're going to have to defend our title," she said. "I've been telling the girls to take it one game at a time and we've also talked a lot about self-motivation. We have to push ourselves. We're our toughest competition, our biggest enemy and our biggest cheerleader."

While Union won a school-record 19 matches in 2020, they got off to a rocky start after opening the season 10th in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Class AA/A rank-

ings. Fresh off an Elite Eight berth in 2019, their past success played a significant role in the Lady Panthers' preseason top-10 ranking. But they quickly realized that resting on their laurels was not an option after dropping four straight to begin an inconsistent August. Ultimately, victories over Chestatee, Stephens County and East Hall helped right the ship entering September, where Union County went on to win 16 of 18 before falling at the eventual state champion (Pace Academy) in the semifinals.

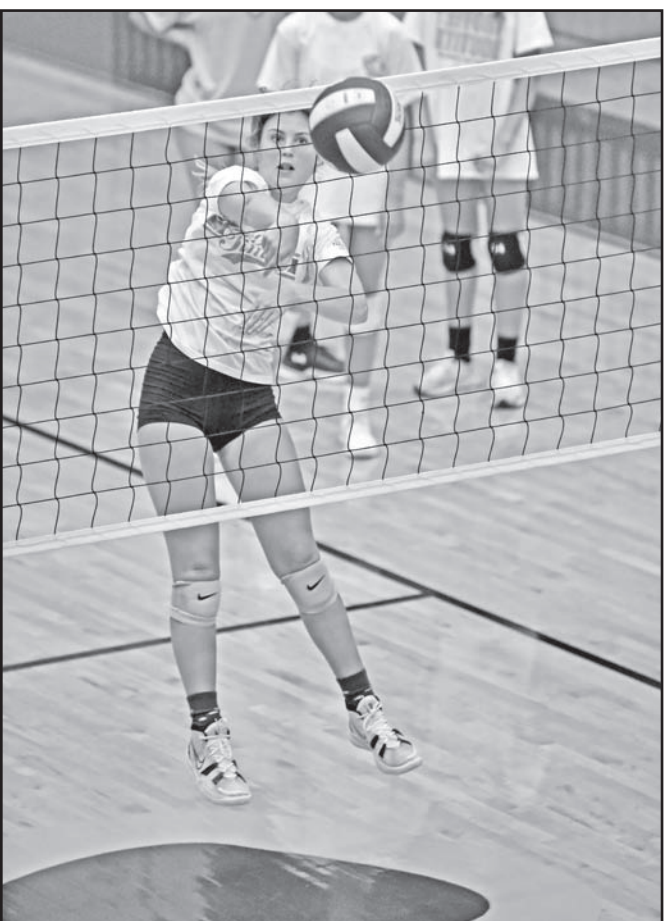
"We really need to figure out our rotations and which ones are going to work," said Chapman, regarding where her attention will be focused during the early non-area matches. "We have a few possibilities [with those rotations] and it's all about what will work best for the team. We're also making a few changes this year that I'm really excited about."

Area contenders this fall include an up-and-coming

Banks County squad that sent Rabun County packing in the first round of the Area tourney. The Leopards finished the regular season fifth but earned a state tourney berth by defeating fourth-seeded Rabun.

As for Rabun, the Lady Cats owned the Area/Region for the better part of the last decade but graduated six seniors from their disappointing 2020 campaign (5-4). But at the end of he day, they should return enough talent and experience to contend for a state playoff spot. Meanwhile, 2020 runner-up Oglethorpe County (7-2) and third-place Lake Oconee Academy (7-2) are reliably solid and seem to always bring their A-game when facing Union.

Putnam County placed sixth in the 2020 regular season with a 3-6 area mark. Commerce, Elbert County and Washington-Wilkes rounded out the bottom three, each sporting a 1-7 record after beating up on one another.



The potential of incoming junior transfer Kaylee Ashcraft has head coach Anna Chapman enthusiastic. Photo/Todd Forrest



The two newest additions to the gym rafters will immortalize Union County's momentous 2020 volleyball season. Union will be among the favorites to win state in 2021 and will face Class AA/A runner-up Gordon Lee on Sept. 14 in a measuring-stick matchup. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Softball: Union wrapping up summer schedule; Midnight Madness on Friday

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

**Carrollton** - Union County faced its toughest test of the summer last week when they traveled to Carroll County for four games against some of Georgia's best softball teams.

"That [trip to Carrollton] was exactly what we needed last week," Union County head coach Stephen Mitchell said. "We handled ourselves really well and got better."

The Lady Panthers also used the time away from home to take part in team-building activities at Lake Tisinger. This week, Union County will play two games at Franklin County, attend another chemistry-boosting team get-together and host a Midnight Madness event to close out the summer.

According to head coach Stephen Mitchell, the Lady Panthers will practice on Monday, then travel to Franklin County on Tuesday for a 4 p.m. doubleheader. Wednesday and Thursday will feature more team-building exercises before an eventful Friday evening that culminates with Union County taking the field at midnight for the first official practice of the 2021 season.

Friday's schedule begins with a hamburger and hot dog cookout around 6 p.m. A slow pitch softball game is slated for 7 p.m., however, Coach Mitchell is unsure of the format. According to the fourth-year skipper, the likely scenario is a father-daughter game, or some type of parents vs. players contest.

The team will remain on the field at dusk for a movie to be viewed with a projector and a big screen. Later, when the clock strikes 12, the Lady Panthers will grab their gloves, bats and balls for a brief practice to officially open the 2021 season. Afterward, the players will camp overnight on the softball field.

As for last week's action, a shorthanded Union County squad dropped three of four in Carrollton, suffering narrow losses to Heard County, Central-Carrollton and Thomasville. The lone win came over Mt. Zion.

"We finished 1-3 but we did really well considering [ace pitcher Sierra Burnette] was gone to a showcase and [freshman pitcher] Ila Bragg was on vacation," Mitchell said. "That put a lot of stress and innings on our remaining two pitchers because there just wasn't anyone else available to throw. But [pitchers] Tori Tracy and Sloane Dyer did really well and grew up a lot. They handled themselves very well."

The level of competition



The Lady Panthers have participated in team-building activities throughout the summer. During last week's trip to Carrollton, the team paid a visit to Lake Tisinger in nearby Bowdon. Union visits Franklin County this week for two games before hosting Midnight Madness, a father-daughter game, a movie and a cookout on Friday night. Photos/submitted

faced last week was unlike anything Union County has dealt with all summer. Heard County is the defending Class AA State Champion and Central-Carrollton finished as the runner-up in Class AAAAA.

Thomasville went 12-10 as a member of Region 1-AA last fall. Mt. Zion won 20 games and reached the Class A Public State Tournament out of Region 6-A.

"Our defense has been really good so far this summer," Mitchell said. "We were missing two or three players that usually contribute, but we had some young players step up like Katie Byers, Jewell Massey and Sloane Dyer. They all did a great job. I am just really impressed with the way we handled ourselves during some of the adversity that we had to face."

Union County's final summer league contests will be Tuesday afternoon at Franklin County. The first game begins at 4 p.m. with the second to follow. Franklin County is one opponent but Mitchell was unsure of his second foe at the time of this writing.

The season gets underway on Thursday, Aug. 5 with a home contest vs. Lumpkin County. The junior varsity

starts at 4 p.m. with the varsity to follow.

Two days later, the Lady Panthers will host Dawson County and Commerce beginning at 11 a.m. Commerce and Dawson will face off at 1 p.m. and Union County will finish off the day at 3 p.m.

The Lady Panthers host

White County on Aug. 10 to cap off four home games to begin the year. The first road contest is Aug. 12 at White County.

Union County will take part in a tournament at Pepperell during the weekend of Aug. 13.

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## MGC celebrates 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympic games with day camp, live stream

| 2021 UCHS Panther Volleyball Schedule |  |   |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| 8-14-2021                             | JV Spiketacular @ North Oconee         | Times TBA   |
| 8-17-2021                             | @ Home - Varsity Only                  | 5:00 Union vs Murray<br>6:00 Murray vs Lumpkin<br>7:00 Union vs Lumpkin |
| 8-19-2021                             | @ HOME                                 | 5:00 JV vs Dawson<br>6:00 Varsity vs Dawson                             |
| 8-24-2021                             | @ Chestatee - JV + Varsity             | 6:00 vs Oconee<br>7:00 vs Chestatee                                     |
| 8-26-2021                             | @ Dawson - JV + Varsity                | 5:00 vs Dawson<br>6:00 vs Hab. Central                                  |
| 8-28-2021                             | Coal Mtn. Classic - Varsity Tournament | Times TBA   |
| 8-30-2021                             | @ HOME                                 | 5:00 JV vs Gilmer<br>6:00 Varsity vs Gilmer                             |
| 9-1-2021                              | @ Banks - JV + Varsity                 | 5:00 vs Banks<br>6:00 vs Stephens                                       |
| 9-2-2021                              | @ HOME                                 | 5:00 JV vs Fannin<br>6:00 Varsity vs Fannin                             |
| 9-9-2021                              | @ Washington-Wilkes - Varsity          | 5:00 vs WW<br>6:00 vs Rabun   |
| 9-14-2021                             | @ Fannin - JV + Varsity                | 6:00 vs Gordon Lee<br>7:00 vs Fannin                                    |
| 9-16-2021                             | @ Oglethorpe - JV + Varsity            | 4:00 JV vs Oglethorpe<br>5:00 V vs Oglethorpe<br>6:00 V vs Commerce     |
| 9-23-2021                             | @ Lake Oconee Academy - Varsity        | 5:00 vs LOA<br>6:00 vs Elbert   |
| 9-28-2021                             | @ HOME - Varsity                       | 5:00 vs Putnam<br>7:00 vs Banks   |
| 9-29-2021                             | @ Gilmer - JV + Varsity                | 6:00 vs Calhoun<br>7:00 vs Gilmer                                       |



Top: Youth gymnasts and coaches from Blairsville's Mountain Gymnastics Center watch the opening ceremonies of the 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics at the MGC gym on the morning of Friday, July 23. Over the next few weeks, MGC will continue celebrating the summer games with camps and other activities. During the 1996 Atlanta games, MGC head coach and owner Shelley Thomas carried the Olympic Torch into Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium as it passed through Blairsville on its way to Atlanta. Bottom: A group shot taken Friday morning as MGC kicked off its festivities. Photos courtesy of Shelley Thomas and MGC