

Sports

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Softball: Late rally propels Union to first Elite Eight in six years Lady Panthers to meet third-ranked Dade County in Thursday's State quarterfinals

By Todd Forrest
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Union County softball is going back to Columbus for the first time since 2015 thanks to a thrilling come-from-behind victory over Toombs County in game two of last week's best-of-three second-round series at UCHS.

Having already taken care of business 9-4 in game one, the Lady Panthers were on the verge of dropping game two and setting up a do-or-die game three the following day. Trailing 6-2 through four innings and 7-3 after five, Union County clawed to within a run with three in the sixth, setting the stage for a seven-run final frame that propelled the Lady Panthers to a 13-7 victory.

"That never-say-die attitude started in the first round at Pace Academy," Union County fourth-year head coach Stephen Mitchell said. "We came from behind [and won] game one. Then we were down 11-0 in game two and kept on fighting. But our resilience really paid off against Toombs County, where we came through with multiple rallies in both games."

Gracie Gladding provided the big blow with two aboard and her team trailing 7-6 with one out in the top of the seventh. Behind 1-2 in the count, the sophomore catcher lifted a letter-high fastball over the center-field fence for Union's first lead of the game.

"I was just trying to hit the ball hard and [not] really worry about where it goes," said Gladding, who took a massive cut at the first pitch of the at-bat, just missing another elevated theater with a foul-tip to the backstop. "I was just up there wanting to make something happen and trying to score some runs for my team."

"I was actually kind of worried [after making contact on the homer] because the ball was in the air for so long, but it just kept carrying and when I saw it go out I thought, 'wow, I can't believe it.' It was just a crazy feeling."

According to Mitchell, Toombs County pitching lived on the outside-corner all night, prompting an adjustment by the Union lineup.

"They worked us away pretty much the entire game and [assistant coach Robby] Roxbury told [Gladding] to move a little closer to the plate," he said. "She got a pitch she could handle and she got all of it."

Despite Gladding's big fly that spotted the Lady Panthers a 9-7 advantage, the offense wasn't finished.

With two down and nobody on, Ansley Collins sparked another four runs when she reached on an error, stole second, then came around on Emma Roxbury's RBI single. Lexi Sisum pushed the margin to 11-7 when she plated Roxbury with a double, which was followed by another double off the bat of Sierra Burnette for a 12-7 advantage.

Chloe Potts capped off the scoring by slapping an RBI single to right field, spotting Union County a 13-7 lead heading to the bottom of the seventh.

(As the host team, the Lady Panthers elected to bat last in game one, which resulted in Union hitting first in game



Union County softball coaches Kaitlyn Seabolt and Stephen Mitchell embrace as the Lady Panthers celebrate the program's first Elite Eight berth in four seasons under Mitchell. Photo/Todd Forrest

two.)

Sophomore starter Sierra Burnette re-entered in the seventh and pitched around a one-out double to preserve the 13-7 victory.

After firing a complete-game victory in game one, Burnette got the nod in game two but ran into some early trouble after a three-run homer spotted the Bulldogs a 5-2 lead after an inning.

"[Burnette is] just a sophomore, so she's still learning how to pitch and not just throw," Mitchell said about his ace. "She's had some health issues this season but she always wants the ball, and that's the kind of pitcher you want on your team in the playoffs. Unfortunately, things didn't go her way in the early innings, but she came through when we needed her late and I'm extremely proud of her."

Still trailing 6-2 after three, Mitchell handed the ball to senior Tori Tracy, who went on to record the win after limiting Toombs to just one run over three frames.

"We're not where we're at today without Tori Tracy," Mitchell said. "We put her out there and she kept getting stop after stop. She gave up one run but she kept us close, so we don't win that game without Tori and the defensive effort behind her."

Tracy's lone run came in the fifth after some serious damage control from the right-hander kept Union within striking distance. Behind 6-3 after a base hit by Gladding resulted in a two-out RBI single from Burnette that cut into the deficit in the top half of the frame, Tracy surrendered a leadoff double, followed by an RBI single. After a walk placed two aboard with nobody out, Tracy escaped without further damage courtesy of a pop-fly to center, a force-out at third and a grounder to short.

"I really trust my defense and I think we have one of the best defenses in the State of Georgia, so I just put a lot of faith in them," Tracy said. "My job is to just get ground balls and I trust Coach Mitchell whenever he puts me in the game so I know that I need to do my best for my team. But it

makes my job a whole lot easier knowing that my defense is really good and they will make the tough plays for me. And [catcher Gracie Gladding], she does a great job. She saved some runs with some really big stops and I feel so comfortable with her behind the plate."

Union answered with three in the sixth, pulling within a run at 7-6 when Kaelyn Jones opened the frame with a double off the left-field fence and Gladding worked a one-out walk.

Senior Caley Davis scored pinch-runner Georgia Patton with a sacrifice fly, then Collins doubled home courtesy-runner Jewell Massey and Roxbury plated Collins with a blop single over the second baseman.

Potts reached on an error to begin the seventh, followed by a one-out walk by Banton that set the stage for Gladding's heroics.

Collins scored the first run of the game when she walked and swiped two bags before a two-out single from Burnette spotted Union a 1-0 lead.

The Lady Panthers extended the margin to 2-0 when Potts singled home courtesy runner Katie Byers.

The lead was short-lived as Toombs put up five in the bottom half of the first, starting with two singles and a hit batter, followed by a two-run double and a three-run homer.

The Bulldogs opened up a 6-2 advantage when a one-out error was compounded by a two-out throwing error that brought home another run.

"We had plenty of opportunities to just give up and get ready for [game three on] Wednesday, but the whole team just stayed in it and kept battling," Mitchell said.

Burnette allowed six hits and five earned over four total innings. Tracy gave up two hits, a run and a base on balls in three innings.

Gladding finished 2 for 3 with 3 RBIs, a homer and a walk. Roxbury scored and drove in one during a 3-for-5 performance. Burnette and Potts each finished 2 for 5 with two RBIs.

Jones doubled during a 2-for-5 game and Sisum finished 2 for 4 with a walk. Katie Byers and Massey scored twice;

Patton and Banton scored once. Collins went 1 for 4 with 3 runs, 3 steals and an RBI.

Collins provided the power in game one with a solo shot to cap a four-run second frame that provided Union an early 7-3 cushion.

After falling into a 3-0 hole in the first inning of game one, Union answered with three in the bottom half, four in the second and two in the third as they cruised to a 9-4 victory.

Collins reached on an error in the first, then Roxbury moved two into scoring position with a double. Sisum cleared the bases with a two-run double and came around to score via a wild pitch.

Burnette settled down to work a 1-2-3 second and the Lady Panthers provided her with all the run support she would need in the bottom half of the frame.

Banton singled to right, Gladding reached on an infield single and a Davis bunt resulted in a run-scoring error. Two runs came around to score on wild pitches, clearing the bases for Collins, who belted a solo homer to left - her second home run of the postseason - for a 7-3 advantage.

"Ansley is one of the strongest kids in the school and she's finally starting to take advantage of her power at the plate," Mitchell said. "She's had a really good season, not necessarily with power, but she's provided a lot of extra base hits for us."

"The entire team has been that way. Even if one of them goes into a slump, somebody else will get hot and pick them up. Early in the season, we might have given up on ourselves, but we've learned that good or bad, we need to flush the previous at-bat and get back to work the next time up."

Jones singled to start the third and Gladding made it 8-3 with an RBI double. Massey replaced Gladding on the basepaths and eventually scored on a wild pitch for a 9-3 margin.

Toombs finally chipped away in the fifth when an error and an RBI double trimmed the deficit to 9-4, but Burnette got out of trouble with a grounder and a strikeout.

The sophomore right-

hander worked around a hit-batter to open the sixth before working a perfect seventh to secure the victory.

Burnette equaled a career-high with eight strikeouts while allowing six hits and three earned runs over seven innings.

Collins went 2 for 3 with 2 runs and an RBI. Sisum doubled, drove in two and scored during a 2-for-4 afternoon.

Gladding doubled and knocked in one during a 2-for-3 game. Roxbury scored a run while going 1 for 3 with a double; Banton went 1 for 2 with a run and Davis was 1 for 3 with a run.

Jones finished 1 for 4, Massey scored twice and Patton added another run.

After hosting the second round for the first time in 11 years (and winning both times), Union will face No. 3 Dade County at 11 a.m. Thursday in Columbus. The Wolverines enter with a 26-2 record and haven't lost in more than two months (Aug. 19). Based on common opponents, however, the two teams are similar with Dade owning wins over Fannin County by scores of 9-1 and 12-0. The Lady Panthers de-

feated Fannin 9-1 and 11-3.

The only question mark comes courtesy of Pepperell, who defeated Union 8-2 during an early-season tournament before dropping a pair of one-run region contests to Dade (4-3 and 8-7).

"Dade County is the region champion and went undefeated in a very good region, so that says a lot about what kind of team they are," Mitchell said. "They have a left-handed pitcher that throws in the mid-to-upper 50s with a good changeup and rise ball."

A Union win would result in a 7 p.m. meeting vs. No. 5 Bremen or No. 1 Vidalia. A loss to Dade would send the Lady Panthers into a Friday matchup vs. the Bremen-Vidalia loser at 10 a.m.

Union County's last trip to the Elite Eight came in 2015 when they suffered two straight losses after standout pitcher/slugging Laken Chambers suffered an early injury during a game-one loss to eventual champ Gordon Lee. The Lady Panthers' last victory in Columbus came 11 years ago when they reached the 2010 Class AA finals before falling to a powerhouse Buford program.

Regardless of how the final week shakes out, the 2021 season is one that Mitchell won't soon forget.

"Absolutely, it's extra special," Mitchell answered when asked about reaching Columbus with the group of seniors that arrived alongside him at UCHS four years ago. "I still remember coming here and sitting in the gym and looking at [that group of] freshmen - they didn't know me and I didn't know them. But we've built a relationship and I'm certainly proud of what they've accomplished and I'm ready to accomplish some more."

Mitchell also thanked the home crowd for helping put Union over the top vs. Toombs County.

"Part of the reason we were successful Tuesday was because of the home crowd and the support we received from the community," he said. "Things were amped up [vs. Toombs] and I'm extremely proud of our fans for hanging in there. It was an electric atmosphere and it's something I won't forget for a very long time."



Sierra Burnette shouts for joy after striking out the final batter in Union County's game two victory. Photo/Todd Forrest



Tori Tracy kept Union in the hunt, limiting Toombs to one run over three innings. She went on to pick up the game two win. Photo/Todd Forrest



Ansley Collins blasts her second homer of the postseason, spotting Union a 7-3 lead over Toombs in game one. Photo/Todd Forrest



Gracie Gladding is all smiles as she rounds third and prepares to be mobbed by teammates after her go-ahead three-run homer. Photo/Todd Forrest

Volleyball: Union County returns to Elite Eight for third straight year

Coach Chapman: 'I hope we pack the gym' Wednesday vs. Dade County

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Union County volleyball qualified for its third consecutive Elite Eight following a pair of 3-0 home victories over Pepperell and Johnson-Augusta in the first two rounds of the Class AA/A State Tournament.

Now the Panthers welcome Dade County on Wednesday as UCHS plays host to its first Elite Eight volleyball match.

The Panthers (17-7) secured their spot in Wednesday's State quarterfinals with a one-sided second-round win vs. Johnson-Augusta on Saturday afternoon in Blairsville. And despite a mid-point hiccup in set one, Union County cruised to victory against an overmatched Johnson squad, taking the final two sets by a combined tally of 50-20.

The Panthers never trailed during the opening set, jumping out to an early 4-1 lead before five aces from junior Kaylee Ashcraft opened up a 13-3 margin. Despite the early cushion, Union County went on to commit 10 errors, allowing Johnson to pull within a point at 16-15 and prompt a Panthers' timeout.

"We made a lot of errors, and I hate to make excuses, but we never play on Saturday and we never play at lunch time," Union head coach Anna Chapman said. "So that timeout was just a conversation about cleaning up the errors, because we were beating ourselves in that first set."

Three Johnson errors, along with kills by senior Morgan Fussell and sophomore Addison Cross, helped Union County open up a little breathing room at 21-15. After consecutive Union shots sailed out of bounds, two more errors by the visitors put the Panthers in control at 23-17.

Union County finally put the set away at 25-20 with an



Junior Kaylee Ashcraft led Union County in aces during each of the first two rounds. Photo/Todd Forrest

Ashcraft ace followed by a Fussell kill.

After falling behind early, the second set was all Union as five aces from Ashcraft helped the home team build an 8-3 advantage. A pair of aces by junior Saylor Noe and a kill by Ashcraft opened up a 17-5 lead to help the Panthers pull away 25-7.

"I think we just started playing more strategic," Chapman said when asked what changed after the first set. "But really, we just struggled all day. And it's hard when you get to this point of the year because it comes down to the luck of the draw to determine who you play. Last year, we had a tough matchup [Armuchee] in the Sweet 16 and we played up to the competition. This year might

have been a case of us playing down."

Union continued rolling in set three, jumping out to an 8-1 lead before closing out the match with a 25-13 win. However, the Panthers were forced to burn a timeout when Johnson erased a 12-3 deficit to pull within 14-10. A kill from junior Mattie Brookshire pushed the margin to 15-10, sparking a 4-1 spurt that built a 19-11 Union lead.

Out front 20-13, the Panthers closed the set on five unanswered points, with Fussell picking up two aces down the stretch.

In the opening round vs. Pepperell, Union County survived the first set 25-21 before taking the final two sets 25-18



Junior Sofia Swartz skies for a kill during Union County's second-round win over Johnson-Augusta. Photo/Todd Forrest

and 25-7.

The Panthers struggled early on against the Dragons, falling behind 8-5 and 11-9. Trailing 14-13, Union County raced ahead 16-14 on three straight kills by Ashcraft. Leading 18-15, Noe and Cross pushed the margin to 20-16 before another kill from Noe opened up a 22-16 advantage.

Pepperell refused to go away as the visitors stormed back to within 22-20, but a would-be kill narrowly sailed out of bounds resulting in 23-20 Union lead. Clinging to a 23-21 margin, the Panthers benefited from consecutive Dragon errors to survive 25-21.

Tied at 4-4 in set two, Noe and Fussell put Union in front 6-4, then kills by Cross and Sofia

Swartz, plus an ace by Sofia McNabb built a 10-7 lead. A block by Swartz, another McNabb ace and a Pepperell error spotted the Panthers a 13-7 advantage.

Three kills by Ashcraft opened up an 18-9 margin before the Dragons closed the gap to 19-15. Ashcraft and Noe answered as Union extended its lead to 22-16, and later, an Ashcraft kill and a Swartz block closed out the second set at 25-18.

Union County stormed ahead 7-2 in the third set and never looked back, en route to a dominating 25-7 victory. With Pepperell hanging around at 13-4, Ashcraft delivered three consecutive kills for a 16-4 advantage. Fussell opened up an 18-5 score with a kill before pushing the

margin to 20-7 with a block at the net.

Fussell provided two more kills as Union pulled away 25-7.

Ashcraft finished the match with 12 kills in 21 attempts for a 57.1 percentage.

Fussell added 10 kills while Noe and Swartz chipped in three each.

Cross had two kills to go with 11 digs. McNabb led the way with 12 digs, Noe had 11 digs and junior Haleigh Helcher added eight.

Ashcraft led the way with four aces; Noe and Fussell added three each. McNabb recorded a match-high 22 assists, Presley Berry pitched in four helpers and Cross had two.

Union County will host Dade County (20-17) at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday. Common opponents between the two include Fannin County, Gilmer and Gordon Lee.

Union split two matches with Gilmer, while Dade fell in its only meeting vs. the Bobcats. Meanwhile, both teams dominated in two matches with Fannin.

Dade defeated Fannin 25-19 and 25-15 in a neutral site region match. Union thumped the Rebels 25-9, 25-13 and 25-11 in Blairsville.

Both squads suffered straight-set defeats to Gordon Lee with Dade falling 2-0 in the regular season and 3-0 (25-13, 25-8, 25-17) in the Area finals. Gordon Lee defeated Union 25-13 and 25-17 in Chickamauga last month.

"We seem to be pretty evenly matched [with Dade]," Chapman said. "But based on [the second round], we're going to have to improve our errors."

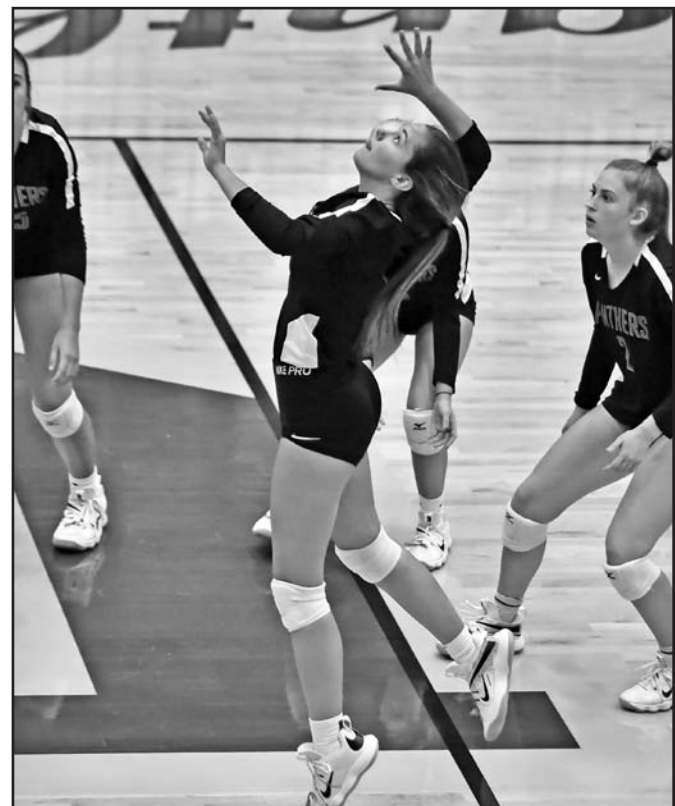
"We're looking forward to Wednesday. I think we'll have more support playing after school. But this should be a really tight match and I hope we pack the gym."



Senior Morgan Fussell denies a Johnson-Augusta shot attempt at the net during Saturday's Sweet 16 victory. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Addison Cross tallied 11 digs in Union County's win over Pepperell on Wednesday, Oct. 20. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Saylor Noe recorded 11 digs, three aces and three kills during the first-round victory vs. Pepperell.

XC: Union impresses in return from Fall Break; Region 8-AA Championships Thursday at Unicoi

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Homer - Union County cross country enters Thursday's Region 8-AA meet off a pair of top-two finishes at Banks County last week.

Entering on just one practice after Fall Break, the Union ladies finished first overall, taking six spots inside the top-eight. Meanwhile, the Union men came in second overall behind senior Hunter Hartzog's third-place performance (18:30) and Benton Gregory's fourth-place finish (18:48).

Union County will open region action Thursday at Helen's Unicoi State Park with the guys getting underway at 1 p.m.

The girls race will begin at 1:45 p.m.

With only four girls' teams in Region 8-AA, the Union County ladies are guar-



Hana Gregory and the Union County ladies will compete for a Region 8-AA championship on Thursday in Helen. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

anteed a spot in next month's Class AA State Championships in Carrollton. Meanwhile, the Union men simply need to avoid finishing last to

clinch a spot at State.

The Class AA State meets are scheduled for Friday, Nov. 5 at 9 and 9:45 a.m.

UCHS squad wins soccer fundraiser



The Union County High School soccer team won the October fundraiser tournament at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium last weekend.

Youth football finale: Oct. 30



Union County youth football will host White County on Saturday morning at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium in the final weekend of the 2021 Mountain Athletic Conference regular season. The gridiron action gets underway at 9 a.m. Photo/Todd Forrest