

Wrestling: Cristian Martinez recognized on Senior/Alumni Night

By Todd Forrest
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Union County Wrestling hosted Senior and Alumni Night during its annual Friday Night Fights event on Dec. 13.

Cristian Martinez, the lone senior on this year's squad, was recognized on Friday but right now his main focus is on qualifying for back-to-back State Tournaments later this winter. As for Friday's results, Martinez and the Panthers turned in a second place performance with victories over Towns County, White County and Murphy, NC.

Union County's one loss came at the hands of Hayesville, NC by a score of 46-36. Despite the team loss, Martinez defeated this opponent, Lazarus Bailey, in the 182-pound weight division to award the Panthers 6 points.

In other wins vs the Yellow Jackets, Damon Wallace scored a win over Elijah Smith at 132 pounds; Trevor Guild defeated William Wimpey at 145; Brady Guild was victorious at 152 over Tyler Hilton and John Cone scored a 160-pound win over Elijah Deese. Overall four of Hayesville's eight wins came via forfeit.

Union County will return to the mat on Wednesday, Dec. 18 when they visit Gilmer for the 515 Tournament. On Dec. 27-28, the Panthers will travel to Dawson County for the Amicalola Classic.

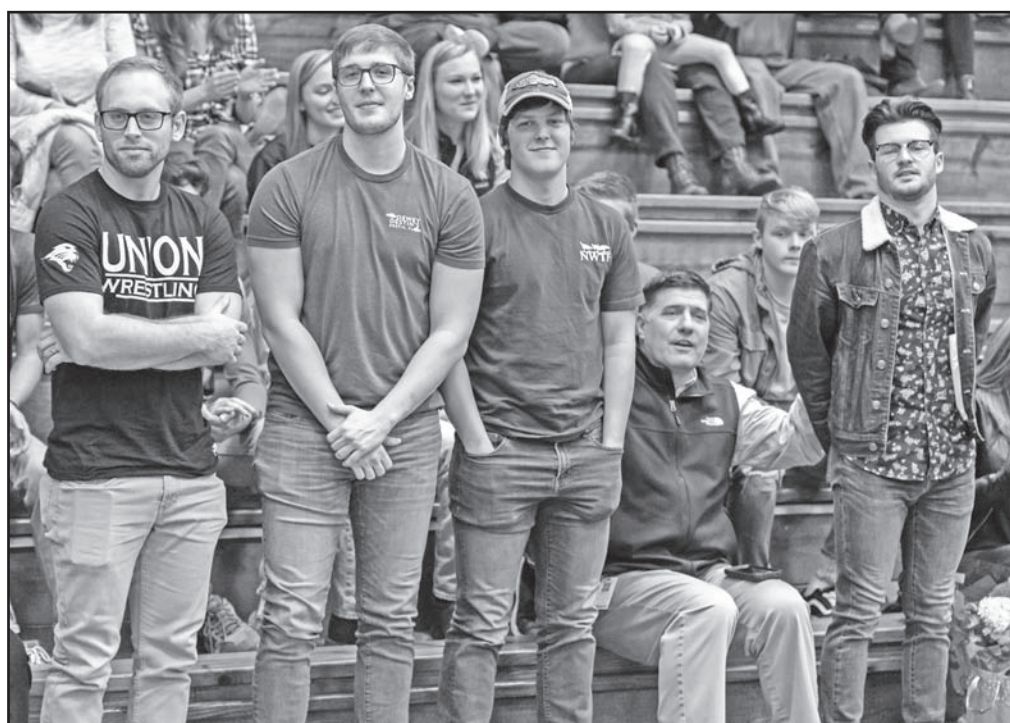
After participating in the Cherokee Tournament in Cherokee, NC on Jan. 4 and hosting Fannin County on Jan. 7, Union County will take part in the Team Area Tournament on Jan. 10-11. The location for that tourney has yet to be determined.



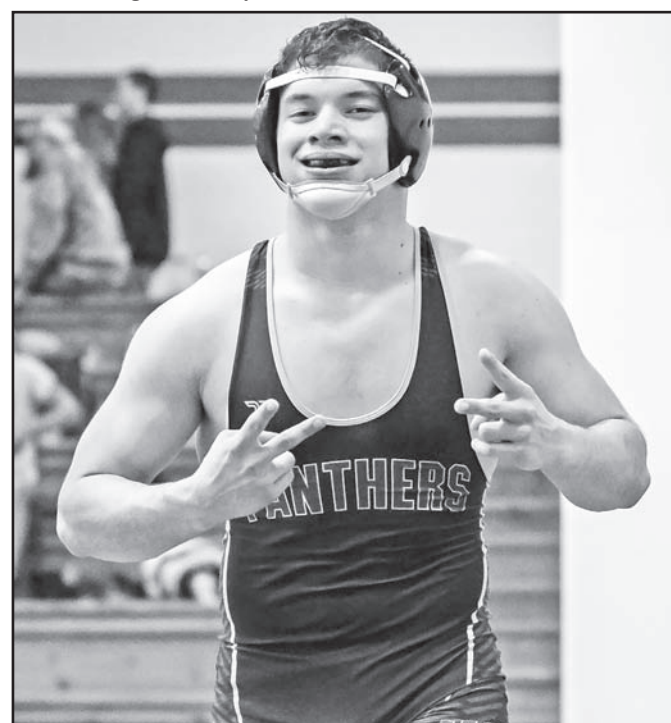
L-R: Friend Andrew Smith, Cristian Martinez and mother Tiffany Martinez. Photo/Todd Forrest



Christian Martinez and his mother Tiffany Martinez embrace during the Senior Night ceremony. Photo/Todd Forrest



Left: Union County Wrestling's alumni were applauded as they stood to be recognized. Right: Martinez is all smiles after scoring a pinfall victory vs Murphy, NC. Photos/Todd Forrest



Football: Panthers well represented on 8-AA All-Region team

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Following its historic 2019 campaign, Union County took home three of the top five honors when the 8-AA All-Region football teams were announced last week.

Head coach Brian Allison was named Region 8-AA Coach of the Year after guiding the Panthers to their first-ever playoff victory and a program-best 10 wins. Under Allison, Union County football finishes the decade with 69 wins — 20 more victories than 1970-1979 — closing out the most successful decade in program history.

(UCHS wins by decade: 2010s — 69, 2000s — 39, 1990s — 31, 1980s — 48, 1970s — 49, 1960s — 45, Union County began playing football in 1957)

The Offensive Player of the Year award went to quarterback Pierson Allison following a senior season that saw the left-hander put up 267 yards per game through the air and 28 touchdowns. He also recorded 395 yards and six touchdowns on the ground — both good enough for second-best on the team.

In September, Pierson Allison led the Union County offense to consecutive 700-yard performances: 721 vs Monticello (a school record) and 720 a week later at Putnam County. In the win over Putnam, Union County set a new school mark with 74 points as Pierson Allison broke a pair of individual school records with eight total touchdowns and six passing touchdowns. Additionally, he would throw for a program-best 490 yards in the 53-21 win over Monticello.

On the other side of the ball, John Mancuso picked up Defensive Player of the Year honors after recording team-highs with 122 tackles and seven tackles for loss.



All-Region selections Sawyer Drake (21), JJ Engle (56), John Mancuso (9), Noah Underwood (16) and Kaston Hemphill (3) lead the Panthers onto the field last month. Photo/Todd Forrest

Mancuso's selection comes thanks in large part to his ability to show out in key games. In Union's three contests vs the other 8-AA playoff teams, the senior safety averaged 14 tackles a night with a career-high 16 coming in the win at Putnam County and 14 vs Rabun County.

Highlighting the 8-AA All-Region First Team was junior Jonah Daniel, who turned in one of the best seasons by a running back in school history. In his first year as RB1, Daniel gashed opposing defenses to the tune of 8.8 yards per carry, 131 yards a game and 16 touchdowns.

Daniel eclipsed 100 yards in nine of 12 games this fall, including a career-best 227-yard performance at Putnam. Like Mancuso, he saved

his best for when it mattered most, recording 121 yards vs Rabun County, 95 vs South Atlanta and 100 at Metter. In the playoff games, Daniel would score the game-winner vs South Atlanta, then account for his team's only touchdown in a 14-7 second-round loss at Metter.

The wide receiver duo of Sawyer Drake and Kyle Morlock each received a first-team nod as Drake caught 78 passes for 1,240 yards and 10 scores. Morlock, despite missing almost half of the regular season with an ankle injury, still managed to put up 591 yards and six scores on 28 catches.

Defensively, seniors Sloan Sutton, Nathaniel Ledford and junior Kaston Hemphill each earned first-team honors after helping lead a de-

fensive renaissance at UCHS. The Panthers held nine of their 12 opponents to 21 points or fewer, with eight of them scoring 14 or fewer — including both playoff opponents.

The last Union County defense to hold more opponents (10) to under 14 points was the 1983 unit that featured Brian Allison as an All-State defensive lineman.

Speaking of intimidating defenders, after leading the Panthers in tackles a year ago, Sutton was second on the team with 111 tackles in 2019, giving him back-to-back 100-tackle seasons from the inside linebacker position. At safety, Hemphill was third on the team at 90 tackles and second with six tackles for loss, while Ledford, a three-year starter, led the Union defensive front

with 62 stops.

Rounding the first-team selections was junior guard Aaron Helton, who helped anchor an injury-riddled offensive line with his consistency and versatility.

Union County also received three second-team selections with senior center Drake Groves the lone offensive nominee. Like Helton, Groves' leadership and experience helped stabilize a front-five that suffered two season-ending injuries at the tackle position.

At linebacker, junior Noah Underwood's four sacks led the Union County defense while his 88 tackles were good enough for fourth and his three TFL was third best. The highlight of Underwood's season, however, didn't come during

region play. Tied at 7-7 in the opening round of the playoffs, Underwood's blocked punt resulted in a safety, swinging momentum in the Panthers' favor and helping them record the program's first postseason victory.

The final second-team selection was placekicker Mason McCombs, who connected on 42-of-45 extra points and 4-of-5 field goals, including a critical 48-yarder vs South Atlanta as time expired in the first half.

Six Panthers picked up honorable mention recognition: senior DL J.J. Engle, senior OL Lance Patton, senior WR Cayden Rich, senior NT Joseph Rockenbaugh, senior CB Zion Ross and junior LB Clayton Lester.