

# Sports

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## Lady Panthers' playoff run ends in Elite 8 at the hands of Lovett

### Union County ladies arguably the No. 1 public school in Class AA

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Despite losing the services of its leading scorer Maddy Morlock in the Region Championship-clinching game, Union County (10-2) made an historic playoff run - reaching the Elite 8 for the first time in the program's history before falling 5-0 to Lovett, the No. 3 team in the State.

After thrashing Darlington, the Lady Panthers poured it on during a 6-0 rout of Thomasville, who made the 350-mile trek to Blairsville where the majority of the Lady Bulldogs were looking at mountains for the very first time.

But the guests from South Georgia would be in for a rude awakening, thanks in large part to Union's underclassmen.

Just 70 seconds into the contest, sophomore Joanna Irvin put the home team on the board with a goal off an assist from fellow sophomore Braedyn Robbins.

Two minutes and 21 seconds later, freshman Brenna Innis made it a 2-0 game with the assist going to Irvin.

Senior Camryn Carter added an unassisted goal in the 20th minute, that turned out to be the only senior goal of the evening.

Following the intermission, junior Rachel Vester stretched the Lady Panthers' lead to 4-0 thanks to assists from freshmen Innis and Layne Baenninger.

The next score came in the game's 66th minute when Carter fed Robbins for a goal. Union's sixth and final goal came with under 9 minutes to play, and would also belong to Robbins, with Baenninger receiving credit for the assist.

The win improved the Lady Panthers to 10-1 and punched their ticket to the Elite 8 of the Class AA State Tournament - marking the program's first trip beyond the final 16.

Unfortunately for Union County, standing between them and a berth in the Final Four was the 3rd ranked Lovett Lady Lions, the No. 2 seed from a Region that consists of the top four teams in Georgia - the private school powerhouses of GAC, Wesleyan, Lovett, and Holy Innocents.

In Friday night's meeting between the Lady Panthers and the Lady Lions, the Union County defense stood firm with the exception of a Lovett goal that came 8



Left: Sophomore Braedyn Robbins (16) celebrates with freshman Brenna Innis following a Robbins goal. Middle: Sophomore Joanna Irvin (13) with a header as junior Alyssa Arnold (7) looks on. Right: Keeper Joanna Van Pelt wrapped up her senior season with 10 shutouts in 12 games. Photos/Todd Forrest



Left: Senior Camryn Carter looking for a shot. Center: Junior Rachel Vester on the attack. Right: Seniors Marissa Spaulding, Emma Smith, and junior Ansley Garrison played an integral role in Union's suffocating defense. Photos/Todd Forrest



minutes in.

Lady Panthers' keeper Joanna Van Pelt played her heart out. The Union County senior kept the Lady Lions from pulling away in the early going with several difficult stops, including one off the foot of an outstretched left leg when it appeared Lovett was on the verge of taking control for good.

"Joanna is a gamer," Coach Hunter said. "She's one of those players that, the bigger the game, the more she's looking to step up and get after it."

The Lady Lions would eventually take a two-goal lead when Van Pelt was left alone on

an island and surrendered a one-on-one goal with 7:47 left before the half.

Twelve minutes into the second, Lovett extended its lead to 3-0. They added another goal in the game's 76th minute and tacked on their fifth goal in the 80th and final minute of the contest.

The Lady Lions advanced to the Final Four along with the other three private schools from Region 6-AA.

The No. 2 seed Lovett will face No. 3 Wesleyan, who is ranked No. 2 in the State by Eurosport.com

GAC, the No. 1 seed and the No. 1 ranked team in Georgia

will host 6-AA's No. 4 seed and 5th ranked Holy Innocents.

Only three public schools reached the Class AA Elite 8: Model, the Region champ from 7-AA, Social Circle, the Region Runner Up in 8-AA, and Union County, the 8-AA champ.

A compelling argument can be made as to why Union County is the top public school in Class AA.

The Lady Panthers easily knocked off Social Circle 7-0 at their place, which leaves Union and Model as the top two public schools in AA.

As for Model, the Blue Devils were mercy-ruled 11-1

by Wesleyan the No. 3 seed from 6-AA, while Union kept Lovett, the No. 2 seed from 6-AA, within three goals until the final 4:49 when the Lady Lions tacked on two late goals.

"Without a doubt we are the best public school (in Class AA)," Coach Hunter said. "Model split with Darlington and we smashed Darlington."

As for next season, Coach Hunter must replace seven seniors that have been vital to the Union County soccer program.

"We'll be very young next year because we will have lost players that we've built the team around for the last four years,"

Coach Hunter said. "We'll return four seniors and won't have a very big junior class either, numbers-wise. But to be honest I still think we're going to compete and have a chance to win the Region again next year."

One of the reasons that Hunter feels they will be successful, is the camaraderie and the family atmosphere surrounding both Union County soccer teams.

"Our two teams play hard together, look out for each other, and are a unit," he said. "That's why we had the success this year. We had talent but we also had everyone pulling in the same direction."

## Panthers take Game One in extra innings but unable to close out Fitzgerald

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**Fitzgerald** - The Panthers were one game away from a trip to the Elite 8 after taking Game One from 8th ranked Fitzgerald in the second round of the Class AA State Baseball Tournament.

After fighting off a tenacious Model squad in the first round, the Panthers found themselves on the road to South Georgia where they would meet the Purple Hurricanes of Fitzgerald - the Region 1-AA Champions.

Union stole game one 7-6 in eight innings but dropped the second game 8-3 and the third game 5-3.

In the first meeting it was obvious that neither squad brought its A-game but the Panthers were able to prevail without a single extra base hit, while committing 5 errors in the field.

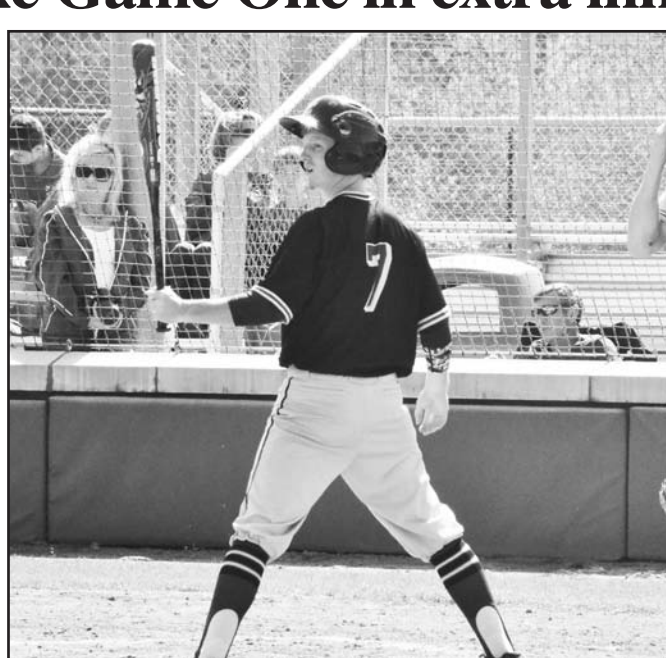
On the mound for Union was Joseph Mancuso, but the junior ace was anything but sharp - issuing 7 walks and hitting three batters.

Struggling in all three phases of the game is usually a recipe for disaster but Panthers Head Coach Brandon Bradburn is proud of the way his team fought to the very end and came through in the clutch during the late innings.

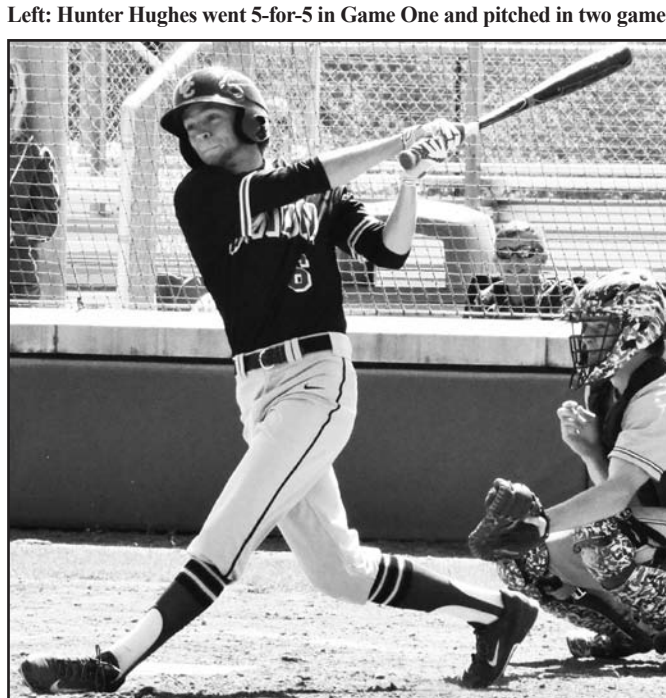
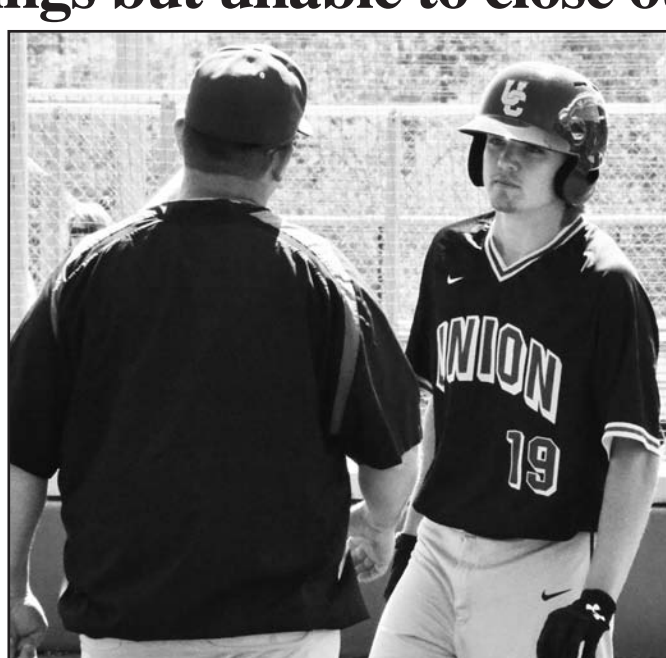
"In that first game, neither team really played great," he said. "Joe (Mancuso) kept us going on the mound and just kept working hard out there for us."

"Offensively the whole series was very difficult due to the quality of their pitchers. I feel the reason we came out with a win was the defensive effort late in the game. In the bottom of the eighth, they hit the ball very well but we finally came through with some spectacular defense at the right time."

Leading 5-4 entering the top of the seventh, the Panthers added an insurance run when junior Lance Rich reached on



Left: Hunter Hughes went 5-for-5 in Game One and pitched in two games. Right: Coach Bradburn and junior Andrew Brown. Photos/Todd Forrest



Left: Senior Tyler Odom was 2-for-3 in Game Three at Fitzgerald. Right: Senior Chase Barnett drove in a run in Game Three. Photos/Todd Forrest



an error and junior Andrew Brown singled, resulting in a throwing error that allowed Rich to score.

The home team tied things back up with a double and two singles before a pop out and a grounder to short kept Fitzgerald

from scoring the game-winner.

The eighth inning began with a Josh Daniel groundout but senior Hunter Hughes recorded his fifth hit of the game. Mancuso flew out to right but senior Jake Sisum came through with an RBI single - scoring

Hughes.

Hughes relieved Mancuso in the bottom of the eighth and sat down the Purple Hurricanes 1-2-3, via line out to first and a pair of ground outs to Rich at third base.

The second game was

all Fitzgerald as they silenced the Panthers' bats and took an 8-3 victory. Union was held to three hits with two coming in the first inning when they took a 2-1 lead.

"You have to tip your cap to (Fitzgerald's) pitcher, he

was nasty and we couldn't get anything going," Coach Bradburn said.

Fitzgerald came to the plate first and took a 1-0 lead on Hughes, who stayed on the mound for the second contest.

But the Panthers would answer right back with two runs in the bottom half of the first, beginning with a double from Daniel and a bunt single from Hughes. Daniel would steal home and Hughes scored on an error.

Two runs in the third and two more in the fourth provided the Purple Hurricanes some breathing room with a 5-2 advantage.

Neither team was able to mount any offense until the top of the seventh when Fitzgerald struck for three more runs.

Trailing 8-2, Union got a run back in its final at bat when Mancuso singled, Jackson Burks reached on a dropped third strike, Rich drew a walk, and Tyler Odom scored Mancuso on a ground out.

Daniel got the call in game three and despite walking five and hitting two batters, kept the Panthers in the game.

"The dixie cup sized strike zone our pitchers had to work with was frustrating, but we still found ways to keep us in the games," Coach Bradburn said.

The Fitzgerald pitching staff limited Union to just one extra base hit in Game Three - making the Panthers earn their runs, base-by-base.

The Purple Hurricanes built a 4-1 lead in Game Three but the Panthers got two runs in the fifth to get within a run. However, Fitzgerald added a run in the sixth for a 5-3 advantage.

As he reflected on the season and the outgoing seniors, Coach Bradburn is thrilled about the direction of the program, knowing they were on the verge of reaching the Elite 8 for the first time in 20 years.

"When the dust settled

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