

# Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

## Panthers clinch State playoff berth with two wins at Oglethorpe

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County rebounded with a Region 8-AA doubleheader sweep at Oglethorpe County on Friday night to clinch a state playoff spot after its nine-game winning streak ended in an extra-inning loss to Lumpkin County on Wednesday.

Still riding an eight-game region winning streak, Union County (12-9, 8-4) secured a spot in the Class AA State Tournament with two wins at Oglethorpe County. Since starting the season at 0-6, the Panthers have won 12-of-15 games. When asked what's changed since the first two weeks of the season, Union County Head Baseball Coach Zach Odom's answer was, "nothing."

"We've just stuck to what we've been doing," he said. "We started getting those clutch hits that weren't falling at the beginning of the season. Ever since the (six-run seventh inning) against Monticello, everybody is coming through and producing in the right situation."

The Panthers' playoff bid also received some assistance from that same Monticello squad as the Hurricanes took two from Rabun County, who needed at least a split to keep its playoff hopes alive. Instead, the Wildcats are currently three games back of fourth place Union County with two games remaining.

Those final two games, however, will be a twin bill at Union this Friday when the Panthers host Senior Night between games. While Rabun has nothing to play for, Union County can still move into third place with a sweep of Rabun, combined with at least one Elbert County loss.

Odom, however, doesn't believe his squad will roll over during the final week with a "just happy to be here" attitude entering its first postseason series since advancing to the Elite 8 in 2016.

"I talked to the guys Friday (after clinching) and they know that reaching state was one of our



L-R: Hunter Kelley combined to go 5-for-7 at Oglethorpe County. Catcher Alec Youngblood recorded three doubles at Oglethorpe. Photos/Todd Forrest

goals at the beginning of the year," he said. "But the last thing they want to do is settle in, especially on Senior Night against a region rival. We plan on taking care of business so we can enter state next week with some momentum."

Elbert County is coming off a split with Social Circle as the two squads remain tied for second, one game ahead of Union. First place Banks County sits one game up on second as they visit Elbert this week. With the Panthers owning the tiebreaker, Union would move into third place in the event of a tie with Elbert.

As for Social Circle, who owns the tiebreaker over Union, they will meet last-place Putnam County on Friday. In the (very) unlikely event that Putnam takes two from the Redskins, the Panthers could take second place, assuming Elbert drops at least one game to Banks County.

**Panthers 12, Oglethorpe County 0** - Union County bounced back from a heartbreaking loss to Lumpkin County to drop a dozen on the Patriots in Lexington on Friday, April 12.

"I wasn't down on them and I don't think they were down on themselves (after the winning streak ended to Lumpkin)," Coach Odom said. "We had one bad inning, probably our worst inning in nine games, and we were able

to flush it and come back to tie the game so I was very proud of them. I believe the last four innings of that (Lumpkin) game were what we took into Oglethorpe, so I wasn't too worried and I don't think (the players) were either."

Sophomore Isaak Mullanack got the start and allowed just one hit over six innings while striking out nine and walking two. He also scored twice and drove in a run at the plate. Meanwhile, his battery-mate, Alec Youngblood, finished 3-for-3 with a double and four RBIs.

Senior Coleson Daniel doubled twice and knocked in two during a 2-for-5 day. Hunter Kelley drove in three, doubled and scored twice as the senior outfielder turned in a 2-for-3 performance at the dish.

Kelley got things started in the first with a two-run double to spot Mullanack and the Panthers a 2-0 lead after one. Matthew Kelley made it a 3-0 game in the second when he was hit-by-a-pitch and later scored on an error of the bat of Zeke Swartz.

Hunter Kelley led off the third with a walk and came around to score on a Youngblood double. After a scoreless fourth, Oglethorpe opened the bottom half of the inning with a leadoff single -- the lone hit off Mullanack -- who eventually got out of a first-and-

third jam.

Union County opened up a 7-0 advantage in the fifth when a Daniel RBI double scored Austin Garrison. Courtesy runner J.J. Littles scored on a Matthew Kelley single then Daniel came around on a Mullanack ground out.

A Youngblood sacrifice fly and another RBI double from Daniel made it 9-0 in the sixth. Hunter Kelley's base hit in the seventh stretched the lead to 10-0 before Youngblood plated two more with a single to center.

Senior lefty Ean Harkins worked a scoreless seventh after surrendering a leadoff walk.

Senior Alec Scott walked twice and scored; Swartz finished 1-for-5 with a run; Rich went 2-for-4 with two runs; Garrison scored once and Matthew Kelley was 1-for-3 with a run and an RBI.

**Panthers 7, Oglethorpe County 3** - Things tightened up a bit in game two after Union County jumped out to a 4-0 advantage in the first inning.

In five innings on the hill, Swartz fanned nine while allowing four hits, three runs (two earned) and one walk. The sophomore southpaw also picked up his team-leading fifth win of the year.

Garrison and Rich each worked one scoreless inning in relief to preserve the victory.

Hunter Kelley remained a tough out, going 3-for-4 with a double, a triple, two runs, two RBIs and a steal. Youngblood turned in his second two-hit game of the night, recording a pair of doubles and one RBI in a 2-for-4 performance.

Rich scored twice, drove in two, and stole a base while getting plunked twice. He also put Union on the board when his grounder to short resulted in a two-run error during the top of the first. Later in the inning, back-to-back RBI doubles by Hunter Kelley and Youngblood opened up a 4-0 advantage.

The Patriots responded with two in the bottom of the first on a one-out double and a two-out single. Union stretched the lead to 5-2 in the third on an error off the bat of Garrison. They made it 6-2 when Mullanack scored on a base hit by Scott in the fourth.

Oglethorpe cut the lead in half in the fourth thanks to an error and a fielder's choice. The score would remain at 6-3 until Rich was hit to begin the seventh and Hunter Kelley scored him with an RBI triple.

Scott finished 1-for-3 with a run and an RBI; Swartz was 1-for-4 with a run and Daniel went 1-for-3 with a walk.

**Panthers 6, Lumpkin County 7 (8 Inn): Lumpkin**

County scored two in the eighth inning after Union County rallied from a 5-0 deficit to force extra innings.

According to Odom, a five-run rally is something he probably wouldn't have pulled off early in the season.

"At the beginning of the year? Probably not. But now, they have the confidence from winning nine games in-a-row," he said. "I've really seen them mature, especially the sophomores, who have had to play a lot of innings. After we fell behind (5-0), I could tell by their body language and see it in their eyes that we would be fine. And we were."

Following a scoreless first, the Indians scored five in the second despite getting just one ball out of the infield. Three infield singles, a walk, a hit batter and an error put the Panthers in a five-run hole.

Union got on the board in the third when Jonathan Everett walked and scored to lead off the inning and Austin Garrison drew a bases-loaded walk.

They would cut the deficit to 5-3 in the fifth when Daniel scored Rich with a base hit. A Swartz double in the sixth made it 5-4 before a Rich single tied the game heading to the seventh.

The Panthers would pay dearly for stranding the winning run at second during the bottom half of the seventh as Lumpkin County scored two in the eighth.

Scott walked and scored to lead off the Union half of the eighth but the Panthers wouldn't get another runner aboard after Scott came around on a Swartz grounder.

**Up next:** Union will visit White County at 5:55 p.m. Tuesday before hosting a day-night doubleheader with Rabun County for Senior Night on Friday, beginning at 5 p.m. The Senior Night ceremony will take place between games.

The State Tournament opens with a doubleheader on Wednesday, April 24. The third game will be Thursday the 25th, if necessary. Likely opponents for the Panthers are 2nd ranked Bremen or 12th ranked Callaway (Hogansville).

## Union soccer honors its seniors, preps for next week's State Tournament

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Senior Night photos by Todd Forrest

The Union County Lady Panthers wrapped up region play with a perfect record while running its unbeaten streak to 11 games following a 2-2 tie at Gilmer and a 10-0 rout of Monticello.

At 10-1-1, the Lady Panthers have secured their first double-digit win season since 2016 and are three victories away from the equaling the 2011 squad for the most wins in a season this decade.

Meanwhile, the Union County men won its fourth and fifth straight games with a 5-2 victory at Gilmer and a 5-0 win vs Monticello to improve to 8-4 overall - the most wins since 2015. The Panthers are also within reach of their first 10-win season since 2013.

Region 8-AA play came to a close on Friday, April 12 when the Lady Panther seniors put on a show for the home crowd in a shootout of Monticello.

It also helped to have Anzly Sherman healthy and back in the lineup as the senior recorded two goals with one assist during the first 25 minutes to lead Union County to a 6-0 halftime advantage.

Senior Madison Yost scored two second half goals as the Lady Panthers ended the match in the 70th minute via the mercy rule.

Sherman and Mattison Ruff got the scoring underway when Ruff fed Sherman for a goal in the fourth minute.

Senior Ellie Garrison found Ruff in the 18th minute to give Union a 2-0 advantage. Just over five minutes later, Sherman picked up her second goal of the half off an assist from senior Sophia Romano in the 23rd minute.

Senior Gracie Bridges made it a 4-0 game off dual assists from Sherman and Bella Nottage. A goal from senior Sheyenne Dyer -- assisted by Ruff -- stretched the lead to 5-0 in the 30th minute before senior Ellie Garrison concluded the first half onslaught with a free kick goal in the 38th minute.

Yost made it 7-0 in the 48th minute off a freed from Ruff. Following a scoring drought of almost 20 minutes, Garrison found senior Allison Fair in the 57th minute to open up an 8-0 advantage.

Senior Maddie Sutton setup a Yost goal in the 67th minute before Sutton's unselfishness was rewarded with a goal of her own in the 70th minute to bring the game to a close.

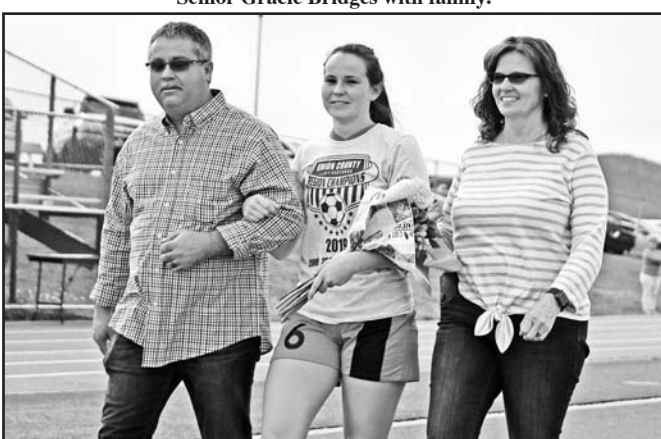
The Lady Panthers traveled to Class AAAA's Gilmer on



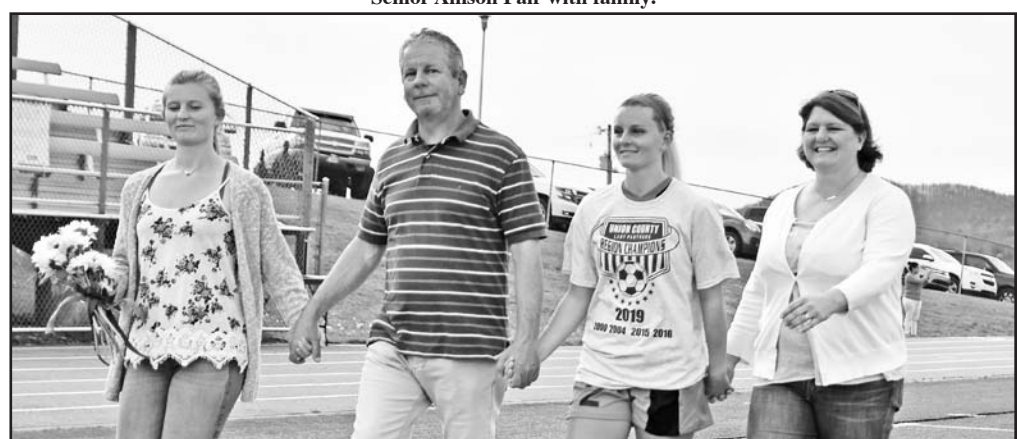
Senior Gracie Bridges with family.



Senior Allison Fair with family.



Senior Sheyenne Dyer with family.



Senior Ellie Garrison with family.



Senior Sophia Romano with family.



Senior Anzly Sherman with family.

Tuesday, April 9 where the contest ended in a 2-2 tie.

Union County's first goal came late in the first half when Romano found Yost in the 30th minute.

The final goal of the night belonged to Garrison, who converted a feed from Sutton in the 62nd minute.

Later, the Union guys took care of business 5-2 behind four goals from senior Brian Smith.

Kobi Robbins was responsible for three assists while Tyler Robbins added one helper.

A Samuel Mendoza penalty kick was the only other Panther goal of the evening.

Against Monticello, MJ Delatte kicked off the scoring in the eighth minute before two goals by Smith, late in the half, provided the Panthers a 3-0 cushion at the intermission.

Early in the second half, Kobi Robbins made it a 4-0 game before Steven Seiler tacked on a late goal to bring the final to 5-0.

Smith and senior Colby Ives each recorded one assist for Union County.

Up next is a trip to White County on Tuesday.

The Lady Warriors are currently 11-3 and ranked 10th in Class AAAA. As for the White County men, they currently sport

a 4-9 overall record.

The matches at White County are scheduled to get underway at 5:30 p.m.

The Lady Panthers will host one final home match when Tri-County Early College pays a visit to Blairsville at 5 p.m. Thursday.

State Tournament action is slated to begin April 25 when the Lady Panthers host Temple at 6 p.m.

The guys will get underway on April 26 when they travel to either Lamar County or Bremen in the opening round.

**Senior Night photos continued on Page 3B**



Senior Isaac Tritt with family.