

Sports

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Spring football is underway; scrimmage May 18 at Chestatee

Strong turnout of 70 players participate in last week's spring drills

By Todd Forrest
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For the first time in 185 years, Union County High School returned to the gridiron on Monday for the opening of spring football practice.

Head Coach Brian Allison and staff begin the arduous task of replacing 15 seniors that compiled a 32-8 regular season record (32-11 overall) while tying the 2017 Senior Class for most wins over a four-year span.

As expected, turnout won't be an issue this spring as approximately 70 players took part in agility drills in preparation for spring practice.

"We kept around 65-70 (players) last week but I'd say closer to 70," Allison said. "The crazy thing about spring practice is, you have end-of-year testing going on so we'll have players and coaches going in-and-out because of it. But I expect us to keep about 65-70 kids through the spring."

According to Allison, 12 freshmen took part in the pre-spring drills as the Panthers look to reload following the Class of 2018's departure. Most notable among the 15 graduated seniors is quarterback Cole Wright.

Allison's recent track record with quarterbacks has been quite stellar as Union County is breaking in just its third signal caller since 2013 following three successful years under Joseph Mancuso, who handed off to Wright for another two seasons.

Mancuso, currently a redshirt-sophomore in college, is battling for the starting job at FCS powerhouse Richmond University.

Meanwhile, Wright is preparing for his freshman year



Left: Union County Head Coach Brian Allison addresses the team following last year's spring game at Chestatee. The Panthers will return to Chestatee next Friday, May 18. Right: Rising-senior Jackson Colwell (32) with a tackle during the first half vs Fannin County. With 109 tackles (3 tackles-for-loss) in 2017, Colwell is the team's leading returning tackler heading into 2018. Photos by Todd Forrest

at West Point after receiving a football scholarship to the prestigious New York military academy.

"The most obvious (position that we're watching closely) is quarterback," Allison said. "We've had to replace two really good quarterbacks over past five years and now we're just trying to determine who the next guy will be."

The frontrunner to replace Wright is rising-junior Pierson Allison - Wright's backup for two seasons. Last year's junior varsity QB Kaston Hemphill will miss spring practice due to an injury but rising-senior wide receiver Kanon Hemphill will see action behind center.

Kanon Hemphill began

his career at quarterback but made a seamless transition to receiver as a sophomore - catching 21 passes while leading the Panthers with 401 yards and four touchdowns in 2016.

As for the receiving corps, that's one of two position groups -- along with running back -- where depth isn't a concern for Allison.

Nine different receivers -- only two were seniors -- caught a pass in 2017. Six different wide outs reeled in at least a dozen grabs and seven totaled 100-plus yards on the season.

At running back, leading rusher Chad Buzzard returns after posting two 100-yard games and seven total TDs in 2017.

The success of the new quarterback and his backfield mates will hinge on an offensive line that was also hit hard by graduation.

The defensive side of the ball also features a few areas where Allison and company are eager to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

The 2018 season was an up-and-down year for the Union defense. The unit was stifling vs Banks County in game four and Fannin County in game nine. Unfortunately, things went south in October during a four-game skid where the Panthers allowed 713 yards and 62 points at East Hall, 510 yards and 52 points vs Dawson, then 637 yards and 55 points at North Hall, with a playoff spot



on the line.

"The secondary and line-backer are two areas where we're looking to find some guys," Allison said.

Of the 821 total tackles made by the defense last season, 411 were credited to seniors. The defense must also replace 16-of-41 tackles-for-loss, 4-of-7 sacks, and 2-of-4 interceptions.

Although, the early focus of spring practice isn't to fill out the depth chart for the opener vs East Hall on Aug. 24, but to allow the coaches to familiarize themselves with their personnel and vice-versa.

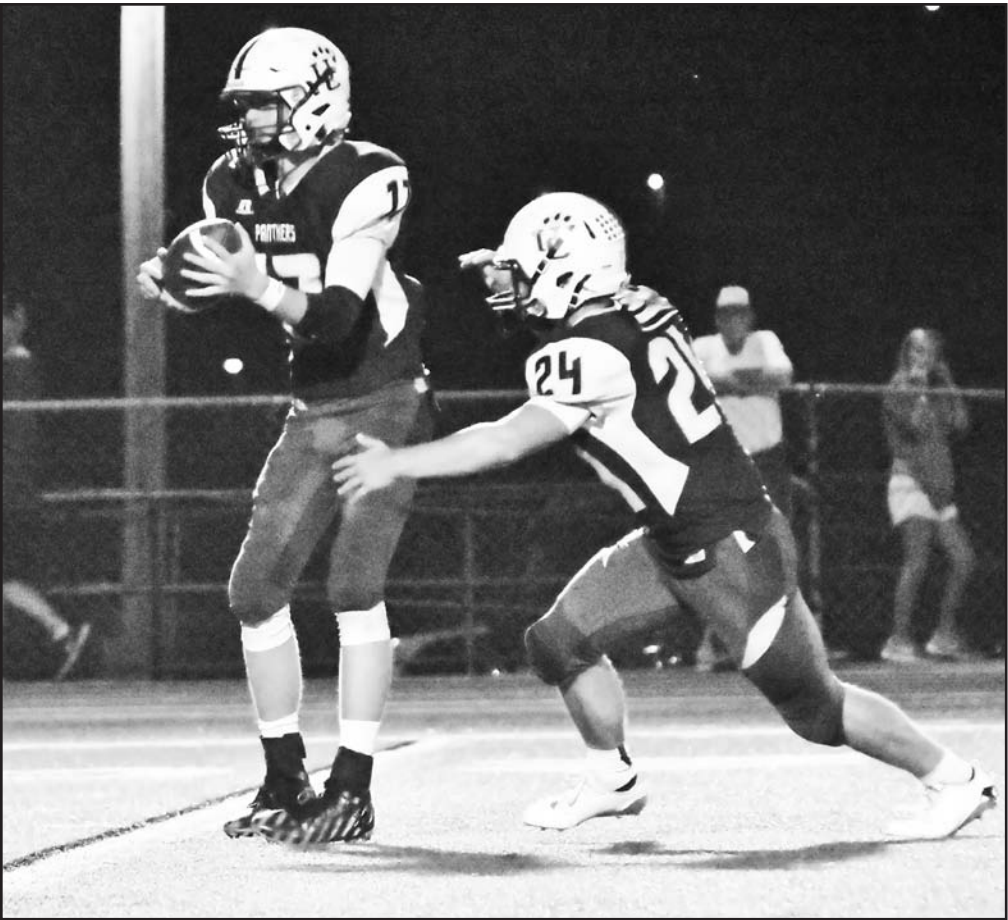
"The plan for the first week is to focus on fundamentals and work on our technique," Allison said. "There

won't be much 11-on-11 but mostly individual and group stuff. On Tuesday we hope to get about 6-8 live plays then maybe 25-30 live plays by Friday, but we'll just have to wait and see how things go."

Once again, spring football will close with a trip to Chestatee for a scrimmage contest on May 18 at 7 p.m.

According to Allison, Union County is returning to Chestatee for the second straight year due to GHSA rules that prevent schools from hosting scrimmage games in both the spring and the fall.

In order to host a scrimmage game in the fall, the Panthers need to travel for their spring game.



Rising-junior quarterback Pierson Allison (17) and rising-senior running back Chad Buzzard (24) are the most experienced members of the Panthers' 2018 backfield. Photo/Todd Forrest

MUSA recognizes Smith family



MUSA founders Richard and Debbie Smith (middle) along with "Marty the MUSA Mustang" who made his debut during the tournament.

Mountain United Soccer Association (MUSA) recently celebrated 30 years with the inaugural Richard Smith Invitational Tournament.

On hand for the ceremonial opening kickoff was Richard and his wife Debbie Smith. Richard and Debbie founded MUSA 30 years ago and ran the organization for over 20 years. MUSA thanked the Smiths for "bringing soc-

cer to the mountain area and teaching thousands of kids how to love the game. They have left a lasting legacy and we are grateful for their contribution to the game."

The North Georgia News would also like to thank Richard and Debbie Smith for their dedication to youth soccer in local area and for introducing so many to the sport. Much of the recent success by the

Union and Towns County High School soccer programs can be attributed to MUSA. Over the years, Richard and Debbie have made certain that MUSA's top priority has been, and always will be, about the kids and their enjoyment of the game.

For further details on MUSA you may visit their website at www.mountainsoccer.org. You can also email them at musa.soccer@gmail.com

2018 VARSITY FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

August 10		Habersham Central (Scrimmage)	
August 24	H	East Hall	7:30
August 31	A	Towns County	7:30
September 7	H	Fannin County (MS/Rec night)	7:30
September 14	A	Monticello	7:30
September 21	H	Putnam County (Homecoming)	7:30
September 28	A	Elbert County	7:30
October 5		Open	
October 12	H	Banks County	7:30
October 19	A	Oglethorpe County	7:30
October 26	H	Social Circle (Senior Night)	7:30
November 2	A	Rabun County	7:30

Junior Varsity Schedule

August 30	A	Dawson County	5:30
September 6	H	Gilmer County	5:30
September 13	H	White County	5:30
September 20	A	Pickens County	5:30
September 27	A	Lumpkin County	5:30
October 11	H	Rabun County	5:30
October 18	A	Fannin County	5:30

North Georgia Rapids travel to Highlands, NC



Members of the North Georgia Rapids recently competed on April 28 in the Spring Invitational in Highlands NC. Pictured front row: Ava Wheeler. Second row: Wyatt Nichols, Hunter Yancey, Hunter White, Liam Smith, Brooke Yancey, Dylan Marine, and Courtney Foster. Back row: Michael Dillard, Aiden Wilkes, Kaiya Wilkes, Riley Howse, and Team Coach, Barry Gay. All of the members placed very well, breaking some pool records and personal best times.