

Sports

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Softball: Union squanders late lead vs. Banks, dismantles first-place Elbert

Lady Panthers still in contention for Region 8-AA's top spot but need outside help

By Todd Forrest
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Union County responded to a devastating 5-3 home loss to Banks County with a 16-2 thrashing at first-place Elbert County to keep its regular-season region title hopes on life support for another five days.

Entering last Thursday's visit to Elberton, the Lady Panthers (9-6, 3-2) couldn't afford a third region loss after throwing away a 3-1 seventh-inning advantage vs. Banks County on Tuesday, Sept. 20. Needing to win out -- and hope the chips fall into place elsewhere -- to force a three-way tie atop the region standings, Union County took its frustrations out on Elbert County, who entered the contest unbeaten in 8-AA.

During Tuesday's loss to Banks, the Lady Panthers surrendered four runs in the seventh inning after coming within one strike of sweeping the regular season from the defending 8-AA champs. Sophomore right-hander Sierra Burnette issued a leadoff walk in the top of the seventh after previously retiring seven straight Leopards. With one down and a runner at third, Burnette induced an RBI groundout that trimmed the Union County lead to 3-2 but more importantly, emptied the bases with two walks and the bottom of the Banks County order coming to the dish.

Leopards pinch-hitter Allinson Murphy (who replaced Banks County's No. 8 hitter) provided the visitors what may have been the game's finest at-bat (and turning point) after falling behind one ball and two strikes. Murphy kept the AB alive, working a 10-pitch walk while fouling away four two-strike offerings to draw the free pass.

The 9-hole hitter, Maryssa Riley, who stepped to the plate 0 for 2 with a pair of groundouts, laced a single to left field then advanced to second on the throw, putting two runners into scoring position for the top of the lineup. With a 1-1 count, Burnette produced the result she was looking for when the leadoff hitter tapped a slow roller to third, but the throw home sailed wide up the first-base line, allowing the tying run to cross.

The Leopards sent the very next pitch high and deep into right field, clearing the bases on a two-run error when the ball popped out of the defender's glove at the warning track for the team's second consecutive two-out miscue.



Sierra Burnette celebrates a first-inning RBI that spotted the Lady Panthers a 1-0 advantage over Banks County last week. Photo/Todd Forrest

Burnette skirted any further damage via a deep fly-out, but when the dust settled on the 38-pitch top-half of the seventh, Union's 3-1 advantage had turned into a 5-3 deficit.

A one-out single from senior Kaelyn Jones was the only offense Union County could manufacture in the bottom of the frame as back-to-back pop-ups ended the contest.

Despite the rocky seventh, Burnette sat down the first nine hitters she faced, allowing her offense to build a 3-0 lead with a run in each of the first three frames, knocking the Leopards junior ace Jacy Ayers from the contest after 3 innings.

Junior Lindsay Crawford worked four scoreless innings to keep Union County in check, setting the stage for Banks County's late-inning rally.

A leadoff walk in the fourth accounted for the Leopards' first base-runner of the game, followed by a base hit, a line-out to right and a ground ball/force at third. With runners at first and second and two down, a sharp single to left field made it a 2-1 game when an errant throw from the outfield allowed the lead runner, who had stopped at third, to come home.

Burnette wouldn't allow another base runner until the leadoff walk in the seventh.

As for the Union offense, some two-out magic put the home team on the board in the first after Lexi Sisum singled and stole second, then Burnette

helped herself with an RBI single to right.

The second frame produced more two-out offense when Caley Davis kept the inning alive with a walk, Ansley Collins blooped a single over third base and Emma Roxbury drew a free pass to load the bases for Sisum, who drove in her team's second run when the Leopards were unable to make a play on a slow roller to third.

Chloe Potts opened the third with a walk and moved to second on a swinging bunt from Jones. After a strikeout, Potts advanced on a wild pitch and Jaycee Seabolt brought her home when she beat out an infield chopper to spot Union a 3-0 advantage.

Union County welcomed Crawford to the circle with a Roxbury single and a Sisum hit by pitch, but three consecutive pop-ups brought the fourth inning to an uneventful close.

Davis singled with two away in the fifth but was cut down trying to swipe second.

Sisum was stranded at third in the sixth after the senior ripped a base hit to right that skipped past the Banks County outfielder for a two-base error. Sisum finished 2 for 3 with a run and an RBI while accounting for Union's only multi-hit performance.

Collins and Roxbury had one base hit apiece. Burnette and Seabolt each singled home a run. Davis finished 1 for 1 with two walks and a run.

Burnette yielded three



Chloe Potts dives to her left to deny a Banks County hit, then throws out the runner from her knees to end the top of the second. Photo/Todd Forrest

hits and three earned over seven innings but matched her season-high with four walks - all coming in the fourth and seventh frames. Union County is 0-3 this fall when Burnette issues four free passes.

The loss dropped the Lady Panthers from second place to third in 8-AA, one game back in the loss column to Banks and Elbert.

According to head coach Stephen Mitchell, a "salty" Union County squad traveled to Elbert two days later and bullied the first-place Blue Devils into submission after just five innings.

The 16-run outburst got underway with a seven-run first inning that saw the Lady Panthers send 13 batters to the plate. The big knock came courtesy of Burnette's two-run homer that built a 3-0 advantage after Collins' leadoff single and a Roxbury base hit drove in the game's first run.

Union wasn't finished after Burnette's blast with hits from Potts and Banton sandwiching a Jones walk. Trailing 4-0 in the first, Elbert County made a pitching change but Davis greeted the new hurler with a run-scoring fielder's choice followed by a two-run, two-out double from Roxbury -- her second and third RBIs of the inning.

Three two-out singles and an error allowed the Blue Devils to get a pair of runs back in the bottom half of the first, but Burnette worked a 1-2-3 second and Union tacked on three in the third.

A one-out double by Davis, an infield single from Collins and a Roxbury base hit loaded the bases for Sisum, who plated two with a single up the middle. After a walk to Burnette, Potts opened up a 10-2 advantage by beating out a grounder to second.

Burnette escaped a third-inning jam with a grounder to third after a one-out error and a two-out single had Elbert County in business. Later, the sophomore pitched around a leadoff fourth-inning single and the Lady Panthers put the game away in the fifth.

Three consecutive singles by Collins, Roxbury and Sisum opened the frame, leading to a Burnette sacrifice fly for an 11-2 margin. Potts loaded the bags again with her second three-hit game of September,

and pinch-hitter Tori Tracy drove home Roxbury with the fifth of six Union singles during the inning.

A Banton single scored Sisum for a 13-2 lead before Seabolt delivered the only extra-base hit of the frame -- a two-run double to right, scoring Potts and Tracy. Banton scored the 16th and final run when Gracie Gladding brought her home on a sacrifice fly to center.

Burnette notched two of her four Ks during the bottom of the fifth, ending the contest early via the mercy rule. In total, she gave up five hits, one earned run and no walks over 5 frames. At the plate, she launched her second big fly of the year during a 1-for-2, three-RBI game. Collins finished 3 for 4 with four runs; Roxbury went 4 for 4 with her second four-hit performance in three games. The senior shortstop also scored three times and drove in three more. Sisum was 2 for 3 with a run and two ribbies. Potts scored twice and drove in one during a 3-for-4 game. Seabolt went 1 for 3 with a pair of RBIs; Banton was 2 for 4 with two RBIs - her first two-

Class AA Softball Postseason Preview

Tuesday, Oct. 5 marks the start of the Region 8-AA Tournament with the No. 1 seed playing host. The championship and consolation games will be Oct. 6.

With only four softball teams in Region 8-AA, a Union County state playoff spot is a guarantee where they will face an opponent from Region 6-AA.

To call Region 6-AA's 2021 season a "wild year" would be a "wild" understatement.

At the moment, Pace Academy is atop the 6-AA standings with a 10-0 record. The Lady Panthers defeated Pace 7-2 during an early-season weekend tournament. However, Pace still has two games remaining vs. third-place Washington -- the 10th ranked team in this week's Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC) Class AA poll, and the losers of two region games via forfeit.

Lovett is currently second in 6-AA and has one meeting left with first-place Pace Academy. Lovett's only region loss came during a 16-14 shootout vs. Pace. Lovett is also the owner of the forfeit wins over Washington.

hit, two-RBI game since Sept. 8, 2020 (Fannin County). Tracy finished 1 for 1 with a run and a ribby. Gladding drove home one; Jewell Massey and Georgia Patton each scored once.

Up next: Despite the one-sided victory at Elbert, Union still needs quite a bit of help to secure its second-straight No. 1 seed at the Region 8-AA Tournament. First, they need a Tuesday win at Rabun County. Second, they need Banks and Elbert (who have one loss apiece) to split their two games scheduled for Monday and Tuesday of this week. Rain washed out the first Banks vs. Elbert game, forcing the teams to reschedule for the regular season's final week.

Should everything fall into place, Banks, Elbert and Union would all be tied atop the standings. The three-way tiebreaker is determined by runs allowed between the three teams. With Union being the only team to have completed its season vs. the other two contenders, the Lady Panthers are currently in the clubhouse with 21 runs allowed. Elbert has yielded 23 runs to Union alone, and as a result, the Blue Devils would be eliminated from first in the event of a three-way tie.

With that said, the only way Union is guaranteed the top seed is by Banks allowing 15-plus runs during a two-game split vs. Elbert. Should any of the three teams finish tied in runs allowed, the number of runs allowed vs. the entire region would determine first place. And that could factor in if Banks allows 14 in a split with Elbert. In that case, Banks would remain tied with Union County in runs allowed, bringing the Rabun County matchups into the picture. Against Rabun, Union won the only meeting so far, 12-0.

Banks defeated Rabun 7-2 and 9-1, so the Lady Panthers must limit Rabun to two runs or fewer Tuesday to be on the safe side. *(The above calculations are not official but simply based on my figures from the results listed by MaxPreps - TF)*

Union County will close the region schedule on Tuesday at Rabun County. The first pitch is slated for 5:30 p.m.

Fourth place will likely go to Coretta Scott King or fifth-place South Atlanta.

According to MaxPreps, the remaining teams, Therrell, Columbia, KIPP, McNair and Towers are all winless in region play, and apparently don't play each other either (or report scores).

In the second round of State, Region 8-AA is paired with regions 2 and 4. Barring any upsets, the top two teams from 8-AA would meet the 1 and 2 seeds from Region 2 in the Sweet 16. If 8-AA's bottom two seeds pull a road upset -- while the other top seeds hold serve -- 8-AA will likely meet the 1 and 2 seeds team from Region 4 in the round of 16.

At the moment, the AJC's top two Class AA teams reside in Region 2, where Vidalia owns the top spot with Jeff Davis in second.

Leading the way in Region 4 are two 8-AA breakaways from the recent reclassification. Former region foes Oglethorpe County and Putnam County currently reside in 4-AA's top-two spots, and like their old region, 8-AA, don't feature a team inside the AJC's top-10.



'Give me two hand claps and a Ric Flair: Wooooo!' Senior Emma Roxbury leads the Lady Panthers' pregame ritual prior to a recent home game. Last week, Roxbury smacked four hits in a win at Elbert County - one for each member of the Horsemen. Photo/Todd Forrest

Football: Bulldogs seal Union's fate with 40-point second half

Union County opens region play Friday with visit to Riverside Military Academy

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Union County (0-4) may have started slowly in its previous two outings, but that wasn't the case in Friday's night's border war vs. Murphy, NC. Unfortunately, the final 12 minutes and change proved unkind to the home team as the Bulldogs pulled away with 26 unanswered points in a 54-24 victory.

"The biggest thing that helped us [early on] was just picking up our tempo to try and catch [Murphy] off guard, knowing they play a lot of guys both ways," Union head coach Michael Perry said. "We simplified some things to play faster than normal hoping to tire [Murphy] out."

Despite its late-game collapse, Union County never trailed during an encouraging first half and was either ahead or tied for 31:02 of the game's first 36 minutes.

The remaining 12 were a completely different story, however.

Trailing 28-24 with 44 seconds remaining in the third, senior quarterback Logan Helcher was picked off near midfield when a Union receiver ran the incorrect route. Murphy returned the interception to the house for a 34-24 advantage with 28 seconds left in the quarter.

The next Panthers series showed promise as they quickly moved into plus-territory until a second interception, coming on an intended screen pass, found the hands of a rushing lineman on the first play of the fourth quarter, awarding Murphy possession at the Union County 45. From there, the defending state champs needed only seven plays to build a 41-24 advantage, punching it in from three yards out.

"We're still really young on the defensive line and they had a tough night, but the late turnovers also put them in some difficult situations," Perry said. "But on the second interception, if [Helcher] gets that screen pass over the lineman, Caiden Tanner is probably still running. There was nobody there [in coverage], so it would've been a huge gain."

Later in the fourth, the Panthers were denied on fourth down with under five minutes remaining, leading to another



A fired-up Panthers team takes the field and immediately turned in their best half of football in 2021 vs. Murphy, NC. Photo/Todd Forrest

short-field Murphy touchdown during their first trip to Blairsville since 1988.

The Bulldogs added another touchdown run followed by a 71-yard scoop-and-score to take the 30-point victory.

The contest opened with both offenses exchanging punts, but Union broke through on its second series - moving 70 yards on 11 plays to grab a 7-0 lead with 3:28 left in the first.

The scoring drive was aided by a Murphy pass interference and offsides penalty before sophomore Caiden Tanner -- the backup QB making his first varsity start at running back -- took an option toss and blasted his way across the goal line from 3 yards out.

"I couldn't be prouder of the kid and he proved that the spotlight isn't too bright for him," Perry said regarding Tanner's first start at a new position. "He's also our backup quarterback so he knows the ins and outs of the offense. He gives us three good players [at running back] that can all contribute. But it was great seeing [Tanner] perform and I know that everyone was proud of him."

Murphy answered with an 80-yard scoring drive that spanned nearly seven minutes, putting the Bulldogs on the board with a 1-yard quarterback keeper on fourth and goal. Senior Eli

Peugh blocked the PAT to keep Union in front 7-6.

A Murphy penalty on the ensuing kickoff started the Panthers at the 42-yard line, where they needed only six plays to build a 14-6 advantage at the 6:40 mark of the half. After a false start moved Union back five yards, Helcher scrambled for 18, then found sophomore Jensen Goble for 8 yards. A first-down run by freshman Connor Schuknecht was followed by a 15-yard completion to Griff Young, plus a Bulldogs penalty, setting up a first and goal. Two plays later, Helcher kept it himself around the left edge, splitting a pair of defenders in the backfield before powering his way to pay-dirt -- inching the nose of the football across the white line.

Murphy answered with a 14-play drive and a 2-point conversion, knotting the score at 14-14 with 57 seconds before the intermission.

With two timeouts remaining, the Panthers orchestrated one of their best-looking drives of the year, advancing into field goal range for senior Kyler Robbins, who connected from 40 yards out as time expired.

"Absolutely," answered Perry when asked if that was one of Union's better drives of 2021. "Having a big, big weapon like Kyler Robbins changes the way you approach that situation. Just

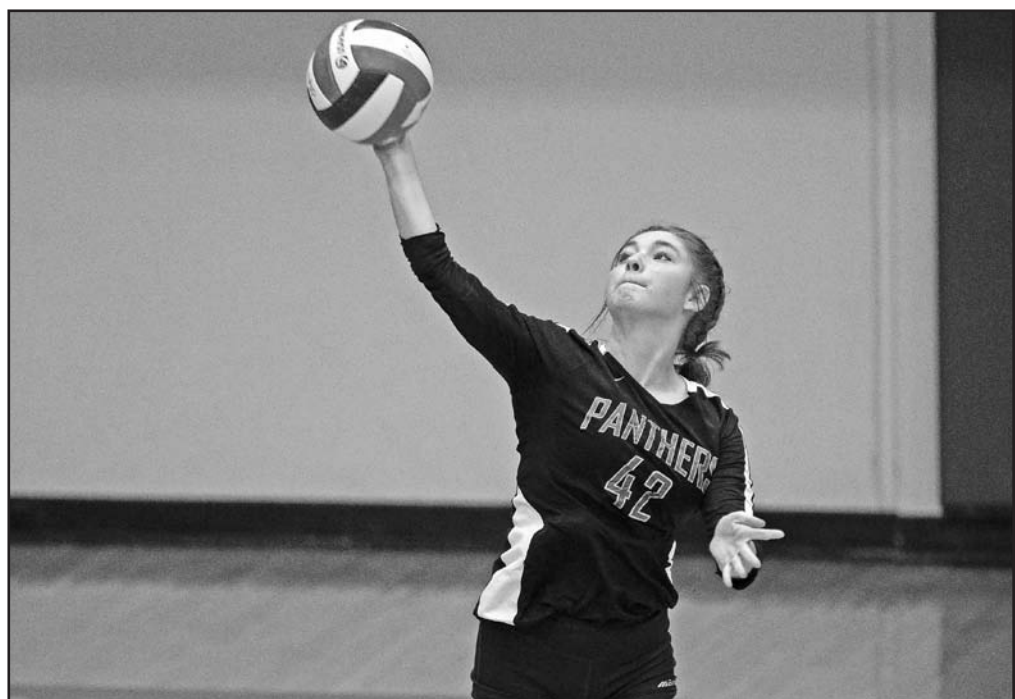
look at his kickoffs - every one of them went into the end zone and he just keeps getting better."

The possession began with a Trace Wright kick return to the 40-yard line where Union set up shop with 50 seconds on the clock. A quick out to Goble stopped the clock when he found the sideline after an eight-yard gain. On second down at the 48, Helcher stepped up in the pocket and hit a sliding Young for a baker's dozen at the Murphy 39. Then he scrambled out of trouble again, outrunning a defender to the sideline for a pickup of five.

The third time wasn't the charm as Helcher was dragged down from behind on another rushing attempt, forcing Union to burn its second timeout ahead of a critical third-and-4 play.

Once again, the Murphy pass rush forced Helcher to step up and tip-toe the line of scrimmage before firing back across the middle to Goble for 11 yards.

Volleyball: Second-straight Area 8 title up for grabs Tuesday vs. Banks County



Senior Emma Whicker serves during a home match in early September. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Greensboro - Tenth-ranked Union County (10-5, 6-0) clinched a top-two spot in the upcoming Area 8 tournament with last Thursday's tri-match sweep of Lake Oconee Academy (LOA) and Elbert County.

LOA entered the meeting tied for second with Banks County, but the Panthers handed the Titans a 2-0 straight-set loss, knocking the home team into a third-place tie with Rabun County.

Union County took the first set from LOA 25-17; the second went Union's way as well, 25-19.

In the finale, the Panthers faced Elbert County and cruised to another 2-0 victory (25-17 and 25-16).

Union will wrap up Area play Tuesday with a home showdown with the second-place Leopards and a middle-of-the-pack Putnam County squad (3-3).

The action gets underway at 5 p.m. with Union facing Putnam. Assuming Banks County defeats Putnam in the 6 p.m. match, the Panthers and Leopards will settle the area's top seed at 7 p.m.

Banks' lone area loss came to Rabun County on Sept. 14. The Leopards also own a non-area win over Union County on Sept. 1 when the Panthers were coming off their two-week COVID-19 hiatus.

Senior Night interview Part 3

The North Georgia News wraps up the Senior Night conversation with Morgan Fussell and Emma Whicker below.

NGN: Other than hitting the Chestatee girl in the face,

do the two of you have any other favorite memories of each other?

MF: Two years ago, it was my birthday and they smashed a pink cupcake into my face, and I went and put it on [Whicker] and it stained [her] eyebrow pink for like three days.

EW: It was more like a week, but that was so funny. We have some very good memories. Not just as teammates, but hanging out together as friends. We do all the things that girls do together. We go to the football games together. We go to each other's houses so we can get ready for the football games together. But I couldn't imagine doing that with anyone else.

MF: We've played varsity together for three years, so on the court we have this undeniable chemistry. I know when she's going to set me and we just know what the other is going to do. We don't have to say anything and [our chemistry] continues to grow.

NGN: When your class arrived as freshmen, the program had just hired a new head coach (Megan Swanson). Then, ahead of your junior year, you find out that you have another new coach (Anna Chapman). How important is leadership from the upperclassmen during those uncertain periods of transition?

MF: Those times can be rough and its definitely a big change. [Chapman and Swanson's] coaching styles are very different so its up to the upperclassmen to set an example. But I remember the day that Coach Swanson brought [the team] over to her house and told us the news. We all just sat there crying.

and 62 yards on the ground as Union County finished with 73 yards rushing.

Tanner scored his first varsity touchdown, finishing with two scores - one through the air and another on the ground.

Young caught six passes for 69 yards; Goble hauled in six passes for 52 yards.

Murphy piled up 344 yards rushing to go with 77 passing.

Up next: Union County will open Region 8-AA competition at Riverside Military Academy (1-3). The Eagles are coming off a 62-0 loss to Toombs County (2-3), where they were victimized by seven turnovers and a blocked punt. Riverside also fell 26-7 to former Union head coach Brian Allison's first year East Forsyth squad after suffering a 26-6 loss to Georgia Military College a week earlier.

RMA's only victory came in a 32-26 nailbiter over a winless Druid Hills team that hasn't posted a winning season since 1993 or reached the state playoffs since 1956.

In the win over Druid Hills, the Eagles rolled up 405 yards rushing, recorded six sacks, forced five turnovers and blocked four kicks (two field goals, two punts).

Based on Union's recent run defense struggles, the Eagles' ground attack could present difficulties for Perry's Panthers in what he views as the first of two critical 8-AA contests.

"From what we've seen on film [of RMA], the personnel they use is different in nearly every single game," Perry said. "They have a different quarterback and different guys all over the place, so who knows what we're going to get. But they're doing a great job considering they didn't play football last year."

"As far as the Region goes, this week and next (Banks County) are must-win games to get a state playoff spot."

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on Friday night.

XC: Hartzog claims gold at Murphy

Murphy, NC - After running in the shadows of older Union County runners for most of his high school career, Hunter Hartzog has finally struck gold.

At last weekend's Bulldog Meet in Murphy, NC, Hartzog took home the gold medal, edging Swain County's Connor Brown by three seconds after clocking in at 18 minutes, 16 seconds.

Union sophomores Zander Rotko and Benton Gregory placed 10th and 11th, respectively. Ethan Rouse was 25th, Alec Wilder placed 27th and Anderson Clouse came in 31st.

In the girls race, junior Ashley Shipes placed second at 21:59 - nearly two minutes behind Arizona Blankenship of Swain County.

Seniors Hana Gregory and Allie Brey were fifth and ninth, respectively. Ellie Adams was 11th with Natalie Payne in 15th, Lydia Wagner in 17th and Katelynn Rash in 19th.



Senior Hunter Hartzog (pictured at Meeks Park) set the pace at Murphy, NC as the first of three Panthers in the top-11. Photo/Lowell Nicholson