

Volleyball: Early State Tournament exit a learning experience for young squad

By Todd Forrest
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JONESBORO - In its first ever postseason appearance, Union County volleyball drew Elite Scholars Academy, the Region 5-AA Champions who entered riding an eight-game winning streak after finishing undefeated in region play.

In the best-of-five, first round match-up, Union County fell in straight sets, 25-5, 25-4 and 25-14.

Earlier this week, the *North Georgia News* met with first-year UCHS Volleyball Coach Megan Swanson to take a look back at the program's second season while securing a sneak peak at 2019.

NGN: By reaching state you gained two extra weeks of practice and you traveled to Metro-Atlanta to face some quality competition. How important is that additional experience for this young squad?

MS: Just reaching the playoffs after not winning a game last year is an accomplishment in itself. They got to see what it's like to advance to state and travel outside of our area to see some teams that have been playing volleyball a little longer than we have. Now they have a taste of what kind of competition they'll be facing if we make it back next year.

NGN: What are your plans for the offseason? When will you begin preparation for 2019?

MS: We're offering them an 8-week training program that they can do through



Union County volleyball at Elite Scholars Academy in Jonesboro for last weekend's Class AA State Tournament. Photos/Katie Morris Rankin



the winter. During the spring we'll offer another program that allows them to work with a coach from Athens once-a-week. He's actually the same guy that did their training last spring.

It's (all voluntary) but that will allow them an opportunity to begin getting ready for next year.

NGN: Going from year two to year three, is there any particular areas you're looking to improve on?

MS: I want to focus on team morale and learning how to be competitors, because, for a lot of our players, this was

their first time playing any kind of sport.

NGN: How much improvement did you see from the first game to the last?

MS: It's been a world of difference. They've learned a lot but I've also asked a lot. Next year I hope to see even more improvement. We'll still focus on fundamentals but I hope we can fine tune our defense and some of our plays.

NGN: Speaking of the future, how many freshmen made an impact this season.

MS: We have five juniors that were on varsity and others that were on JV. But most of the juniors coming back are experienced, they've gone through the offseason training, they play travel ball, and the majority of them don't play any other sports. If they continue to work hard I believe we can have a much better season next year.

NGN: Speaking of the future, how many freshmen made an impact this season.

MS: I had three freshmen that were regulars on varsity so I have a very good group of younger players that

I'll get to keep for a few more years.

NGN: Do you know what the other teams around the region have coming back next season?

MS: If I remember correctly, everyone loses at least two or three seniors so I think we'll be neck-and-neck with just about everybody.

NGN: How much can you improve on your fourth place finish? Is third-or-better the goal for next season?

MS: Yes. Our expectations are to exceed (fourth place) and I'm going to hold them to it.

NGN: Is there anyone you would like to thank or any final words regarding the season?

MS: I would like to thank the community for all the support we have received. A lot of different people have shown their support and we had some really good home crowds during the year. I really appreciate all the interest that our program has been shown.

The school has been tremendous, the school board, the parents and everybody have helped make my first year a very good experience.

Coach Mitchell: We really figured it out at the end of the year

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The return to Class AA saw the return of Union County softball to the State Tournament, albeit as members of a brutal Region 8-AA.

As of this writing, the three remaining Region 8-AA teams -- Banks County, Monticello and Social Circle -- have all advanced to the Elite 8 in Columbus. Meanwhile, Union County's first round opponent Heard County has also reached the state quarterfinals.

On Monday morning, the *North Georgia News* sat down with Union County Head Softball Coach Stephen Mitchell to reflect on the 2018 season while looking ahead to 2019 and beyond.

NGN: You went the distance with a very good Heard County team in the first round. What kind of learning experience was that and how will it benefit the program?

SM: That was huge for us and I think we were peaking at the right time. Had the (first round) match-ups turned out any differently, I



Union County Head Coach Stephen Mitchell during a meeting with the infield late in the season. Photo/Todd Forrest

think we could still be playing.

We really figured it out at the end of the year. All year we kept trying, trying and trying and the girls kept believing in us and we finally made it work. We're really taking a lot of momentum into the offseason. The assistant coaches and myself are already excited about next season and I think the girls are too.

We'll be so far ahead next year just from a terminology standpoint. Instead of teaching the girls how we want them to play the game, we can teach them how to win games.

NGN: What is the focus during the offseason? How long will you take off and when will you begin preparing for 2019?

SM: Obviously we're going to focus on pitching. It

wouldn't matter if we had two D1 prospects, I would still focus on pitching because that's what wins ball games.

Offensively, we need to get better at situational hitting. That's something we struggled with at times during the year. I'd like to be able to create more offense and put pressure on the defense -- that was something we weren't quite able to do this year so it'll be a point of emphasis for us.

try to come up with a plan for each girl.

NGN: With the heart of the order and your leadoff hitter all graduating, will that force you to rely more on small ball to generate offense?

SM: I'm hoping with another year in the weight room we'll be able to find some power in the lineup. You've got to have hitters who can line doubles into the gap. But I think we'll have to get more creative next year. We won't be able to sit back and wait on the home run.

NGN: Have you had a chance to evaluate the middle school team to get an idea of what you have coming up next year?

SM: We didn't make it to as many games as I wanted to and that's something I'd like to work on in the future. We'd like to try and get (UCMS) to play a game or two (at the high school) and I'd like to be as involved as I possibly can. That's something else we'd like to work on this summer, whether it's having them practice with us or scrimmage with us, that's another goal of mine for this offseason.

We had a good year. There's no denying that. I think we've built a solid foundation for the future and the future is bright for us.

Offense						
	Comp/Att	Yds	TD	Int	Long	
Passing						
#17 P. Allison	14 / 19	232	1	-	72	
#8 L. Helcher	1 / 2	22	-	-	22	
Rushing	Att	Yds	TD	Long	Fum	
#34 J. Daniel	6	109	2	29	-	
#24 C. Buzzard	12	69	2	16	1	
#25 P. Ivester	3	57	1	43	-	
#17 P. Allison	4	57	-	25	-	
#2 C. Schafer	1	8	1	8	-	
Receiving	Rec	Yds	TD	Long	Fum	
#21 S. Drake	6	122	-	72	-	
#84 K. Morlock	4	62	1	16	-	
#28 D. Allen	1	22	-	22	-	
#4 K. Hemphill	2	19	-	12	-	
#2 C. Schafer	1	15	-	15	-	
#20 C. Rich	1	14	-	14	-	

Team Totals		UC/OC
Total Plays		50 56
Total Yards		554 98
Passing Yards		254 -
Rushing Yards		300 98
First Downs		25 8
Third Down Efficiency		3-3 2-12 (100%) (17%)
Fourth Down Efficiency		- 1-2 (0%) (50%)
Turnovers		1 2
Fumbles Lost		1 2
Interceptions Thrown		- -
Penalties		4 5
Yards		21 49

Youth Football: 9U Panthers shutout Dawson, advance to second round



Captains meeting in the middle of the field Brandon Lynch (1), Chetley Cox (44), Kylar Juracka (8) and Kingston Jones (30).

By Blake Lynch Staff Writer North Georgia News

9u Panthers- The Panthers took on the Dawson County Tigers and it was a 25-0 win for the Panthers.

During the first drive for the Panthers, No. 31 Kevin Kilpatrick took one to the house but the extra point was un-

successful.

Later in the first quarter No. 1 Brandon Lynch scored a touchdown but the extra point, once again, was no good. Late in the second quarter No. 30 Kingston Jones scored a touchdown for an 18-0 lead at the half.

Late in the game, Kilpatrick scored his second touchdown of the day as the Panthers would go on to win 25-0.