

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngame.com

Union survives RMA; pummel Rabun for the second time

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

Union County (10-2, 7-1) outlasted Riverside Military Academy 5-4 in a seesaw affair that saw both teams pull off some late inning heroics that culminated with a walk off single by Zach Odom in the bottom of the seventh.

On Friday, the Panthers proved that last month's 13-3 drubbing of Rabun County (8-5, 4-4) was no fluke, as they went on the road and exploded for 9 runs in the final five innings before the Wildcats scored two in the seventh.

On Wednesday, Union led Riverside 3-1 with three outs between the Panthers and a crucial Region 8-AA victory, when Riverside (9-7, 5-4) rallied for four in the top half of the seventh, giving the Eagles their first lead since it was 1-0 in the second.

Union County junior Calvin Duckworth worked into the seventh, and after fanning the first hitter, gave up a walk and a double, prompting a pitching change by Union Head Coach Brandon Bradburn.

"It's called 'stretching the pitcher,'" Bradburn said. "Duckworth was allowed a base runner for every out he has. So if he lets the first guy on, he is out of the game because there is zero outs. If he has 1 out, he is allowed one base runner, but then if two reach it is time to pull him."

Lane Everett took the hill and induced a grounder to short that scored the Eagles' second run on a fielder's choice. An RBI single and a sacrifice fly brought in the tying and go-ahead runs before a pop out to second baseman Cooper Patton ended the inning.

"Duckworth as always



Shortstop Zach Odom (right) makes a leaping catch during the third inning as centerfielder Jared Croskey closes in. Photo/Todd Forrest

pitched a heck of a game," Bradburn said. "We had some weird defensive errors behind him but, he battled through them and just ran out of gas in the last inning. He actually came out very well, but we had some poor defense early, that's why they scored the one run early on."

"Lane was missing over the plate too much, and they had momentum on their side so both of those added up to them being able to hit Lane a little bit."

Trailing by a run in their last at bat, the bottom of the Panther lineup went to work and set the table for Odom.

Freshman Lance Rich, who is making quite a name for himself in the clutch, led off with an opposite field single. With sophomore Hunter Hughes pinch running for Rich, Patton reached on an infield single putting two on for sophomore Chase Barnett.

The Panther catcher laid down his second bunt of the afternoon that forced an Eagle

throwing error, scoring Hughes and placing the game winning run 90 feet away. Odom then laced an 0-1 pitch into right center, bringing in Patton and securing the win.

"When RMA scored three in the top of the seventh I think it woke us up finally," Bradburn said. "We came into the bottom of the seventh with some attitude."

"I can't say enough about Lance Rich, he comes to the ballpark ready to play no matter what the circumstances and his clutch hitting shows that. He is a pure hitter that always seems to get the barrel on the ball. On our team, we really don't care what grade you are in, instead how can the player contribute to the team."

Riverside posted a run in its first at bat after Duckworth retired the first two Eagle hitters. A two-out error paved the way for a double and an RBI single before a fly out ended the inning without any further damage.

The Panthers went 1-2-3 in the first and on that note, Bradburn and Assistant Coach Cullen Robertson were not pleased with the team's intensity in the early stages, and let their ball club know about it.

"We came out of the gates with the attitude that they were going to give us the game, instead of us having to work for it," Bradburn said. "It also didn't help that the other team had an outstanding pitcher on the mound."

Meanwhile, Union's ace settled down and put the Eagles away in order in the second and a leadoff double by T Bentley and a RBI single from Everett produced a Panther run in the



Lane Everett avoids the tag at second as the junior swiped a base in the second inning. Photo/Todd Forrest

bottom half - tying things at 1-1.

Duckworth worked around a lead off single in the third and was aided by a web gem from Odom for out number three.

The senior shortstop got the jump on a shallow pop fly to center, and with Jared Croskey closing in, Odom stretched out and made a running catch over his left shoulder as he tumbled into Croskey.

Both teams would go three-up, three-down in the next two at bats, before Union put two on the board in the fourth.

Before the inning, Bradburn commented that his team was about to take the lead, and the skippers' prediction was dead on.

Wes Aulet and Bentley each laced singles to left with Everett laying down a sacrifice bunt, putting two in scoring position. Luther Jones grounded out, but Duckworth proved that he can handle a bat by bringing both runners to the plate with a two-out, two-strike single up the middle.

"The reason I knew we were going to have a breakout inning is that our guys had been hitting the pitcher well, but nothing was falling," Bradburn said. "Once we were on our second time through the lineup we knew what to expect and 'Duck' had a two-out hit with runners in scoring position, and in baseball those are good as gold."

The Panthers maintained the 3-1 advantage until Riverside's furious rally in the seventh. However, Bradburn was hoping his team's increased intensity in the fourth would equal insurance runs later on, but unfortunately things didn't

work out the way he intended.

"We were up 3-1, and our guys were comfortable with that lead, and were scoreboard watching instead of giving max effort every inning," he said.

At the end of the day, Bradburn was pleased with the Region win and was proud of the way his team responded after Riverside landed an uppercut in the seventh.

"It's good to win a close one," he said. "We did the little things right today in clutch situations, and that was the difference in us winning the ball game."

Bentley finished with another multi-hit game and scored twice. Duckworth drove in 2, while Everett and Odom added an RBI each.

The Panthers pounded out 9 hits to Riverside's five but Union allowed two errors.

Duckworth worked 6 1/3 innings, allowing 4 hits, striking out 6, walking 2 and giving up 2 earned runs in the no-decision.

Everett picked up the win in two-thirds of an inning, surrendering a run and a hit.

Friday, the Region 8-AA second place Panthers traveled to Rabun County for the second meeting between the two squads.

After run ruling the Wildcats 17 days prior, third place Rabun was out for revenge but once again, the Panthers cemented their place as one of 8-AA's top two teams.

With the offense providing 14 hits, Everett went the distance for Union, allowing 4 hits, striking out 6, with 4 walks and 1 earned run in the 9-2 win.

Odom proved to be a tough out once again as he finished 2-for-3 with 2 runs, 4 RBIs, a double, and 2 walks.

Aulet knocked in 2 runs off 2 hits, Jones had 2 hits and a RBI, and sophomore Jackson Burks, playing with a heavy heart after the passing of his grandfather Jack Lance Sr., went 2-for-2 with 2 runs and a walk.

The contest was scoreless until the top of the third when Union put a three-spot on the board.

With one out, Burks singled, Barnett walked, and junior Garrett Nix pinch ran for Barnett. With two on, Odom doubled to center, scoring Burks and Nix. A two-out single by Aulet brought in Odom, staking Union to a 3-0 lead.

Everett put the Wildcats away in order in the bottom half and allowed the Union sticks to

See Panthers, Page 9A



Calvin Duckworth drives in two runs to help his own cause in the fourth inning. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore catcher Chase Barnett lays down one of two perfectly-placed late inning bunts. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers suffer two shutouts

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

After scoring 31 goals in the previous four contests, Union was unable to find the net against Region 8-AA's Rabun County and Class AAAA's Heritage-Catoosa.

On Wednesday, Union hosted the Wildcats of Rabun in a clash between two of Region 8-AA's top teams, however the Panthers came up short in a 2-0 loss.

The Wildcats struck early, scoring their first goal in the seventh minute.

The remainder of the first half was a stalemate and the Panthers went into the locker room trailing by a goal.

Union came out firing away in the second half but the Rabun keeper kept the Panthers off the board.

The Panthers continued to be the aggressor but a Wildcat snuck past the Panther defense and put the game away with their second goal in the 69th minute of the contest.

Thursday, Union went on the road to face Heritage-Catoosa without senior Jair Gonzalez. After a grueling contest with Rabun the night before, the shorthanded Panthers simply had nothing left in the tank during a 5-0 defeat.

"We had several players who were really banged up from the Rabun County game," Union County Head Coach Tim Hunter said. "It's very hard to play physical soccer games back to back like that. We were still feeling the effects of the Rabun game as our guys put so much into that game that it really wiped them out."

A silver lining from the loss at Heritage-Catoosa is that Coach Hunter was shown that his team has a little more depth than he originally thought.

"Jeremy Webb came in and played a lot of minutes for us and did really well in the Heritage game," Hunter said. "That was probably the best game of the year for him. He plays really hard and always gives max effort."

"Josh Troche also played

tough. Jesus Mancillas took over a lot of the set pieces as Eric Hougrand got an ankle injury in the first half. Jesus is a great player for us and we are excited about him still having three more years of soccer here. As a whole we didn't play well. We were tired and banged up and they were a quality AAAA team. They kept a lot of pressure on our defense and they were very solid at the back."

Union will be off for spring break but return to action on April 9th when they host White County at 7 p.m.



T.J. Smith



Alex Mancillas



Jair Gonzalez vs Rabun County. Soccer photos by Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers knock off Rabun, fall to AAAA's No. 2 Heritage-Catoosa

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

After falling to Towns County, the Union County Lady Panthers responded with a critical 3-1 Region 8-AA victory over Rabun County to qualify for the Class AA State Tournament.

Thursday, Union was up against a buzz saw as they traveled to take on an undefeated and second ranked Heritage-Catoosa from Class AAAA and fell 5-1.

"Overall I was very proud of the girls and their play," Union Head Coach Tim Hunter said. "That is the kind of game that can help you get ready for state play as it shows the level of intensity our girls need."

Against Rabun, Union struck first when Maddy Morlock found Marissa Akin for a goal.

The Lady Panthers would go on the offensive early in the second half as Morlock reached the scoring column again, this time off an assist from Kristena Zeger.

Zeger got her chance to strike later in the contest when she scored off a feed from Camryn Carter.

In Union's loss at Heritage, Coach Hunter was proud of his squad's performance.

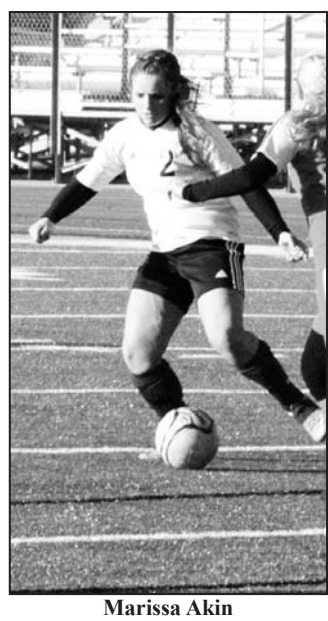
"We played exceptionally well in the loss," Hunter said. "They got up 4-0 in the first half. We played even and really won the second half. The girls were really the aggressors in the second half and put forth a very strong showing and I was proud of how hard they played and the fact that they kept fighting in the face of a very strong opponent."

"Erin Innis played extremely well in midfield. She really showed her skill and quality against some outstanding midfield players.

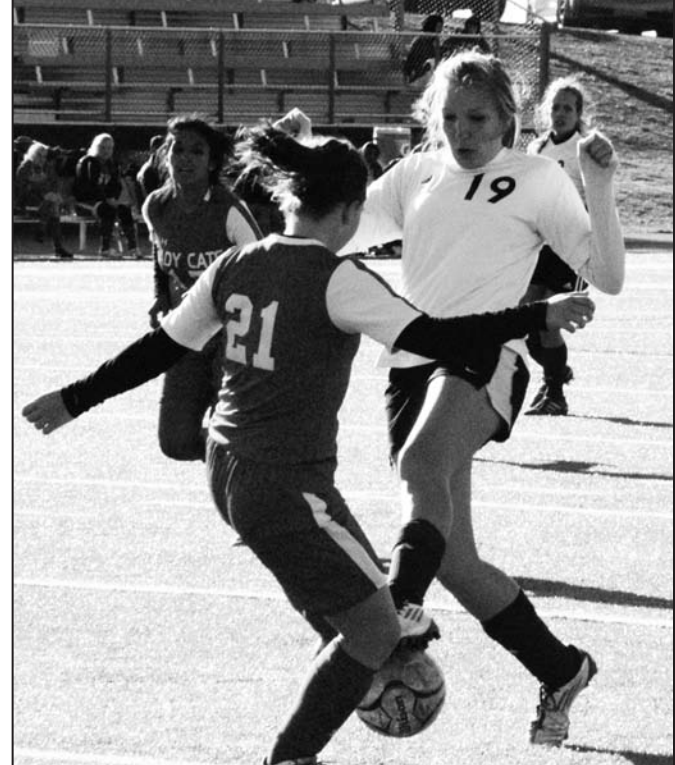
Taylor Burton played very strong at the back. She was focused and physical and ended several would be shots by the Heritage players.

Ansley Gutierrez also had a very strong showing at keeper. She faced a lot of shots and really stepped up as a player. She made at least three amazing saves on would be goals. Her play kept us in the game and did a lot to inspire the players in front of her."

The Lady Panthers are also off during spring break and will host White County on April 9th at 5 p.m.



Marissa Akin



Shelby Brown battles with Rabun County. Photos by Todd Forrest