

# Sports

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## Panthers slug their way back into the driver's seat

### Eight straight wins breathe new life back into Union's postseason aspirations

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When asked about his team's eight-game win streak, Union County Head Coach Brandon Bradburn replied, "winning is contagious."

Last week the Panthers (15-4, 7-3) scored a home field advantage-saving victory over Rabun County 12-9. Over the weekend, Union swept Social Circle 11-5 and 11-7, then got some help from Oglethorpe County, who defeated Rabun and knocked them into a tie for second with Union where the Panthers own the tiebreaker.

The Panthers and Wildcats both have a game left with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* 3rd ranked Jefferson Dragons who are unbeaten in 8-AA. Union will face the Dragons on Tuesday. Their next region contest will be Apr. 15th when the Panthers face Riverside, who Union defeated 10-0 in Gainesville, two weeks ago.

They will then go on the road to Washington-Wilkes for a double-header on Apr. 19. The Tigers have lost all but one region game and are being outscored by almost 10 runs-a-game vs Region 8-AA.

This is a stark contrast from three weeks ago when Union was sitting at 1-3 in Region 8-AA after spinning its wheels for the first month of the season.

Riding a seven-game winning streak, with all seven coming on the road, the Panthers went to Rabun County on Tuesday needing a win to stay in the hunt for one of the top two spots in Region 8-AA. From the moment they arrived, Union meant business and they got the job done, snatching back the tiebreaker from Rabun thanks to eight extra-base hits and timely pitching from senior Lane Everett and junior Tyler Odom.

Union County overcame a three-run hole by pounding out seven runs in the final three innings, resulting in a 12-9 victory over the Wildcats and their ace Stetson Scott, who took a one-hitter into the seventh in Rabun's 4-2 win over Union last month.

Sophomore Joseph Mancuso led the late inning charge courtesy of a three-run bomb in the fifth to knot the score at 8-8.

Trailing 8-5 after four innings, junior Hunter Hughes kick-started the fifth with a leadoff single. Everett followed with a double, setting the table for Mancuso's blast.

"Joe's three-run moonshot was the turning point in the game," Coach Bradburn said. "We were chipping away the entire game, and knew we would have a chance to make up that lead, but in one swing of the bat we had tied things up 8-8. That gave everybody that spark, and we never looked back from that."

The Panthers put up three more in the sixth behind a leadoff double from junior Robert Prunier. Sophomore Josh Daniel followed suit by smacking a two-strike, RBI



Tyler Odom delivers during Union's game one win over Social Circle on Saturday. The win was his fourth of the year. Photo/Todd Forrest

double to left to give Union its first lead since the third inning. Two batters later, Everett brought in Daniel and then with two outs, junior Jake Sisum came through with an RBI single to left, staking Union to an 11-8 lead.

Rabun rallied in their half of the sixth, chasing Everett from the mound after 5 2/3 innings of work. Following a hit batter, a double, and a sacrifice fly, the Wildcats were within two runs at 11-9 with two outs and the tying run at the plate. The Panthers were still unable to slam the door on Rabun, so following his sixth walk, Everett gave way to Odom.

With two on and Rabun's senior slugger Jesse Rentz coming to the plate, Coach Bradburn elected to walk Rentz who homered earlier in the contest. The free pass loaded the bases for an 0-for-2 Jacob Segó, and the move paid off as Segó remained hitless after a fly out to Prunier in center.

The Panthers added an insurance run in the seventh when Daniel ripped a two-out double to center, scoring senior Garrett Nix.

Odom made quick work of the Wildcats in the seventh, sitting them down 1-2-3 with a pair of K's and a groundout to Hughes at short for the final out.

In 1 1/3 innings, Odom didn't allow a hit, struck out two and walked one while picking up his second save of the year.

"I decided to go with Tyler because I knew he could come in there and throw strikes and give our defense a chance," Coach Bradburn said.

Hughes finished with a 2-for-4 night at the plate with a double, a walk, a run, and 2 RBIs. Daniel doubled twice during a 3-for-5 performance that included 3 runs, 2 RBIs, and 2 stolen bases. Mancuso swiped a base and went 2-for-3. He drove in three runs, scored three runs, doubled, homered, and drew a first inning walk for Union's second run.

On the first pitch of the game, Daniel reached on a bunt

single and later scored along with Mancuso on a Rabun error to make it a 2-0 game.

The Wildcats, arguably, got plenty of home cooking and it started in the first inning. Rabun got one run back on the first of three balks that Everett was tagged with in the early going. However the Panther bats took some of the pressure off their ace by tacking on two more runs in the second frame. Barnett was hit by a 1-1 pitch with one out, bringing Nix in as a courtesy runner. Prunier followed with a single and two batters later, Hughes delivered with a two-out, two-run double for a 4-1 Union advantage.

Everett was hit with two more balks in the bottom of the second after Rentz opened the inning with a solo homer. Two walks, an error, and a base hit ensued. Throw in the two balks and you had a tie game after two innings.

"There is something called a 'gorilla move' that I and the other coaches had never heard of," Coach Bradburn said. "There should have been some type of warning or heads up before going crazy on the balk calls. There were also two balk calls on him not coming set. It really made for a few awkward couple of innings between us coaches, the umpires, and Lane."

Mancuso opened the third with a leadoff double and the Panthers played small ball to get a run. Sisum grounded out to advance Mancuso. Burks brought him in with a sacrifice fly to right field.

The Wildcats picked up three runs in the bottom of third after a leadoff walk, single to center, and an error that drove in one. Two batters later and with two outs, junior Zach Gragg singled to left, bringing in two more and putting Rabun on top 7-5.

Scott, the Wildcats' ace and Second Team All-Region right-hander retired the Panthers in order after inducing a double-play ball to end the fourth. Rabun tacked on another run in their half of the inning despite Everett sitting down the first Wildcat swinging and the



Josh Daniel with an RBI double vs Social Circle. Photo/Todd Forrest

second one looking at strike three. Unfortunately, consecutive walks, a double steal and a passed ball gave Rabun its eighth run going into the fifth where Mancuso blasted the first pitch he saw from Scott.

Union brutalized the Wildcats' pitching staff, delivering 15 hits with eight going for extra bases. Of Rabun's seven hits, two went for extra bases.

"We weren't swinging at the first pitch every time and were getting into positive counts at the plate," Coach Bradburn said. "We were being selective and waiting for our pitch to hit, and that can be frustrating for any opposing pitcher."

Scott departed from the mound in the sixth, giving way to senior pitcher Chase Groom, who finished the game for the Wildcats. He allowed two runs off four hits while striking out two.

Everett finished with an outing of 5 2/3 innings, striking out six, surrendering 7 hits, with only two of the nine runs being earned. However, six walks, three balks, and three Panther errors played the role of equalizer for Everett who labored through 115 pitches with 66 being strikes.

"He only gave up two earned runs," Coach Bradburn said in defense of his ace. "They scored a lot on (him), but most of that can be attributed to our poor defense. I was really proud of our team's attitude. Sometimes you just don't play clean defense, but we didn't let that transition over to the offensive side."

The W over Rabun was a victory on more than one front for Union. With the tiebreaker being combined scores for the two games, the Panthers 12-9 win is by a greater margin than Rabun's 4-2 win over Union. With the Panthers now riding high on a wave of momentum generated by eight straight wins Coach Bradburn likes his team's chances of hanging on to that No. 2 spot in 8-AA.

"Since we gift wrapped the last game to Jefferson, we knew we could hit and play with any team," Coach Bradburn said. "We haven't made it easy on ourselves with some

poor defensive games, but we have been out slugging everybody else. It's a hard way to live, we know we have to improve every day in all facets of the game."

Over the weekend, the Panthers hosted Social Circle, scoring 11 runs in each game. And while the first game was all Union 11-5, the Redskins gave the home team all that they could handle in game two 11-7.

Mancuso took the mound in that second game and couldn't make it out of the first inning.

Daniel, who worked a couple of innings in the first game, entered and got out of the inning with his team trailing 4-0.

Mancuso got a run back in the first with an RBI groundout, but the Redskins got a pair in the second.

Behind 6-1, Barnett and Daniel walked and Hughes brought in Barnett with a groundout. With two outs, Social Circle shot themselves in the foot twice with a pair of errors, allowing two more runs to cross.

Daniel allowed an RBI double in the third, making it 7-4 Redskins, but Hughes scored sophomore Lance Rich and Prunier by lining a double to center.

Without further damage in the fourth, the Panthers took their first lead of the game thanks to a two-run single from Daniel.

Everett took the ball in the fifth and crushed any hopes of a Redskins rally. The Panthers' lineup continued putting runs on the board with an RBI double by Sisum and an RBI single by Rich. Union would add another run in the sixth when Mancuso doubled home fellow sophomore Andrew Brown.

Hughes went 1-for-4 with 3 RBIs, Daniel was 1-for-3 with 2 RBIs and 2 runs, and Mancuso finished 1-for-5 and 2 RBIs. Sisum and Rich each finished with a two-hit day at the plate.

The first game saw Odom toss five innings, picking up his fourth win of the season. And before he exited, the Panthers had things under control with an 11-4 lead. Despite the seven-run margin,

both teams churned out just six hits a piece.

Daniel continued to rake, going 2-for-3 with a double, three runs and a pair of RBIs. He also went 2 innings on the mound, allowing 2 hits, and one unearned run. Burks also scored three times and doubled during a 2-for-2 game.

In the first inning, Mancuso brought in Daniel with a sacrifice fly but the Redskins tied the game up at 1-1 in the top of the second.

Union pounded out five runs in the second ignited by Burks taking one for the team, reaching on a hit-by-pitch. Brown walked putting two aboard and Barnett's bunt forced an errant throw to first, scoring Burks. Prunier walked, setting up the top of the lineup.

Daniel and Hughes connected on back-to-back doubles and Everett brought in Daniel on a grounder to short.

Three more Panther runs came in the third thanks to two singles, two walks, and a pair of Social Circle errors.

Burks and Brown brought in Union's final two runs of the game with a double and a groundout.

Daniel recorded his second win of the season, going 3 1/3 innings, allowing one earned, with three walks, and three strikeouts.

"It had been a while since Joe had seen mound time, so he was a little rusty and was just missing on most of his pitches," Coach Bradburn said. "Josh Daniel really stepped up and ate some innings out there. He didn't have his best stuff, but was throwing strikes and giving us a chance to hang around."

The Panthers travel to No. 3 Jefferson on Tuesday at 5:55 p.m. looking for that elusive win over the Dragons. The last three contests have seen Union either tied or ahead during the seventh inning in all three.

On Wednesday, Union plays host to Hayesville, NC in a non-region contest at 5 p.m. The Panthers then get six days off in preparation for their final three 8-AA games, starting on Apr. 15th.

"We aren't planning for Hayesville at all," Coach Bradburn said. "We are going to go into the Jefferson game with a World Series Game 7 mentality, like we do every Region game, and see what we have left for Hayesville. It will be a good opportunity to work on things and try to get sharper for the end of our season."

With four of Union's potential first round opponents from Region 6 currently ranked by the AJC (1st, 2nd, 8th, and 9th), holding on to second and hosting the first round of State would be a huge bonus.

"The No. 2 seed is very important, but I think at this stage of the season, you don't really focus on it too much," Coach Bradburn said. "You just try to keep the kids focused on the game in front of them, and not worry about other teams results. We want to play in front of our home crowd in state playoffs. I feel like it's important for our school and our community."

## Union soccer teams using break to gear up for stretch run

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Union County's soccer teams got to enjoy their spring break without a game or practice but returned to the field on Sunday.

Union County was last in action back on March 28th when they hosted Jefferson. They will return to the field of play on Friday when they host Social Circle for Senior Night at 5:30 p.m.

Both teams used the well-earned break to rest up after 6 weeks of grueling action.

"We practiced the Sunday we returned from spring break," Union County Head Coach Tim Hunter said. "Our kids needed some rest time and time to get healed for our end of the season run. Our focus now is win these next three region games so the girls get the second seed."

"The boys are trying to lock up a state tournament berth. We should be back and healthy after the break. We may not have Jacob Rogers until later but the rest of the team should be at full strength."

Up next for the guys is Social Circle. The Redskins are currently 0-6 overall and 0-3 in Region 8-AA but their record is a bit deceiving.

None of their three region losses were runaways and they lost to Jefferson by the same score (4-1) that the Panthers fell to the Dragons.

They own a pair of 8-0 losses to two much larger schools in a nine-win Winder-Barrow squad and a six-win Loganville team. They also fell 8-2 to a 5-4 Jackson County team from Class AAA.

Inside of 8-AA, the Red-



Coaches Jon Krieger and Tim Hunter look on during Union's game at Fannin. Photo/Goal Keeper's Club

skins fell 5-1 at Riverside Military Academy in the region opener. A week later they fell 2-1 to Rabun County.

"Social Circle is a good team on both sides and often a difficult team to play against," Coach Hunter said. "They play a really high back line and try to play the offside trap. Our boys will really have to get our wings involved and we'll have to pass and possess the ball well to work it up the field."

Meanwhile the Lady Redskins are 3-3 overall and 1-1 in 8-AA.

They shutout Prince Avenue 1-0 in the season opener, and won 3-1 in a second meeting last month. They fell 7-0 to Loganville, 4-0 to Jackson County, and 7-0 to Winder-Barrow.

On March 14th the Lady

Redskins took care of Rabun County 3-1, then the following week, dropped a 4-1 affair with Jefferson.

"I think their girls will have a hard time with our speed up front and we will try to make them pay for playing the trap," Coach Hunter said. "Both games are really must wins. Girls need it to get a home (State) game and boys need it because they must win at least two more Region games to qualify for State"

There have been some dates set for makeup games for games that were canceled earlier in the season.

The Panthers were supposed to host Towns County in the season opener but that game has been moved to Apr. 21st.

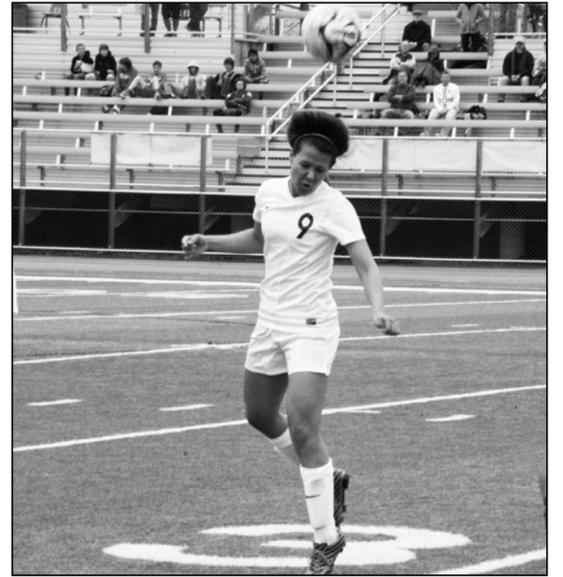
The March 25th games at

Rabun County have been moved to Apr. 15th.

"Our girls approach to Rabun hasn't changed," Coach Hunter said. "We just have to bring our intensity and we will be fine. The girls need to score early to force them to not bunker at the back and they will have a hard time guarding us. The boys will have to play very well as they are skilled at every spot. They are also fast and athletic at the back which can mean problems for anyone."

Union only has two home games left but they are very important for different reasons. Friday's Senior Night will be packed full of emotion as the seniors and their families are honored.

On April 21st, arch-rival Towns County comes to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium where



Junior Camryn Carter with a header vs Jefferson. Photo/Todd Forrest

the Panthers are hoping to erase the memory of their first ever loss to Towns. The Lady Panthers are looking to pick up their first win over Towns in three games. Last year the Lady Indians took the second meeting 1-0 and then Union

tied the Lady Indians 2-2 in their first encounter of 2014.

"We really want our fans to stay and cheer us on as it makes the atmosphere so great and helps give our kids energy," Coach Hunter said.