

# Sports

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## 2013 Union County Soccer season: two for the ages

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For the Class of 2013, this spring's Panthers and Lady Panthers' soccer season was a year to remember.

For the returning players, it will be looked at in the rear-view mirror as the year that Union soccer turned the corner.

Both teams won a State playoff game, in the same year, for the first time in the school's soccer history, which began in the late 1990s.

On Thursday, May 23rd the soccer teams held their year-end banquet at Meeks Park. With Coaches Tim Hunter and Jon Krieger manning the grill, along with corn hole games and plenty of fellowship, the banquet delivered more of a family reunion-type atmosphere than your typical sports banquet.

As Coach Hunter and Coach Krieger handed out awards to both Union soccer squads, it was obvious to everyone that Union's soccer players have caught the eye of more than just the locals.

Seven Lady Panthers picked up 8-AA All-Region Team honors while eight Panthers got the nod for the All-Region Team.

Taylor Burton, sophomore Camryn Carter, and freshman Ansley Garrison were named Honorable Mention.

Erin Innis and Kristina Zeger received Second Team honors, and Ansley Gutierrez and Marissa Akin were selected as First Team All-Region. Akin has also committed to play at Piedmont College next season.

For the guys, Tim McKenna, Josh Troche, sophomore Keaton Dyer, and freshman Jesus Mancillas were Honorable Mention.

Eric Hougrand and sophomore Kyle Hamby made Second Team All-Region. Jair Gonzalez and junior T.J. Smith both picked up First Team Honors.

Gonzalez was even recognized Statewide. Union's midfielder was the only player chosen from Class AA to play for the Blue Team in the DiVarsity soccer match last month at



Lady Panthers' soccer award winners after the cookout at Meeks Park. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County Panthers' soccer award winners after the cookout at Meeks Park. Photo/Todd Forrest

Sprayberry High in Marietta.

Smith also made quite a name for himself by leading the entire Region with 24 goals.

Before Hunter handed out the awards, he made it clear that with two extremely deep and talented squads, picking the best of the best was one of the most difficult tasks that he's faced this year.

"I want to tell everyone that it's very hard to make these picks when you have two teams where all of the players did so well, and did so much," Hunter said.

Hunter began with the Lady Panthers' awards, with the first plaque being the **Offensive Award**, presented to Zeger and Carter.

"This award came down

to goals and assists, and who had the most combined," Hunter said. "It was a tie, and I decided not to break the tie since both of them were very deserving."

The **Defensive Award** went to Burton and Gutierrez.

Hunter pointed out that defense isn't based on statistics, and the only number you can use is the opposition's total number of goals scored.

"This award isn't stat based," Hunter said. "The only way to choose this is by looking at who we absolutely could not do without in the back. We had a lot of people who played great for us, but we knew that if we didn't have Taylor and Ansley in there, we were in trouble."

The **Coach's Award**, went to Innis and Maddy Mor-

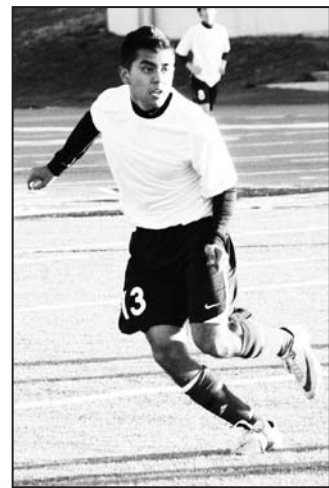
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"I had two girls this year who always did exactly what I needed them to do," Hunter said. "But (Innis) improved so much in a lot of the intangible parts of the game. Where she really stepped up was by guarding the best offensive player from the other team. And (Maddy) plays hard all of the time. She is a great player and does so many wonderful things for us."

The next award on the girls side was the **M.V.P.** which went to Akin.

"She started all four years and I'm very proud to give her this award," Hunter said.

Hunter then handed out, what he calls, "**The Purple Heart**" to Shelby Brown and Mikala Jones. The award went



Jair Gonzalez



Marissa Akin

to players that epitomized a team-first mentality.

"I'm very proud of these two seniors, who have done more than I could have ever asked of them," Hunter said.

The last award was a tradition that Hunter plans on starting and it's titled the **Goal of the Year**.

"The criteria for this is, the best looking goal, the most amazing goal, or a goal in the biggest moment possible," Hunter said.

That trophy was given to Kenna Bauman for her corner kick goal during the State playoff game at Manchester.

"She took a corner kick and bent it in the back post, untouched, right behind the keeper."

The boys' awards began with Coach Hunter handing out the **Offensive Award** to Smith

and Hougrand.

"Statistically it was very easy," Hunter said. "T.J. led the region in goals so that one was simple. Eric was our assist leader, and during a four-game span, he either scored or assisted every single goal."

The **Defensive Award** was given to McKenna.

"If you came to any of our games late in the season, especially against good teams like Lumpkin, Jefferson, and at Chattahoochee, you would see we were playing short-handed," Hunter said. "Our entire back line stepped up and played huge for us all year, so it was a very tough decision."

The two **Coach's Awards** went to Josh Troche and Jeremy Webb.

"These two came out for soccer for the first time this season," Hunter said. "The entire season, these guys were the first ones in drills. They were busting it the entire time at practice, games, and in everything we did. I am so thankful that they came out because they made us so much better as a team."

There were two **M.V.P.** awards handed out on the boys' side. The first one was the **Most Versatile Player**, presented to Hamby.

"If I put him in at sweeper, he played great," Hunter said. "If I put him at midfielder, he played great, I could move him back on defense, move him up front, I could have put him in at goalie if I wanted to. It's hard enough to ask a player to play any spot, but he played every spot great."

The **Most Valuable Player**, without a doubt, was Gonzalez.

"This award isn't just about play on the field," Hunter said. "He has been in my home-room for all four years, and when the season started, I told him that 'I need a leader. I need someone to get the practices started. I need someone to teach the younger players.' And when your best player is your hardest working player, you really have a chance."

The **Goal of the Year** went to Smith for his 35-yard, *See Soccer, Page 13A*

## Panther baseball hands out hardware; reflects on 2013

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The 2013 Union County Panther baseball season could have easily been written off as a rebuilding year.

Coming off a ho-hum 12-10 season, Union had a new coach, a revamped pitching staff, and new faces all around the diamond and in the outfield.

The Panthers, who finished 17-8, opened in late February with three wins in four games, and due to the weather, entered Region 8-AA play with just a handful of games under their belt.

Two wins at Oglethorpe County sparked the Panthers to a 13-3 victory over Rabun County that provided Union the confidence it needed to remain in the mix for a Region Championship well into April.

Two extra-inning losses to Jefferson knocked Union into the No. 2 spot in 8-AA, but due to sweeping both Rabun and Riverside, the Panthers had home field advantage in State, wrapped up more than two weeks before the first pitch was thrown in the opening round.

The Panthers held off a young and scrappy Bowdon squad in the first round before falling in an eventual Final Four team at Pepperell.

On Thursday, May 23rd, Coach Brandon Bradburn gathered his troops together one last time at North Georgia Technical College to reminisce and honor those who played a vital role in Union County baseball's most successful season in 18 years.

The first award handed out was the **Iron Panther Award** and it went to sophomore catcher Chase Barnett.

"This award goes to the player that day in, and day out, shows how tough and durable they are," Bradburn said. "He had little to no varsity experience coming into this season, and almost didn't play this season. I am so glad he changed his mind. He played in every game except three, and that was to give him rest, even though he didn't want it. Battered, bruised, or broke, it didn't matter because



Union County Panther baseball award winners. Chase Barnett is not pictured. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County Panther baseball's seniors during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

he was going to be there for the team. One of the compliments that I got from an opposing coach is, 'I can't believe he's just a sophomore.'"

The award for **Pitcher of the Year** was too close to call, so Bradburn chose two: Kalvin Duckworth and Lane Everett.

"That was the toughest decision that I had to make," Bradburn said. "Having to choose one pitcher and say he's our best. Our pitching staff really didn't have much varsity pitching experience, but you would have never known it by the way they performed."

"(They) have been throwing bullpen since October and have been working on the mental side of pitching as much as the physical side. Pitching was the backbone to our success,

and you see the type of success we've had all season. I'm so thankful to have (them) for another year."

The **Most Improved Award** went to T Bentley.

"This season, potential turned into power," Bradburn said. "He started off the season red hot and never really cooled down. Offensively he made it look so easy, but really it was an illusion because of the amount of work that he put into it. Defensively he improved due to the hard work and determination that he put into his craft."

The **Coach's Award** was given to second baseman Cooper Patton, the only Panther not to commit an error all season.

"This award goes to a dear friend of mine," Bradburn said. "This young man saw a lot of

playing time this year and works so hard to improve his game. He was always coming to me, asking how he could get better. And I told him, and he worked hard. He got better."

"He is truly a rare breed. He is so friendly, compassionate, hard working and mature. And on top of all that, he's a darn good baseball player. He is also someone that I will never have to worry about the way he will represent Union County High School and Panther baseball. He understood what it takes to actually win games and he hit the most important sacrifice fly of the season against Bowdon. That just fit perfectly into showing how unselfish he really is."

The **Team Award** went to Jared Croskey. "He wasn't afraid to call



Coach Brandon Bradburn presents senior Cooper Patton with the Coach's Award. Photo/Todd Forrest

you out if he thought you were doing something detrimental to the team," Bradburn said. "He wouldn't accept losing games, and if we did, he knew what needed to be fixed and made sure it was fixed by our next game."

"I don't know if I ever told him this, but I feel like he was the heartbeat of our team. He was the glue that held it all together. We all fed off his emotion on the field and in the dugout. He also pitched Game Three against Bowdon to show off his skills."

Cody Davenport was named the **Defensive Player of the Year**.

"He is probably the best catching outfielder that I've ever coached at Union County and I've had a bunch of good ones," Bradburn said. "He got to balls that I thought, 'there is no way anyone should get to that ball.' The thing about it is, he made it look really easy. He was one of the fastest on the team, but he ran like a deer, very graceful. It made it a whole lot easier on the team knowing that he was out there and nothing was going to drop. He probably doesn't know it, but I've watched him play since Little League and have followed him on up through high school and I'm sad to see him leave."

Wes Aulet received the **Offensive Player of the Year**.

"He is the guy you want at bat when the game is on the line and was a model of consistency

at the plate," Bradburn said. "He was also a leader in the dugout and on the field. He had a no-nonsense approach to practice and games, but still found a way to have a lot of fun at it. He gave our team the quiet confidence that we strive for and was pretty intimidating when the other teams would see him swing the bat. One of the best compliments I received about him is how he got better every year."

Finally, the **M.V.P. Award** went to four-year starter and Region 8-AA Player of the Year Zach Odom.

"With a nickname like 'superstar,' we expect a lot out of you," Bradburn said. "In my six years of coaching, he is the hardest-working player that I have ever had. I hope the younger players took notes on how hard he practices and what it takes to be the best ball player that you can be."

"Offensively, he was either hot, or really hot. He reached base on two-thirds of his at bats this season, which is unheard of. He was always the guy that other team would have to watch out for. Defensively, he was one of the best shortstops in Georgia, but he would never tell you he was. He left some pretty big shoes to fill."

The *North Georgia News* would like to thank Union County baseball and Coach Bradburn for letting us tag along during an unforgettable 2013 Panther baseball season.