

# Sports

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## Softball: New-look Lady Panthers primed and ready for opening day

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The first day of school might be a week away, but the 2022-23 UCHS athletic calendar opens this weekend when the Lady Panthers softball team hosts Commerce and Lumpkin County for 'Diamond Day' on Saturday, Aug. 6.

The action gets underway at 11 a.m. when Union County and Lumpkin County clash in the 2022 season opener. Following a Lumpkin County vs. Commerce meeting at 1 p.m., the Lady Panthers and Commerce will finish the day's action with a 3 p.m. contest.

With a first-year head coach and nine departed seniors from 2021, Union County softball will look different this fall as they begin their quest for the program's third region title in a refurbished Region 8-AA.

Former UCMS head coach and UCHS assistant Carissa Owenby takes over for head coach Stephen Mitchell, who departed Blairsville following an Elite Eight appearance in his fourth and final season at the helm.

However, the cupboard isn't completely bare for Owenby with the return of junior ace Sierra Burnette following two stellar seasons in the circle and a breakout 2021 campaign with her bat. As a sophomore, Burnette compiled a 10-8 record and a 2.95 ERA over 102 innings after posting a 2.78 ERA in 37 2/3 frames in 2020.

At the plate, Burnette's two homers tied for the team lead and her 17 RBIs were second most. Her nine doubles and 12 extra base hits topped Union County during a 2021 season that saw Burnette hit .340 with a .575 slugging percentage.



Intra-family bragging rights were on the line last week when Union County softball hosted a Parents vs. Players softball game on Friday, July 29 at the UCHS Softball field. Photo courtesy of UCHS Softball.

Junior catcher Gracie Gladding joined Union County midway through the 2021 season and didn't miss a beat, hitting .367 and slugging .600 in 15 games. Her go-ahead 3-run homer in the seventh inning of Union County's Sweet 16 win over Toombs County helped propel the Lady Panthers to their first Elite Eight in five years.

Perhaps the most experienced Lady Panther is senior infielder Chloe Potts, who has tallied 33 hits, 25 runs and 13 stolen bases in more than 160 plate appearances over the previous three seasons while spending most of her time at second base.

Meanwhile, first base third base and shortstop are all positions that belonged to experienced seniors in 2021 and are Owenby's biggest concern entering 2022.

"Jaycee Seabolt is a senior and she will find her way on the field somewhere,"

Owenby said. "We're looking at her at third and first, and maybe at catcher too. The other spots will probably go to Sloane Dyer and Ila Bragg. We also have [junior] Georgia Patton, who plays shortstop."

The sophomore duo of Bragg and Dyer should also see action in the pitcher's circle as they battle for the No. 2 spot behind Burnette. Despite combining for 11 2/3 varsity innings, Bragg and Dyer spent most of 2021 on the JV squad. But with the graduation of Union County's previous No. 2 pitcher, Tori Tracy (35 1/3 innings in 2021), both should see a substantial increase this fall.

As for Patton, she appeared in 18 games in 2021, scoring eight runs while seeing most of her action on the base paths.

Returning junior Katie Byers is expected to take on a more significant role in 2022. She hit .333 last year, scoring

nine runs with six steals in 19 games, primarily as a courtesy runner. Playing behind centerfielder Aubrey Banton for the past two years, Byers finally receives an opportunity to show off her elite glove work this fall.

As for the corner outfield spots, senior leftfielder Caroline Karnes returns to the program after sitting out the 2021 season. As a sophomore, Karnes appeared in 14 games during the 2020 campaign.

Junior Jewel Massey is the favorite to patrol right field after swiping eight bags in 17 games last year.

The Lady Panthers added two freshman pitchers, Ayla Jamison and Jaslyn Roberts, giving Owenby four capable arms if needed.

Another player to watch this fall is Brooklyn Brown, who drew high praise from her coach.

"She's a junior and she plays second base, so she's

kind of stuck behind Chloe [Potts], but she's fantastic and a great teammate," Owenby said. "She always keeping us hyped up and she's always supportive of everybody all the time."

Others returning from last year include Lilly Collins, Lily Helton, Anniston Howse, Mikala Souther and Bella Stepp.

On Saturday, Owenby doesn't anticipate any restrictions on her pitchers, but she hopes to get a look at as many players as possible.

"I want to see everyone and what they can do," she said. "But there is no limitations [on the pitchers]. They've been playing travel ball all summer so they should be ready to go."

"Overall, I hope we play to our ability and communicate well on the field. I want our girls to be supportive of each other and be good teammates, and just show everyone what

we are capable of doing."

During the offseason, Region 8-AA underwent a massive shakeup with the departures of Rabun County and Elbert County. Replacing the two longtime region foes is East Jackson, and Providence Christian (Lilburn). Other region newcomers Athens Academy and Fellowship Christian are not playing softball.

Among the newcomers, East Jackson is the most likely contender for a region title after finishing third in 8-AA a year ago.

Providence squeaked into the Class A-Private playoffs but lost to ELCA in consecutive games by a combined score of 28-0 during the first round.

With four-straight region titles, Banks County once again enters with a bullseye on its back. But Owenby believes that despite the graduation losses, her squad could be in the hunt to dethrone the Leopards in October.

"I'm just excited to get started and get these girls rolling so they can show what they are capable of," she said. "They're young, but they're very capable of accomplishing great things."

Saturday's first pitch is slated for 11 a.m. vs. Lumpkin County. Union County softball's Diamond Day will also feature a baked goods silent auction during the three games.

Union County will hit the road on Monday, Aug. 8 with a 6 p.m. contest at White County.

On Friday, July 29, Union County softball hosted a Parents vs. Parents game that Owenby declared a tremendous success.

"It went really well and we had a lot of fun," she said. "I really appreciate the support from the parents. Of course, it's always fun to let the girls play against their parents. They loved it."

### 2022 Union County Softball Schedule



Date	Opponent	Location	Time
8/6	Lumpkin	Home	11:00
8/6	Commerce	Home	3:00
8/8	White	Away	6:00#
8/13	Alcovy	Away(Prince)	11:00
8/13	Prince Ave	Away	1:00
8/15	Lumpkin	Away	6:00#
8/16	Fannin	Home	5:30
8/20	Bremen	UNG	TBA
8/20	Dawson	UNG	TBA
8/23	Pickens	Away	6:00#
8/26	BASA	Oconee Tour(2)	4:00
8/26	PACE	Oconee Tour(2)	6:00
8/27	Savannah Chr.	Oconee Tour(2)	9:00am
8/27	Ware	Oconee Tour(2)	11:00am
8/31	Pickens	Home	6:00#
9/6	Commerce	Away	6:00#
9/8	Banks	Away	5:30*
9/12	Rabun	Away	6:00#
9/13	East Jackson	Home	5:30*
9/15	Providence	Home	5:30*
9/20	Banks	Home	5:30*
9/27	East Jackson	Away	5:30*
9/28	White	Home	6:00#
9/29	Providence	Away	5:00*
10/4	Banks	Away	5:30*
10/6	East Jackson	Home	5:30*
10/11	Providence	Home	5:30*
10/13	Rabun	Home	6:00#

## First-ever UCHS youth baseball camp attracts more than 20 youngsters

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Head coach Zach Odom and his UCHS baseball players hosted its first youth camp last month, topping out at more than 20 attendees.

Despite the recreation department's state tournaments, Odom was pleased with the turnout and hopes to build on the solid foundation laid by this year's event.

"We ended up with 19 campers but we lost a few kids because [the camp] ended up being at the same time as all the state games," he said. "That was an error on my part, but being the first time we've ever done this, I didn't even think about checking with the rec department before scheduling. But we still ended with 19, with one coming from out of town."

Designed for grades 2-8, the camp taught the fundamentals while helping local youth develop a love for the Great American Pastime.

"We focused on the fundamentals and the right way to play the game, but it was also about getting them out there and letting them have fun," he said. "The biggest



Union County baseball players with youth campers.

thing was letting them come up to the high school field and spend time with our [Panthers baseball team] and give them someone to look up to."

The three day event ran from July 11-13, but Odom admitted pulling off their first youth camp took a complete team effort.

"We had some parents really step up and help out

with T-shirts and registration," he said. "We really want to thank all the parents, players, coaches and kids that came out. It was the first camp we've ever held so it was a learning experience for all of us. All of the kids were tremendous and we looking forward to growing it next year and in the future."