

Sports

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Softball: Union blasts Rabun County, drops 10-7 shootout to Elbert Burnette slugs first career homer as Lady Panthers thump Fannin County

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Union County dropped a 10-7 thriller to Elbert County in Tuesday's battle of 8-AA's only remaining unbeaten teams but rebounded two days later, trouncing Rabun County 12-0 on Senior Night behind a four-inning no-hitter from sophomore Sierra Burnette.

The week began with an 11-3 victory over Fannin County on Monday, Sept. 13. Senior Tori Tracy and freshman Sloane Dyer combined to limit Fannin to a pair of first-inning runs and one in the third.

During the first-place showdown vs. Elbert County, the Lady Panthers exploded for five runs in the fourth to seize a commanding 7-3 lead. But the lead was short-lived as Elbert answered with four in the fifth and two in the sixth, chasing Burnette from the contest after 5 2/3 innings. Union County wouldn't score again as the Blue Devils escaped Blairsville with the W via seven unanswered runs.

Union struck in the first inning when Ansley Collins beat out on an infield single and came around to score on a one-out base hit from Lexi Sisum. But after sitting down six straight to begin her outing, Burnette ran into trouble in the third against the bottom of the order. Consecutive singles and a sacrifice bunt moved the go-ahead run into scoring position when a base hit to right field put Elbert out front 2-1. The fourth single of the frame, followed by a sacrifice fly, spotted the Blue Devils a 3-1 advantage entering the Union half of the inning.

A solo home run to right field from Sisum pulled the Lady Panthers within a run at 3-2, then Burnette escaped the fourth via an inning-ending defensive gem. With one out and one aboard, senior shortstop Emma Roxbury chased down a soft flare headed for shallow left field with a back-handed grab, then fired across her body to double-off the runner at first.

Roxbury's twin killing ignited the five-run fourth that she eventually capped off with a bases-clearing triple. Senior Kaelyn Jones started the rally with a one-out single, followed by a walk to fellow 12th grader Aubrie Banton.

With the go-ahead run aboard, Elbert County displayed a short leash by yanking the starting pitcher. Her replacement immediately surrendered a game-tying double to Gracie Gladding, then plunked Caley Davis and gave up an opposite-field single to Collins.

With the bags full of Lady Panthers, Roxbury laced the first pitch down the right-field line, clearing the bases and spotting Union a 7-3 lead. Consecutive pop-ups by the heart of the order ended the inning with Roxbury standing on third, which ultimately proved costly.

The fifth got underway with Burnette's first walk in more than 11 innings of action.

After a bunt advanced the runner, Burnette issued a second free pass then allowed a tough-luck infield single. A base hit into left cut the Union lead in half, and a sacrifice fly pulled Elbert within a run followed by a two-out game-tying single.

The Lady Panthers couldn't answer in the bottom half of the fifth and picked an inopportune moment for the lineup's only 1-2-3 frame of the



Union County's nine seniors (L-R): Rebekah Chambers, Lexi Sisum, Ansley Collins, Caley Davis, Emma Roxbury, Aubrie Banton, Tori Tracy, Emily Byers and Kaelyn Jones. Photo/Todd Forrest

contest. Elbert opened the sixth with a leadoff single, but a pop-up and strikeout moved Burnette one out away from escaping with the game still even at 7-7. Two walks (one intentional) loaded the bases and the Blue Devils made Union County pay by delivering their second two-out, two-run single to grab a 9-7 lead.

Tracy entered with the bases loaded and induced a groundout to keep her team within striking distance.

The Lady Panthers' best late-game opportunity came during the bottom-half of the sixth when Gladding led off by dumping an opposite-field single into right-center. Davis moved the courtesy runner Jewell Massey to second with a bunt, but the inning went south when the ensuing batter, Collins, lined a base-hit up the middle, forcing Massey to pause on the frozen rope hit in her direction. As she broke for third, the center fielder came up firing and cut down the runner at third on what appeared to be a late tag on the sliding Massey.

The play ran Union out of the inning and led to the ejection of third base coach Robby Roxbury, who expressed his disagreement with the ruling.

Elbert tacked on its 10th run in the seventh when Banton flashed her arm strength by throwing out a base runner attempting to stretch a single. Emma Roxbury's tag at second base occurred just as a Blue Devils runner came around to score from second, and despite the pleading of the Union coaching staff, the umpire declared the baserunner crossed home before the third out.

Needing three runs in the seventh, Union could only muster a leadoff walk by Sisum, who finished 2 for 3 with a homer, a run and 2 RBIs.

Roxbury's day ended 1 for 3 with a three-run triple. Collins turned in her first-ever four-hit performance - scoring twice and knocking in one during a 4-for-4 game. Gladding went 2 for 3 with one ribby; Jones walked and scored during a 1-for-3 performance. Banton, Davis and Massey all scored once for Union County.

Burnette allowed 10 hits, 9 earned runs and four walks

while fanning two over 5 2/3 innings. Tracy gave up one hit, two walks and an earned run in 1 1/3 innings of work.

Union jumped all over Rabun County on Senior Night with one run in the first and four in both the second and third frames as Burnette bounced back with her second mercy-rule shortened no-no of the year.

Collins walked and stole a bag in the first, coming around to score on an Emma Roxbury base hit. The second began with a walk to Banton, an Emily Byers sacrifice and a Davis walk. Collins built a 3-0 lead with a two-run double, another Roxbury single made it 4-0 and a Tracy fielder's choice opened up a 5-0 margin.

Roxbury knocked in another run to open the scoring in a four-run third. Burnette drew a bases-loaded walk and Jones plated two more on a base knock to left field.

A hit-by-pitch to Byers started the three-run fourth that ended the contest via the mercy rule. Roxbury's seventh RBI in two games scored Byers, followed by a Sisum double and a two-run single from Burnette.

While only striking out two, Burnette's day in the circle ended just two batters above the minimum with Rabun reaching on an error during the first and a hit batter in the third.

Roxbury finished 4 for 4 while driving home four and scoring three times - all good enough for career highs in hits, RBIs and runs.

Collins scored three times during a 2-for-2 game - the first three-run performance of her career. Sisum went 1 for 1 with a double, a hit-by-pitch, a sac bunt and a walk.

Burnette walked twice and drove in three during a 1-for-2 evening. Her three ribbies matched a career-high (at Dawson County, August 2021). Tracy walked and scored, Byers stole a base and scored while Davis walked twice and scored twice.

"These seniors were freshmen when I arrived and they've persevered through the good times and bad," Union head coach Stephen Mitchell said. "This a very special group of kids, but the parents are also a special group. The players have laid a foundation for the program, but the parents have laid a foundation for the Diamond Club. They've put in a lot of work over the last 3-4 years and I'm blessed to work with all of them."

During the 11-3 win over Fannin, Sisum led the onslaught,

going 3 for 3 with two doubles, a pair of ribbies and a stolen base. Burnette smashed her first career homer during the first inning, headlining a 2-for-3, two-RBI game. Emma Roxbury kicked off her red-hot week by going 2 for 3 with a pair of runs.

Tracy fanned two over three-plus innings - scattering eight hits, a walk and three earned runs. Dyer fanned three and walked one while allowing one hit in two innings of work.

Davis, Gladding and Jones each added a hit for Union County. Seniors Rebekah Chambers and Banton chipped in one run apiece.

Following back-to-back hits and a steal of home right out of the gates, Tracy settled down to limit Fannin to two runs. The Lady Panthers quickly put up a three-spot in the bottom of the first when Roxbury reached and scored on a Sisum double and Burnette sent a 2-2 pitch out of the yard.

Tracy escaped a bases-loaded jam in the third with the game tied at 3-3 and Union County added two more in the bottom half of the inning. Collins was hit by a pitch and later scored on a wild pitch; Sisum reached on a bunt single and came around courtesy of an RBI groundout off the bat of Burnette.

Dyer replaced Tracy with

two on in the fourth and fanned the first hitter before getting out of trouble with a line-out double play.

Jones was plunked to lead off the bottom half of the frame and Massey, the pinch-runner, stole a base and later scored for a 6-3 advantage. Union ended the game with five in the fifth when Roxbury, Sisum and Burnette each doubled to start the inning. Junior Chloe Potts brought home Sisum with a groundout and Jones plated the pinch-runner Chambers with an RBI single.

Jones scored on Davis' sacrifice fly and Banton also came around on an errant throw to end the game at 11-3.

Region play resumes at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday when Union hosts Banks County in a critical Region 8-AA matchup. With a win, the Lady Panthers will all but secure a top-two seed in the 8-AA tourney while keeping pace with first-place Elbert County.

Speaking of the Blue Devils, Union County travels to Elberton on Thursday at 5:30 p.m. Region play concludes Tuesday, Sept. 28 with a visit to Rabun County.

"The girls are great kids, they're great students and they're going to do great things," Mitchell added. "And that includes a lot of good softball this year."



Union County softball hosted its annual Cancer Awareness game on Tuesday, Sept. 16. Each Lady Panther played in honor of a selected friend or family member who has battled or is currently battling cancer. Photo/Todd Forrest

