

Sports

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Volleyball: Union County wraps up Area play undefeated

Area Tournament gets underway Tuesday evening at Union County High School

By Todd Forrest
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Union County (13-6, 8-0) enters the upcoming Area 8 Tournament fresh off the program's first victory over Rabun County, capping off an undefeated season in Area play.

"I think this team had a lot of natural talent and they just needed to learn how to use it as a team," Union County head coach Anna Chapman said regarding her team's turnaround from an 0-4 start. "Their teamwork really flourished. They learned to trust each other, communicate and their energy level has been up. Of course, we had try outs four days before our first match, so we had a rough start. COVID really hurt us in that aspect."

Despite clinching the No. 1 seed earlier in the evening with a 2-0 win over Putnam County, the Panthers didn't pull any punches during their 2-0 victory vs. Rabun in the second contest of last Thursday's tri-match.

Seeking their first-ever win over the rival Wildcats, Union County quickly turned a 4-3 deficit into a 10-5 advantage. And despite a pair of ties at 11-11, 18-18 and 21-21, the Panthers never trailed again en route to a 25-23 victory.

Rabun County grabbed an early 6-3 advantage in the second set before quickly turning it into a 13-8 lead. But Union would respond with four straight to pull within a



Sophomore Saylor Noe drew praise from her head coach after the win over Rabun County. Photo/Todd Forrest

point, eventually overtaking the Wildcats at 17-16.

Rallying from a deficit is something Chapman's squad has prepared for all season. And when Union fell behind on multiple occasions vs. Rabun, she was confident that one particular drill would pay dividends when it mattered most.

"[We practice] junior varsity vs. varsity, junior varsity starts with 15 points and varsity has to win," she said.

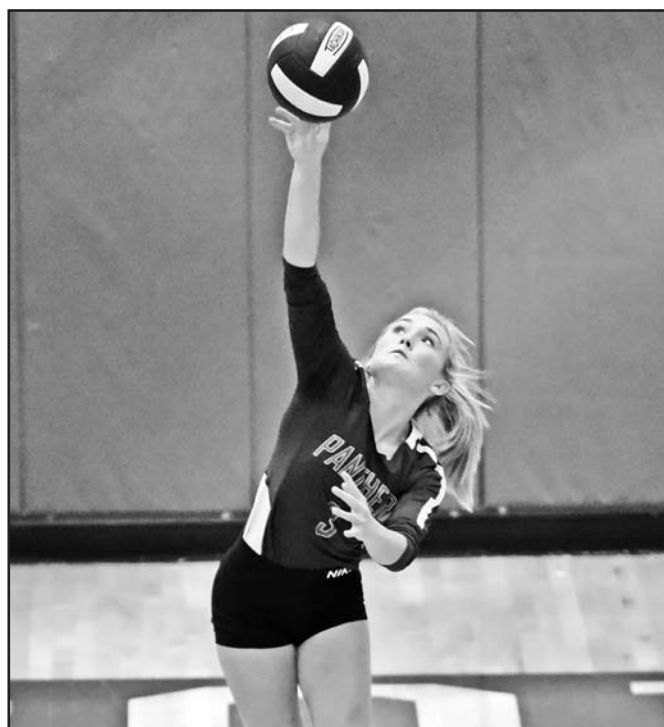
"So we're used to playing from behind. I also think that during the first half of the season, we would get into a rut and wouldn't know how to

get out."

Like a pair of heavy-weights standing toe-to-toe in the center of the ring, Rabun countered for a 19-18 advantage, but Union hit back even harder, using a 4-0 spurt that opened up a 22-19 lead.

After halting the Union run, pulling within 22-20, Rabun never threatened again as the Panthers took three of the next four points to take a 25-21 victory.

"I think so much of tonight's win was mental because Rabun has always been that wall we could never get over," Chapman said. "Saylor



Junior Molly Kay West is three aces away from 50 on the year. Her eight aces vs. Putnam County matched a career high. Photo/Todd Forrest

Noe was phenomenal tonight. Overall, we had some girls who were off and that hurts, but we still managed to pull it together, and we normally do when it matters. We beat Lake Oconee and Oglethorpe County [without key starters] so we had to dig deep. But everyone is back and we're healthy."

Sophomore Saylor Noe finished with a team-high 8 kills in the win. Junior Morgan Fussell added six and fellow-junior Riley Allison, returning from injury, chipped in five.

Sophomore Sophia Swartz had two kills and senior Haley Noe recorded one.

Fussell led the way with two aces while Haley Noe added one. Juniors Molly Kay West and Emma Whicker also finished with an ace.

Haley Noe's 16 digs were a team-high. West had six and Saylor Noe had five; Allison and Whicker added four each while Fussell had three.

Whicker turned in a team-high 19 assists; junior Olivia Blocker added one.

In the previous match, Union County made quick work of Putnam County, 25-10 and 25-8. Despite trailing 3-0 in the first set, the Panthers quickly turned it around with

an 11-1 run. They would open their largest lead of the night at 24-8 before finally closing out the War Eagles, 25-10.

The second set saw Union continue its hot play, scoring the first six points en route to a 9-1 advantage. Putnam trimmed the lead to 11-6 but the Panthers crushed any comeback hopes with a 12-1 outburst that provided Union a comfortable 23-7 cushion that turned into a 25-8 victory.

Fussell and Blocker each turned in 5 kills in the match; Saylor Noe added four and Swartz had three. Haley Noe and Whicker tacked on one apiece.

West finished with 8 aces and 2 digs, Saylor Noe recorded three aces, Allison had two and senior Austyn Davis had one. Haley Noe added one ace to go with a team-high 3 digs.

Whicker had 17 assists and Blocker finished with one.

Up next: The Area Tournament gets underway at 5 p.m. on Tuesday when Union hosts the 8-seed Commerce. At 6 p.m., the No. 4 seed Rabun County takes on fifth-seeded Banks County.

The two winners will square off at 7 p.m., setting up the possibility of a Union-Rabun rematch just five days removed from the previous meeting.

With a win over Commerce, the Panthers will secure their third consecutive State playoff berth. Two wins on Tuesday will punch their ticket to Thursday's Area Finals.

Softball: Top-seed Union County stumbles into Region 8-AA Tourney

Postseason play opens Tuesday at UCHS; Region finals, consolation game on Wednesday

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The sixth-ranked Lady Panthers enter this week's Region 8-AA Tournament coming off a difficult stretch that saw Union County drop two-of-three, including a mercy-rule shortened loss at last-place Rabun County on Wednesday, Sept. 23.

Their lone victory came in the second Rabun matchup as the Lady Panthers held off a furious rally by the home team to survive 6-5.

On Monday, Sept. 21 Union County fell 2-1 in 10 innings at Class A No. 4 Commerce.

Trinity Queen struck out three while limiting the Tigers to one run over eight innings before giving way to freshman Sierra Burnette. Queen also drove in the Lady Panthers' lone run of the day, spotting herself a 1-0 advantage in the top of the fourth.

That would be Union's only run of the game as Commerce ace Carson Hobbs picked up the win, striking out four in 10 innings.

With Union still up 1-0 in the seventh, Queen's scoreless streak came to an end at 20 when Commerce knotted the score to force extras.

Burnette took over in the ninth and kept the Tigers off the board. However, the International Tiebreaker rule (the inning starts with a runner on second) went into effect in the 10th, allowing Commerce to push across the game-winner after turning



Sophomore leadoff hitter Chloe Potts at Rabun. Photo/Todd Forrest

away Union in the top half of the frame.

On Wednesday, the Lady Panthers, who had already clinched the No. 1 seed five days earlier, struggled in a doubleheader at Rabun County. In the opener, Union County was playing catch-up most of the game but still found themselves in a position to steal the victory after trimming a 5-1 deficit to 5-4 in the fifth.

Queen replaced the starter Burnette after a lead-off single in the bottom half of the inning in an attempt to keep the Lady Cats at bay. Unfortunately, the Union offense wouldn't get another crack as Rabun, who entered winless in region play, scored 7 runs -- six belonging to Queen -- to

end the game via the mercy rule at 12-4.

Wednesday's upset marks Union County softball's first loss to Rabun County since 2014 and just the second loss in at least a dozen years.

"You always want to win them all, but we played a really tough game on Monday and spent a lot of energy with a late bus ride home," Mitchell said. "As for Wednesday, top-to-bottom, starting with me, we just didn't come out ready to play. I think we've learned from it and understand that on any given day, anyone can beat you."

Queen got the nod in game two and the Lady Panthers jumped out to a 6-1 lead. Still, the Lady Cats would not go away, tacking on two in the



Junior Rebekah Chambers is among the Union team leaders for fewest infield errors. Photo/Todd Forrest

fifth and two in the seventh before Union County finally slammed the door.

"You have to give credit to Rabun County, they hit the ball really well," Mitchell said. "It wasn't necessarily something we were doing wrong but something they were doing right. They might have caught us by surprise a little bit, but they're still a very good offensive team. They're swinging the bat really well and we're going to have to make some adjustments going into [Tuesday's playoff game vs Rabun]."

The top-seeded Lady Panthers and Rabun County will square off in the first round of the double-elimination Region 8-AA Tournament on Tuesday in Blairsville.

The action gets underway at noon with Union and No. 4 Rabun, followed by No. 2 Elbert County and No. 3 Banks County at 2 p.m.

The losers of each game will meet at 4 p.m. to determine the No. 4 seed in the upcoming Class AA State Tournament.

The winners will square off at 6 p.m. with the victor punching its ticket to the Region finals. The loser of the 6 p.m. game will meet the winner of the 4 p.m. contest on Wednesday to settle the No. 3 seed at state.

The Region Championship game is scheduled for 4 p.m. Wednesday. The "if-necessary" game is at 6 p.m.

"We had a good day of practice on Thursday and our mentality was good," Mitch-

ell said. "I expect our girls to come out ready to play on Tuesday."



#10 Rebekah Chambers - JR

In last week's Fall Sports Preview, Chambers' picture was incorrectly labeled, resulting in the wrong photo getting included in her place.