

Sports

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Panthers let Game 2 slip, now face third and deciding game

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Hosting a State Tournament series is not something to be taken lightly and the Panthers learned a tough lesson in Game Two of their first round series with Bowdon.

On Friday, Union County missed a perfect opportunity to put themselves into the driver's seat going forward into this week's second round of the State Tournament.

After taking Game One 7-1 over Bowdon, the Panthers led 1-0 in Game Two when they wasted a perfect scoring scenario with the bases loaded and no-outs. Two strikeouts and a bouncer back to the pitcher prevented Union from adding to the run total, and opened the door for the Red Devils to strike for five runs in the fifth and sixth innings, resulting in a 5-1 Panther loss and sending the series to a series-deciding Game Three on Saturday.

Rain washed out Saturday's and Monday's contest, pushing the series back to Tuesday.

The Game Two loss was already a bitter pill to swallow, but it became a bit more sour after learning that the Second Round opponent, the winner of GAC vs Pepperell wouldn't be decided until Monday, or later, meaning that the Panthers wouldn't be allowed to rest their pitching staff entering the Sweet 16, that is if Union lives to see the second round.

Junior Lane Everett (7-1) took the mound in Game One and pitched a gem. Going the distance, striking out 8 and scattering 5 hits.

Early on visitors showed signs of nerves as they committed two costly errors in the first allowing Union to jump out to a 3-0 lead after an inning.

Following two strikeouts by Everett in the top of the first, Zach Odom led off the bottom half with a walk, and Calvin Duckworth was hit by a pitch and Wes Aulet blooped a single to right, loading the bases. After T Bentley flew out, Everett brought home Odom on a throwing error by the Bowdon third baseman. Jared Croskey then brought in two more on another Red Devil throwing error, giving the Panthers a 3-0 lead.

Cody Davenport was hit by a pitch with one out in the second, and Odom and Duckworth loaded the bases with a



Senior Wes Aulet doubles to right in Game One. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior T Bentley slides safely into third during Union's Game One victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

pair of walks. Aulet doubled off the right field fence, scoring Davenport and Odom giving Union a 5-0 lead after two.

Croskey opened the third with an infield single and Luther Jones reached when the Bowdon shortstop juggled a grounder. Jackson Burks brought in two more when his bouncer to short resulted in an errant throw, allowing Croskey and Jones to score. After three innings of play, Union led 7-0 and appeared primed to run rule the Red Devils and make an early statement.

Everett got out of trouble in the fourth when a line out to Duckworth at second resulted in a double play when the Bowdon runner was caught in no-man's land, giving Union an easy out at first, competing the double-play.

The Panthers put two on base in the bottom half but Croskey's liner was snagged by the first baseman for the third out.

Everett continued to roll, striking out two in the top of the fifth. In the bottom half of the fifth, Davenport was left stranded after a two-out single.

Bowdon finally got on the board with back-to-back doubles in the sixth but Everett

escaped with no further damage, and the Panthers still in control 7-1.

A two-out walk by Bentley in the bottom of the sixth went by the wayside but Everett worked around a one-out error in the seventh to preserve Union's 7-1 victory.

On paper, a 7-1 victory looks pretty convincing but considering that walks and errors accounted for most of Union's damage early in the game, the Panthers only managing two hits in the final three innings, and Bowdon's bats coming to life late, left Union Head Coach Brandon Bradburn a little concerned entering Game Two.

"I wasn't concerned that we didn't run rule them in Game One, but I was concerned that we were trying to hit the long ball and we forgot what got us the seven-run lead in the game, which was putting the ball on the ground," he said.

As feared, the Union bats remained cold entering Game Two and gave Duckworth (5-4) little run support before the junior was pulled in the bottom of the sixth for Croskey (1-1).

With the Panthers being the visitors in Game Two, Union left two on in the top of



Lane Everett



Kalvin Duckworth doubles



Luther Jones checks his swing on a controversial call. The home plate ump's ruling that Jones didn't go was overturned. Photo/Todd Forrest

the first and went down 1-2-3 in the second.

The Panthers struck for a run in the third when Odom reached on an error and Duckworth smacked an RBI double down the third base line with one out. Union then fell victim to consecutive ground outs and held a slim 1-0 lead.

The Red Devils tied things up in the bottom of the fifth after an infield single opened the inning. A slow roller to third moved the runner into scoring position before a pair of passed balls got the runner across, tying things at 1-1.

Union appeared to be on the verge of blowing things open when the Panthers caught a few breaks, loading the bases with nobody out. That's when Union's luck turned south in a hurry.

For the first time since the bottom of the first inning of Game One, Union came to the plate without a lead. And early in the inning, Union looked as if they were about to give Duckworth some breathing room, thus completing the sweep, and having a relaxing weekend, waiting for the GAC/Pepperell series to conclude sometime early this week. However, that would not be the case.

Aulet was hit by the first pitch of the inning, and Bentley reached on an infield single. Everett beat out a sacrifice bunt, loading the bases for Croskey.

The senior outfielder laced a would-be extra-base hit down the right field line, but the ball sliced foul by mere inches, returning the Panther runners to their bases. Croskey would eventually strike out for the first out of the inning. Jones came to the plate, where the junior DH fell victim to a horrendous missed call when he clearly checked his swing but for the first time all evening, a check swing call was overturned by the base umpire. Jones eventually struck out and Cooper Patton grounded back to the pitcher for the third out.

"Bases loaded and no outs is a dream scenario for us, and it quickly turned into a nightmare," Bradburn said. "Two strikeouts and a tapper back to the pitcher really sparked Bowdon. We just need to realize making contact there gives us the lead, and not try to hit home runs every at bat."

Riding high off a wave of momentum after getting out of a jam, Bowdon struck for 4 runs in the sixth, opening up a 5-1 lead, that held up after

Union went down quietly in the seventh.

A lead off walk came around to score on a one-out triple, giving the Red Devils their first lead all series. An RBI single brought in another run, then a walk resulted in Bradburn handing the ball to Croskey. Another free-pass loaded the bases when Croskey got a grounder back to the mound, the senior went home for the second out but catcher Chase Barnett's throw to first sailed into right field bringing in two more runs. Croskey ended the inning with a strikeout but the damage was done.

"They definitely had the momentum going into Game Two," Bradburn said. "However Duckworth held them down really well. We just couldn't deliver for him offensively. I made the decision to pull him due to his extremely high pitch count, and he wasn't getting his breaking pitches across the plate."

Odom reached on a one-out error but Duckworth grounded to short to end the game on a 6-4-3 double play.

As of this writing Union was scheduled to host Game Three on Monday. However, rain has pushed the game back until Tuesday at 5:30 p.m.

Regardless, Coach Bradburn is confident in his team and won't be afraid to pull out all the stops to put Bowdon away. And regardless of what happens in the GAC vs Pepperell series, he won't be worrying about either team until the Red Devils are in the rear view mirror.

"The positive about losing Game Two is that we get another crack at them in Game Three," Bradburn said. "We are not going to be dwelling on Game Two, we will come out aggressive and ready to play. Bowdon has some really good pitchers so we will need to execute better offensively and defensively. It will be all hands on deck. I'm not even thinking about the next round, that wouldn't be fair to our players. This is a must win, so we will do all we can to make sure that happens. Pepperell and GAC is the last thing on my mind. Right now we are concentrating on Union and Bowdon."

Results of Union County's third and deciding Game Three on Tuesday will be available online.

If victorious, the Panthers' second round date, location and opponent will be posted at www.nghanews.com.

State Boys Soccer: Panthers dish out 10-1 beating at Chattahoochee Co.

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Cusseta - State Playoff games are supposed to be tough sledding, especially for the visitors when facing a higher seeded opponent with your starting goalie missing due to an injury.

Don't tell that to the Panthers. Union County traveled south of Columbus, 234 miles to be exact, to Chattahoochee County. The long bus ride only made the Panthers thirstier for a win as they routed the Chattahoochee Panthers 10-1. For just the second State Tournament win in the history Union County High School's boys soccer program.

Union led 5-0 at the half as senior Jair Gonzalez sparked this team with a goal less than a minute into the contest, on his way to a two-goal outing.

"Jair really set the tone of that game," Union County Coach Tim Hunter said. "He's such a great leader and he really showed that on the field."

T.J. Smith picked up another hat trick, while Jesus Mancillas, Kyle Hamby and Eric Hougrand added goals.

Senior Tim McKenna scored his first career goal on a free kick and sophomore Jacob Rogers also picked up his first career goal late in the second half.

"Eric (Hougrand) had to step up and play keeper for us this week with Eigel out," Hunter said. "Eric has been such an unselfish player all season long. He has really given up a lot of personal glory to make our team better and he is a huge part of why we have had the success that we have."

Union County, along with the rest of Region 8-AA dominated the competition in

the first round of State with Union's lone goal to Chattahoochee being the only goal scored against Region 8-AA.

"They scored after we were celebrating McKenna's first career goal," Hunter said. "He is a senior and it was a very exciting moment for him and they scored on the kickoff before our goalie could get back into position."

After a cake walk in Round One, Union must now prep for a trip to Norcross to face the No. 1 team in Class AA and the 13th ranked team in all classifications, the Greater Atlanta Christian Spartans.

"We really have our work cut out for us," Hunter said. "We haven't played anyone all season who is anywhere close to being on their level."

Union County will visit top-ranked GAC on Wednesday with the game time yet to be determined.

State Girls Soccer: Lady Panthers go on the road, dismantle Manchester

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Manchester - Union County High School's girls soccer program picked up its first State Tournament win in school history last week.

After holding a 2-0 lead at the break, the Lady Panthers exploded for five goals in the first 28 minutes of the second half in its 7-1 first round victory at Manchester on Thursday.

Camryn Carter got the Lady Panthers off and running in the 10th minute by scoring an unassisted goal. Marissa Akin tacked on another Union goal five minutes later on a free kick.

The Lady Panthers didn't fool around in the second half as they were hungry for that elusive State Tournament victory and put the home team away early.

Kristena Zeger scored in the 41st minute off a feed from Maddy Morlock for a 3-0 advantage.

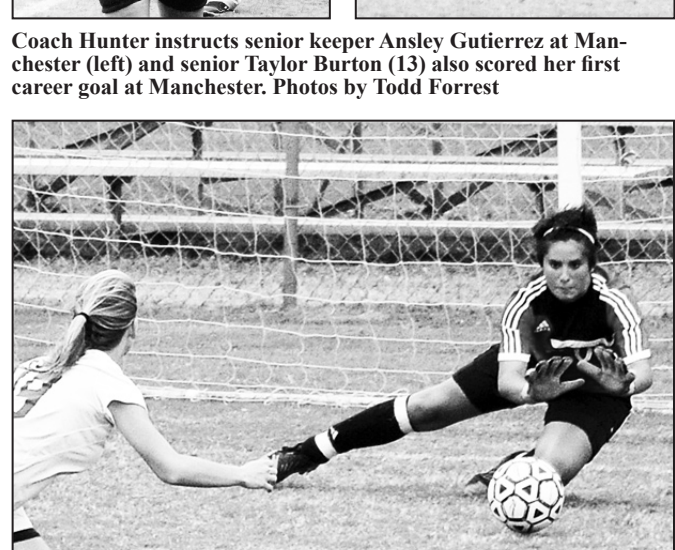
Mary Murphy added goal number four, unassisted in the 52nd minute then senior Taylor Burton scored her first career goal on a free kick in the 59th minute.

Kenna Bauman nailed a corner kick from the right side and found the back of the net for goal number six in the 62nd minute, and Erin Innis capped off the scoring off an assist from Bauman in the 68th minute.

"Our girls were completely ready to play on Thursday," Union Coach Tim Hunter said. "You could tell that the entire day in their body language and they just started winning every ball. It took a while for us



Coach Hunter instructs senior keeper Ansley Gutierrez at Manchester (left) and senior Taylor Burton (13) also scored her first career goal at Manchester. Photos by Todd Forrest



Gutierrez makes the stop during Union's 7-0 win at Manchester.

finally to get on the scoreboard but once we did then the rout was on. I was very proud of how ready our girls were and how they really brought the intensity in that game. We won every 50/50 ball and just really got them on their heels. That set the tone of the game."

Now Union must travel to Norcross to face the second ranked team in Georgia - in all classifications, top ranked in Class AA, and the defending State Champions and

2011 State Runner-up, the Greater Atlanta Christian Lady Spartans.

According to Hunter the only team that Union has seen all season that is anywhere close to GAC is Class AAAA's No. 2 ranked Heritage-Catoosa, who defeated Union 5-1.

"GAC plays an extremely elite level of soccer," Hunter said. But even Heritage is not on the same level as GAC."

Kickoff is set for Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. in Norcross.



A wet and muddy Union County Panther soccer team celebrates after their opening round victory at Chattahoochee County on Friday evening.

