

Sports

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Rising junior guard Elijah Ryals: "losing is not an option"

By Todd Forrest
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Coach David Tucker and his Union County boys basketball teams opened its summer camp season last week and hopes are already high for the 2012-13 season.

Both teams would squeeze in a practice before heading to Athens, Tenn. for a camp at Tennessee Wesleyan College.

The girls played on Thursday and Friday, while the boys began earlier this week. Coach Tucker believes that fundamentals and team chemistry is one aspect of the camps that shouldn't be overlooked, but more importantly, he just wants the kids to play.

"I'm not big on running plays during camps," Tucker said. "I want our kids to just play and learn to beat people off the dribble and just play ball. I don't want them getting caught up in trying to run plays."

Coach Tucker expects

his teams will get between 38-to-41 games along with eight practices.

"We won't be sitting around this summer, we'll be playing basketball," he said.

However, Coach Tucker also understands the importance of rest and spending time with their family during the summer break. Rising senior James Rowe missed the first camp due to a mission trip to New Mexico.

"We don't have to worry about James," Coach Tucker said. "Or Zach (Odom), or Rhett (McCombs), for that matter."

"We know that they'll be prepared and ready to go," he said. "It's the younger guys that need to match that intensity and bring it day-in and day-out."

It's senior leadership and that kind of intensity that has the underclassmen excited about the potential of this team.

"It is very important that we not only reach state but go



#3 Elijah Ryals and his Panther teammates listen closely as Coach David Tucker instructs the team. Photo/Todd Forrest

deep in state for the upcoming seniors," said rising junior guard, Elijah Ryals. "Last year, they carried our team. They were the only reason we were respectable. They played hurt, were fiercely competitive, gracious winners, and good losers. We couldn't ask for better teammates, leaders, and role models. They make you want to win. They will get us to state."

The Panthers will have plenty of youth to go along with it's seniors this upcoming season. Last year Union relied heavily on six freshmen but hopefully with a year of experience under their belt, Coach Tucker is hoping that translates into more depth.

"The younger guys

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UC Softball has more to prove during summer league



All-Region 1st baseman, Hannah Hughes will provide the power for UC as they look to three-peat in Region 8-AA Photo/Todd Forrest

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The Union County Lady Panther Softball team officially opened it's summer league at Walnut Grove with a pair of convincing wins on Thursday and are ready to carve their own niche in Union County Softball's storied past.

Despite Angie Hughes and Callie Dyer taking their talents to college, the Lady Panthers shutdown the Salem team from Class AAAA, 4-1 in it's opening game.

In their second game, Union made it very clear that the road to a Region 8-AA title still goes through Blairsville as they thumped one of the Region's new additions, Social Circle, by the score of 14-2.

Rising senior pitcher Bailey Byers picked up the win over Salem in four innings of work. Rising junior Chelsea Cook recorded a two-inning save in the victory.

Returning First Team All-Region selection, Hannah Hughes provided the offense by picking up where she left off in 2011. The senior first baseman smacked a three-run homer that turned out to be more than enough run support for Byers and Cook.

In the night-cap, rising sophomore Crystal Busbee took the circle for the Lady Panthers and threw three innings, while Cook got in three more innings of relief work.

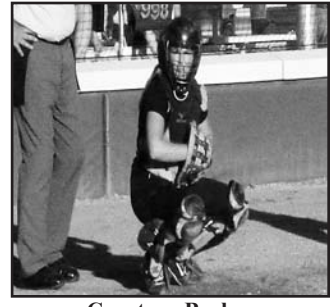
This Lady Panther squad is looking for its third consecutive Region 8-AA Title and could become the first girls' team in school history to three-peat as Region Champs, in any sport.

After a heartbreaking end to the 2011 season, the returning players are anxious to get back on the field and put their controversial, state-playoff loss to North Murray behind them.

"This group of girls are really amazing" said rising sophomore Courtney Busbee, an All-Region selection at catcher. "Everyone really loves the game; I think that's what really drives us. Plus we all want to win. The killer instinct that Coach (Kevin) Hughes tried teaching us has finally set in. We all passionately want that region title and the chance to fight it out in Columbus. Plus to get some pride back after the tragic ending to last season."

Returning to the Elite 8 in Columbus will be no easy task when you lose the greatest pitcher in school history but Courtney Busbee is confident that whoever is throwing to her, they are ready to perform at a higher level.

"We have a new outlook on pitching this year," said Courtney Busbee. "We don't have Angie to get the beastly strike outs but we've really strengthened our defense and Bailey Byers is doing a great job stepping in. Even our alternate pitchers Chelsey Cook and Crystal Busbee have done a great job in our games at Walnut Grove."



Courtney Busbee

During the 2011 season, the Lady Panther defense was a liability but that is expected to change for 2012, with the return of every infielder except pitcher Angie Hughes. Rising senior third baseman, Amber Seeba is determined to take advantage of the summer league games and turn Union's weakness into a strength this year.

"I want to see our team make it to state once again," said Seeba. "We five seniors feel like we have something to prove. Ever since travel ball started we all said we have to make it to state and we were going to work hard to get there. Going to state is a great accomplishment, but we want to win it all. No one really expects us to and I think that's what motivates us. The loss to North Murray does still hurt, but we put that game behind us. We are focused on this season and moving on. Us seniors are ready to play and help lead the team to Columbus."

Hannah Hughes added, "I think the thought of returning to state is what motivates me the most. It is very important for me and the rest of the seniors to return to state especially in softball. Anything less would be a major disappointment. We are all working very hard to improve on the skills we lacked last year especially in the North Murray game."

Coming off two wins and with more summer games this week, the Lady Panthers are determined to build up enough steam that will carry over into the regular season and post-season.

"Hopefully we gave Coach Stewart a preview of what this season will be like," said Courtney Busbee. "I think she was proud of us and we surprised her. Anything less than state will be a disappointment."

Tori Dyer among UC softball players to excel at the next level

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There is no doubt that Union County Softball has become one of the premier programs in all of Georgia since Coach Jessica Stewart arrived here in 2005.

If you need proof, look no further than Young Harris or Dahlonega, Demorest or Carrollton.

That's where four of Union County's finest athletes have taken their talents and have continued collecting awards and more importantly, winning games.

For the next four weeks, the North Georgia News will run a series of stories on each of the four players that recently completed their 2012 college season.

This week, the spotlight will be on Young Harris College freshman, Tori Dyer.

Three former Lady Panthers, Dyer, Kristen Hamby, and Kaitlyn Seabolt, made significant contributions at their respective colleges as freshman. Kaley Sullivan, another former Lady Panther just wrapped up her career at the University of West Georgia and was named to the All-Conference Team in her final year.

All four were stars on the diamond for the Lady Panthers for four years. Now each one has made a name for themselves at the collegiate level and have created a pipeline from Blairsville that coaches all over the southeast are jockeying to tap into.

Ever since Coach Stewart raised the proverbial bar in northeast Georgia, other local high school softball programs have been laboring to keep pace. As a result, northeast Georgia has become a hot-bed for softball talent that has college coaches jostling for the opportunity to wade into the local talent pool.

"Recruiting the state of Georgia is important to us, but more specifically recruiting the North Georgia area," said North Georgia College Head Coach, Mike Davenport. "There is such great coaching

at the high school level and travel ball level as well, that we are fortunate to be within two to three hours of so many talented athletes.

"Recruiting is very competitive, not only in the southeast, but in the state of Georgia that so many college coaches around the country spend a lot of recruiting efforts attempting to sign Georgia players," he said. "Here at North Georgia we're doing our best to keep those players at home, here in the North Georgia mountains."

Nowadays when you talk about Northeast Georgia softball, several teams come to mind. Not only Union County but White County, Dawson County, and Fannin County have all become more than just a blip on the radar screen of college scouts. They are now squarely in the cross hairs of nearly every college in the southeast.

Union County's journey to the top began when first-year coach, Jessica Stewart, fresh out of the University of West Georgia took over a little known, 12-15 Lady Panther program. In 2006, Union County, with Sullivan at shortstop, advanced to its first ever state Elite 8. That 25-win team produced five college players in all. Dyer's older sister Lauren Dyer (Young Harris) at catcher, Kennesaw State pitcher, April Harper, second baseman Dana Seabolt, and outfielder Jess Seabolt played at Truett McConnell.

But as is the case in high school sports, that class had to graduate. The group that put Union Co. softball on the map was forced to pass the torch to the next crop of young talent, and the Class of 2011 certainly didn't disappoint. Kaitlyn Seabolt took over at second base, Tori Dyer at shortstop, and Hamby in the outfield. A year later they were joined by strikeout-machine, Angie Hughes and a power-hitting center fielder named Callie Dyer.

In 2010, Tori Dyer, the daughter of Chris and Dale Dyer, was a part of Union's first of two back-to-back Region Titles and signed with



Tori Dyer was known for her highlight reel defensive plays during this past season at Young Harris College.

Young Harris in February 2011.

Tori Dyer played four years at UCHS under Coach Stewart, where their Lady Panther squad made three trips to the state playoffs, won a region title, and made the state championship game in 2010. Tori Dyer's most memorable moment was hitting a three-run home run in Columbus to defeat Screven County 4-3 in the 2009 state playoffs. During her senior campaign of 2010, Tori Dyer batted .383 with 14 doubles, three triples, and 30 RBI's. She would finish Top Four on the team in nearly every offensive statistic.

"I chose Young Harris because I feel comfortable there," Tori Dyer said. "Their small size will help me stay focused on my studies and softball. I also like the new facilities and the direction of the program."

The freshman shortstop appeared in 45 of Young Harris' 47 games, quite an accomplishment for a rookie, according to YHC Athletic Director Randy Dunn.

"Tori was one of three freshmen to start for YHC this season," said Dunn. "I think Tori was able to earn the starting shortstop position this year because of her athletic ability, passion for the game and the coaching she received at Union County High School."

It didn't take Tori Dyer, or the coaching staff very long to realize that she could make an instant impact on the playing field.

"The toughest adjustment was proving myself and showing that I had what it took to become a starter," Tori Dyer said. "At first I wasn't getting to start, then when I got my chance I showed what I could do."

The freshman scored 16 runs and drove in 14. Tori Dyer, who left Union County with the school record for doubles, finished third on the team with seven doubles, six stolen bases, and her .275 batting average was fifth on the team. With contributions like that from a freshman, Dunn expects great things from Tori

Dyer before she leaves Young Harris.

"Tori is an excellent athlete that has the ability to become a solid Division II player," he said. "I believe with her dedication and work ethic, Tori has the ability to become an all-conference player in the Peach Belt Conference."

Tori Dyer's most memorable moment came on March 14th, when Sullivan's West Georgia squad traveled north to face Dyer and her Mountain Lion teammates. Both girls started at shortstop and recorded a hit in their first plate appearance. Sullivan singled in the first inning and Tori Dyer doubled in the second inning en route to a 2-0 Young Harris victory.

"The highlight of my season was playing West Georgia College and getting to play against a good friend of mine and old teammate, Kaley Sullivan," Tori Dyer said. "It was neat to see so many local people from Blairsville coming out to support us both. At small high schools such as Union County, you don't get to face ex-teammates and good friends at the college level very often, so this was a great privilege and the highlight of my season."

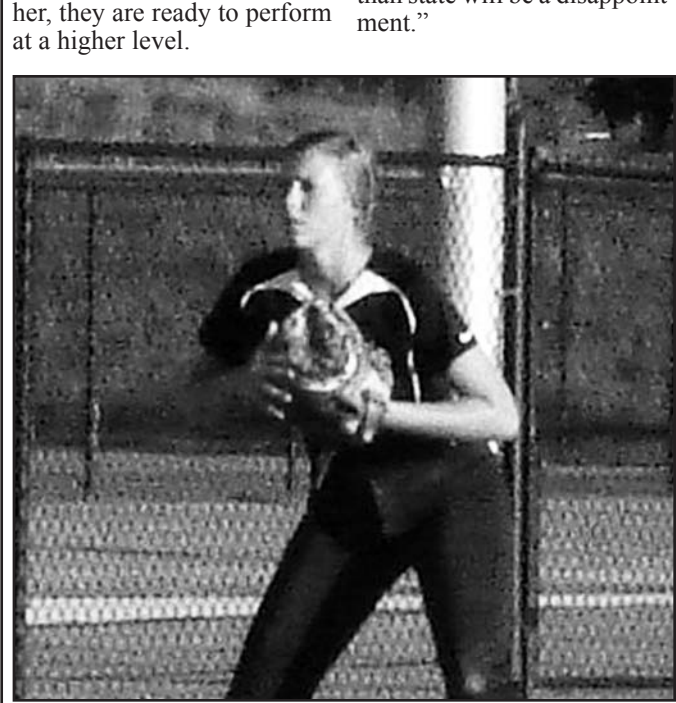
Playing against a former teammate at the collegiate level only reinforced the fact that Coach Stewart and her staff have turned Union County into an elite program.

"Coach Stewart and Coach Jennifer Cagle both played at the college level and were successful so they knew the hard work I needed to put in, and strongly pushed me to become a better player," Tori Dyer said. "Also, Coach David Seabolt helped our team and myself from the time we were 10 years old. Coach Stewart, Coach Cagle, and Coach Seabolt all led our team to success and worked to prepare me for softball at the college level. As a junior and senior, our team faced the best of the best competition in the state of Georgia. The coach-

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YHC Freshman shortstop and former Lady Panther, Tori Dyer



Rising senior third baseman, Amber Seeba expects Union to have a deep and experienced infield during the upcoming season. Photo/Todd Forrest