

Sports

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Lady Panthers fall in Region tourney

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A season of promise ended on a high note of gloom for the Union County Lady Panthers.

Head Coach Howard McCombs' Lady Panthers closed out the 2012 soccer season in the first round of the Region 8-AA playoffs to the ninth-ranked North Oconee Lady Titans.

The Lady Titans took a 4-0 lead into the half and finished off the Lady Panthers 5-0, thus ending a season that saw the Lady Panthers win 11 regular season games, including a Region finish of 4-1.

The Lady Panthers, hosting the game at historic Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, fell behind less than two minutes into the contest as the Lady Titans struck for the game's first goal.



Callie Payne (1) tries to put a stop to Lady Titans' superstar Erin Hirano during region action in Blairsville. Photo/Todd Forrest.

The Lady Titans added two more quick goals to put Union in a 3-0 hole with 24:35 to play before the break.

The Lady Titans All-State
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UCHS Boys' fall short of playoffs

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It was a tale of two halves. Union County Panthers' Head Boys' Soccer Coach Howard McCombs was dumbfounded by his team's first half play in the first round of the Region 8-AA Soccer Playoffs.

One win would vault the Panthers into the state playoffs. It would be a major accomplishment for a rebuilding Panther squad.

However, the Panthers were unable to overcome a slow start in the first half and fell 4-2 to the East Jackson Eagles last Tuesday in Commerce.

"It's hard to say for certain why they came out slow, but one factor had to be the time off we had between games," Coach McCombs said. "Due to the timing of spring break it had been two



Union's Eric Hougrand moves the ball against East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

weeks since we had played a game.

"It does take a little while to catch up to the game speed and pace especially when the competition level is high," he said. "I

certainly would not use this as an excuse for the loss, but that is definitely not an ideal situation to

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Baseball season is over; Panthers lose on road in Elberton

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Elberton – Head Coach C.T. Hussion's Union County Panthers baseball team took on the No. 4 team in Class AA with negative results last week.

The hope was to secure a berth in the Class AA state playoffs. The Blue Devils of Elbert County had other plans.

The Panthers squared off against the Blue Devils in the best two-out-of-three Region 8 tournament series. The Union bats didn't respond in Game One, as sophomore right hander Jacob Smith struck out 11 Panthers in 6 and 1/3 innings en route to a 3-0 win. Brett Mills came on in relief to nail down the save for Elbert County.

In game two, Elbert's bats came alive late, as they pulled away in a 13-4 state playoff berth clincher. They beat Jefferson 2-1 on Friday.

In Game One, the Panthers' went with Cody Davenport on the hill and the junior threw seven innings and kept Union County in the game.

Coach Hussion went with Davenport to keep the Blue Devil line-up off balance, he said. "The teams from the South, usually hit velocity very well," Coach Hussion said. "Davenport throws



Union's Zach Odom gets a lead off second during the first round of the Region 8-AA tournament last week in Elberton. The Panthers were swept and eliminated from the Class AA state playoffs. Photo/Todd Forrest.

a little slower than they are used to, throws strikes, and mixes up his pitches."

Elbert County struck early with a run in the first inning but Davenport would settle down and retire the next seven batters he faced.

The Panthers' best scoring opportunity came in the second inning when Union had runners on

second and third with no outs. Nevertheless, three consecutive strikeouts by Smith kept the Panthers off the scoreboard.

Hussion thought about bunting during the inning to just get one run across, but decided against it after noticing the positioning of Elbert County's third baseman.

"He was playing up," Coach

Hussion said. "He is one of their best players and is very quick so I decided against the bunt."

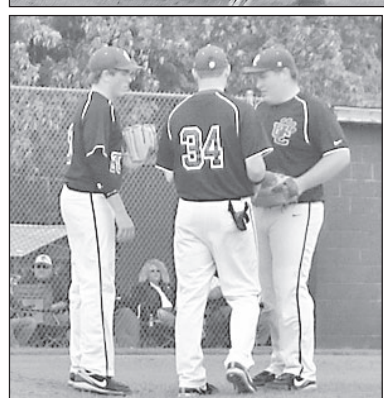
Elbert added two insurance runs in the sixth inning. Following a single and a double, Davenport struck out the next batter, but an infield error loaded the bases. Elbert would draw a walk and scored again on a fielder's choice.

In Union's final at bat, Phillip Stubblefield led off with a single. Following a fielder's choice, Lane Everett and Davenport would draw walks to load the bases with one out. Clay Burnette stepped to the plate with the tying runs on base but flew out to left field and the Panther base runner was cut down at the plate trying to tag up and score from third.

In the second game, Union went with seven-game winner, Daniel Coyne on the mound. Coyne came into the game with an earned run average of 0.65.

Coyne would leave in the fifth inning with the Panthers trailing 4-2. Everett would enter the game but didn't get much help as three Panther errors allowed Elbert to blow things wide open and take Game Two by the score of 13-4 to bring the Panthers' baseball season to an end.

"We were timid," said Coach Hussion of the Panther lineup. "Their pitchers kept throwing strikes and kept us behind in the count."



Above, Clay Burnette calls for time; below, Cody Davenport, Wes Aulet and Luther Jones talk it over during the Elbert game.

Regardless, Hussion is proud of his young team and their 2012 campaign.

"We lost 10 seniors but finished tied for second in the Sub-Region," Coach Hussion said. "This team matched the win total from last year's team. We are playing with what was basically last year's Junior Varsity team. The kids that had question marks coming into the season all stepped up."

Merritt, McCombs named hardwood MVPs

By Todd Forrest
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The 2011-2012 Union County Basketball season is in the books.

So are the annual Basketball Awards and on Sunday afternoon at Butternut Creek Golf Course, the players who made the season so special to its fans were honored among their peers.

For the Lady Panthers, Becka Merritt, who led the team to its most wins since 2000-01, received the honor of Most Valuable Player. Merritt was the Lady Panthers' leading scorer, averaging 18.2 points per game. She had a single-game high of 35 points. She led the team in field goal percentage with 42 percent from the 2-point zone and she shared the 3-point average at 35 percent with Callie Payne.

Merritt also laid claim to the team's Offensive Player of the Year Award.

Coach David Tucker said the Lady Panthers don't win 21 games without Merritt.

"She's been an incredible on court presence her entire career," Tucker said.

The season included highlights like three consecutive wins against the Fannin County Lady Rebels, an achievement that hasn't occurred since the 1985-86 season.

The 2011-2012 senior class will leave as one of the most successful classes in school history, Coach Tucker said.

Angie Hughes, Merritt, Payne, and Catie Tanner registered three state playoff appear-



Becka Merritt

ances, one Sweet 16 appearance, one region title, and a 20-plus win season.

Merritt, the Lady Panthers' leading scorer for three consecutive years, was named to the All-Region Team; meanwhile Hughes was an All-Sub-Region selection.

Tanner and Payne each made Honorable Mention within Region 8.

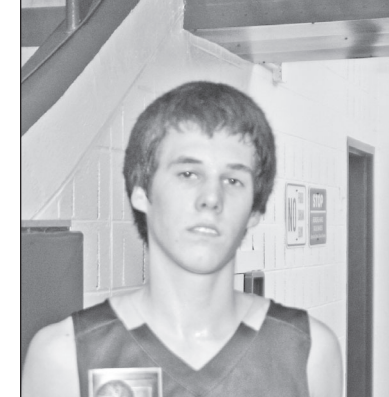
"These kids were such a joy to be around," Coach Tucker said. "I enjoyed practice more than the games. That speaks highly of their parents."

Lauren Zollinger, the Lady Panthers' assists leader, took home the Coach's Award for her spirited hustle throughout the season.

Payne captured the Defense Player of the Year Award; Offensive Player of the Year Award went to Merritt; the Best All-Around Player of the Year Award went to Catie Tanner; and of course MVP honors went to Merritt.

The 2011-12 Panthers boys' squad also was honored on Sunday during the banquet.

Coach Tucker opened the



Rhett McCombs

boys' ceremony with a story of a colleague who told him that if the Union County boys win "five games," then he should have his salary doubled.

They won 13 games and Coach Tucker hasn't heard any more comments.

Though 13 wins might not sound like a lot, consider that the Panthers were replacing eight seniors, four starters – three who had started since 10th grade.

"To be honest, 13 wins was a very successful season," Coach Tucker said.

Maybe the most important win of the season was the last one – a first round playoff upset of North Oconee. The Titans played the role of spoiler during the previous season, when they upset and ended the season of a third seed and 19-win, Panther squad.

The Panthers' upset of North Oconee in 2012 was not only a revenge game, it gave the Panthers their first postseason victory since 2009 and something for Coach Tucker's team to build on in 2013.

The Panthers had only one senior – Zach Arnick – and relied

heavily on freshmen and sophomores. Despite their youth, the Panthers had one of the most potent backcourts in Region 8-AA, thanks to three juniors – All-Sub-Region selections Zach Odom and Rhett McCombs, along with James Rowe – Honorable Mention – gave the Panthers plenty of firepower during the season.

"We're going to try and continue to improve and compete in each game and leave it all on the floor," Coach Tucker said. "I will be back for my third year and it'll be time to go to work. And when you go to work, you're supposed to do your best."

Arnick took home the 2011-2012 Coach's Award; Dylan Coyne won the annual Hustle Award; McCombs won the Offensive Player of the Year Award; Rowe won the All-Around Player of the Year Award and McCombs claimed Most Valuable Player Honors for the Panthers.

On a sad note, Coach Carson Turlington announced that he would be retiring after 21 years of coaching in Union County school system.

Turlington led the Middle School Panthers to multiple league championships, has coached Junior Varsity boys and girls and won 17 games as the Head Coach of Union County Panthers in 2004-05.

That season that saw Turlington's Panthers win a White County Tip-Off Tournament Championship, when Union Co. upset North Hall in the tourney finals.

"He has been a big part of Union County Athletics for many years," said UCHS Athletic Director Jim Hughes. "He has done every job that nobody wanted to do and we won't be able to replace him with just one person."

Correction

In the April 18th edition of the North Georgia News' Sports section front, the newspaper reported that the Union County Panthers' baseball team defeated Rabun County in three consecutive games the previous week. That did not happen. The Panthers played Rabun on April 3rd and April 4th, and lost all three games. The North Georgia News apologizes for the unfortunate error.

Battle Ball Champions

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Ms. Leslie Groves' class won the Second Grade Championship in Military Battle Ball. The game is taught by Coach Chris Robbins at Union County Primary School and is now in its fifth year. The game is similar to dodge ball but also teaches students the value of sportsmanship. The game takes two weeks for the students to learn before five weeks of practice games begin. Finally the *Battle of the Classes* begins to decide who gets the championship trophy. Ms. Groves' class defeated Ms. Linda Seabolt's class, 3-0 in the championship game, making Ms. Groves' class the first to ever win back-to-back championship titles.

The North Georgia News congratulates Ms. Groves' class.