

Sports

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UCHS Softball Summer League opens July 9; Alumni Game July 27

Regular season begins Aug. 2 at home; UCHS to host 'Diamond Day' on Aug. 10

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Year two of the Coach Stephen Mitchell-era gets underway next week when Union County softball's unofficial preseason opens with summer league action on Tuesday, July 9.

In his first season at the helm, Mitchell guided Union County back to the State Tournament despite playing in a brutal region that featured the top three teams in Class AA. When the dust settled on the 2018 season, Social Circle was left holding the State Championship trophy after knocking off Region 8-AA rival Banks County in the finals. Meanwhile, third place Monticello was eliminated one game short of the finals.

After finishing fourth in the Region 8-AA Tournament last fall, Union County traveled to the eventual fifth-place team in Class AA, Heard County, where they were unable to keep pace with a high-powered Lady Braves' lineup, losing 8-3 and 10-5 to close the season with a 15-15 record.

"You obviously want to position yourself with the best possible seeding in the postseason but fourth wasn't too shabby in our region," coach Mitchell said. "If we draw anybody besides Heard in the first round, I think we might have made a little bit of a run."

"It's a great thing (being in our region) because playing that level of competition will only make you better."

Union County will also strengthen its non-region slate this fall with a trip to Carrollton where they will face Heard County and Newnan. They will also meet Madison County at the University of North Georgia and take part in a tournament at North Gwinnett High School.

"We've beefed up our (non-region) schedule this year and we're also going to North Gwinnett and West Georgia for very competitive tournaments," Mitchell said. "I've asked our girls to step up their game this year because we're playing a very tough schedule."

Overall, things are looking up for the softball program entering its second year under Mitchell. The Lady Panthers will feature four rising-sophomores that made significant varsity contributions as rookies in 2018.

Last year's squad also saw a handful of sophomores and juniors that delivered under pressure.

The biggest question mark, however, is the loss of four big sticks atop the Union County lineup. Four of the team's top five run producers



Rising-junior Trinity Queen had a breakout 2018 season to lead Union County back to the postseason. Photo/Todd Forrest

graduated, taking 55% of the team's RBIs and 59% of the extra base hits with them.

Seniors Aladriel Arnold and Bailey Rayfield accounted for all nine of the squad's homers last season while batting .368 and .382, respectively.

Arnold also finished with team-highs in slugging percentage (.701), RBIs (36), stolen bases (15), home runs (6) and hit by pitches (5) while ending up tied for first with 26 runs, second with a 1.163 OPS and third with 11 base on balls.

As for Rayfield, her .382 average and 1.220 OPS led the team before going down with an injury at the halfway point of the season.

Senior centerfielder Maddie Sutton led the squad with 38 hits. She was second on the team with a .376 batting average and 14 stolen bases while finishing third with 23 runs from the leadoff spot.

Her defense in the outfield can't be overlooked as she committed just one error in 68 chances last season. Her .985 fielding percentage was best on the team among players with more than five chances in the field.

Last but not least, senior Skyler Ludlum hit .301 with 18 RBIs and nine doubles last year. Her nine two-baggers were tied with Arnold for second on the team while her 18 RBIs were third most.

With heavy losses to the heart of the order, Mitchell was asked if that will bring about more of a "small ball" philosophy or does he have the personnel to immediately step-in for the departed seniors.

"To be honest, I think it could be a combination of both," he answered. "Our girls have really worked hard in the weight room so I think you're going to see a big difference in some of

the girls that might not have hit for extra bases last year.

"I love playing small ball but I'm also willing to adapt to the strengths of my team, so I think it will be a combination of both."

"We have some big shoes to fill on offense and we're just going to have to see who is ready to do that. I think the potential to fill those shoes is there. Maybe not individually, but as a nine, I think we can fill them."

With the heavy losses on offense, Union County will lean heavily on a solid pitching staff that was effective in 2018 despite being a major question mark entering the season.

"Our pitchers did a great job last year adjusting to me and my new philosophy and style," Mitchell said. "It was obvious we didn't throw enough strikes last season but our three varsity pitchers have worked extremely hard. They've worked in the weight room, with their pitching instructors and with me. You never really know how things will go until you face live hitters but I think you're going to see a big improvement from our three pitchers."

Rising-junior Trinity Queen should once again anchor the staff after finishing with an 8-5 record and a 2.89 ERA last season. With only 47 strikeouts in 104 innings, Queen leaned heavily upon pin-point control and ground ball outs. In 2018, almost 60% of batted balls off Queen resulted in grounders while less than 41% were put in the air -- none leaving the yard. Lastly, Queen only surrendered 29 walks, finishing with 1.62 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

Megan Bright is another right-hander who will play an important role in the Lady Panthers' success this fall. Prior to region play last fall, Bright



Rising-senior Mary Wischmeyer finished 2018 among the top-three on the team in almost every offensive category. Photo/Todd Forrest

was 2-0 with a 3.75 ERA and a team-leading 18 strikeouts. Unfortunately, she struggled late in the year, finishing with a 5.42 ERA and a respectable 6-6 record.

If the rising-senior can put together a complete season in 2019, she and Queen could provide Coach Mitchell with a formidable duo atop the Union County pitching staff.

Rising-sophomore Rebekah Kelley also saw action from the circle, working 6.1 innings and allowing 11 hits, five earned runs with one walk and three strikeouts in 2018.

Kelley, however, is expected to play a bigger role in the infield this season after appearing in 20 games as a freshman. In 48 plate appearances, she hit .333 with nine RBIs, eight runs and three doubles.

The anchor of the Lady Panther lineup this fall should be rising-senior and four-year starter Mary Wischmeyer. In 2018, Wischmeyer was tops on the team with 11 doubles; tied for first with 26 runs and second with 25 RBIs. She placed third on the team with a .374 batting average, a .505 slugging and a .937 OPS.

Rising-sophomore Lexi Sisum hit .259 as a freshman with 14 runs and seven RBIs while seeing action in the 2-hole of the lineup. Her five sacrifices were second on the team to Sutton's six.

The highlight of Sisum's freshman campaign came in Union's six-run rally against Lumpkin County on Sept. 5. Trailing 17-12 and down to their final out, eight-straight Lady Panthers reached base, punctuated by Sisum's walk-off, two-run double in one of the greatest comebacks in school history.

Scoring on Sisum's game-winner was another freshman, Caley Davis, who appeared in

28 games - mostly at third base. She would finish fourth on the team with 18 runs while proving to be Union's toughest strikeout. With only five strikeouts in 86 plate appearances, Davis averaged a K once every 17 trips to the plate. As a result of her extended at bats, her 16 walks led the team and she finished fifth with a .427 on-base percentage.

Rising-junior Hannah Patton is a potential three-year starter who began at shortstop in 2017 before moving behind the plate last season.

As a freshman, she hit .254 with seven RBIs but the move behind the plate last year could have produced a dip in her numbers to .225 and four RBIs. Patton was hitting .267 with three RBIs in August before taking over the catching duties in early-September. Despite struggling with her bat, she managed to produce offensively by drawing 12 walks and scoring 16 runs.

With a secure defensive role entering the fall, Patton is poised for a breakout season in 2019.

Since arriving in Blairsville, Mitchell has preached pitching and defense. And while the pitching staff was solidified early-on, the Lady Panthers spent much of the year looking for the right combination behind them.

"We spent most of June working on defense and they seem more comfortable now, which I think will show up in our defensive play."

Others to watch this fall are rising-senior infielder Miranda Lockaby, who appeared in 23 games in 2018. Rising-sophomore Emma Roxbury had eight runs and four RBIs in 35 plate appearances and fellow rising-sophomores Ansley Collins and Aubrie Ban-

ton, along with rising-senior Kristen Poteete, could all see an increased role.

"We have some girls that didn't really hit very well last season but have worked hard in the offseason to improve," Mitchell said. "I think you're going to see some of these girls turn into serious contributors for us this year."

Another rising-senior is Krysten Hodges, who suffered a knee injury during basketball season but is expected to return sometime in September. Despite a .172 batting average, she regularly put the ball in play, only striking out once every 16 plate appearances.

According to Mitchell, there are a few freshmen who could contribute this season and add to Union County's solid young nucleus.

"We're expecting everyone to be back that's supposed to be back and we have four freshmen that we're very excited about," he said. "Other than that, we're not expecting anyone new, at least that I know of."

The regular season will get underway on Friday, Aug. 2 when the Lady Panthers host Pickens County. The following weekend, Union County will host its first-ever Diamond Day on Saturday, Aug. 10 when they welcome Habersham Central and Commerce.

Union County Softball will also hold an Alumni Game on Saturday, July 27 at 6 p.m. to help kickoff the 2019 season.

Summer League play opens with a doubleheader at 5 and 6:30 p.m. on July 9 in Lumpkin County. Union County will host the following day with games at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. on July 10.

According to Mitchell, the Lady Panthers will be in action on most Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays through July 24. In the meantime, he will use these upcoming "preseason" games to establish roles and build chemistry.

"We hope to find the right nine or 10 girls," he said. "We also want to find who's going to take the pinch hitter and pinch runner spots and just see who will fit best at each particular spot. All of the young girls that played varsity last season were great at times but I'm hoping for more consistency this year."

After opening summer ball on July 9 at Lumpkin and July 10 at home, Union visits Habersham on July 11 at 5 and 6:30 p.m.

They will travel to Flowery Branch on July 16 at 4 and 5:30 p.m. They are off on July 17 but resume play on Jeffers 18 at 4 and 5:30 p.m. in June 18.

A complete Union County summer league softball schedule is available on Page 3B.

Union County 2018 Softball Statistics

#	Roster	GP	PA	AB	H	1B	2B	3B	HR	RBI	R	HBP	ROE	FC	CI	BB	SO	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS
14	Mary Wischmeyer	30	111	99	37	25	11	1	0	25	26	4	5	0	0	7	16	.374	.432	.505	.937
26	Maddie Sutton	30	110	101	38	35	3	0	0	15	23	2	4	3	0	1	14	.376	.394	.406	.800
11	Aladriel Arnold	30	104	87	32	16	9	1	6	36	26	5	5	6	0	11	11	.368	.462	.701	1.163
12	Skyler Ludlum	30	103	93	28	19	9	0	0	18	12	0	6	2	0	9	11	.301	.359	.398	.757
2	Caley Davis	28	86	62	15	14	1	0	0	8	18	4	4	6	0	16	5	.242	.427	.258	.685
6	Hannah Patton	26	83	71	16	14	2	0	0	4	16	0	3	0	0	12	19	.225	.337	.254	.591
4	Lexi Sisum	26	71	58	15	14	1	0	0	7	14	1	4	1	0	6	11	.259	.333	.276	.609
15	Miranda Lockaby	23	59	46	6	5	1	0	0	6	11	3	5	3	0	9	11	.130	.305	.152	.457
21	Rebekah Kelley	20	48	39	13	10	3	0	0	9	8	2	1	1	0	6	11	.333	.447	.410	.857
00	Bailey Rayfield	15	46	34	13	9	1	0	3	12	11	3	1	1	0	9	4	.382	.543	.676	1.220
5	Emma Roxbury	14	35	30	7	7	0	0	0	4	8	1	3	3	0	4	5	.233	.343	.233	.576
22	Krysten Hodges	14	32	29	5	3	2	0	0	5	5	1	3	1	0	2	2	.172	.250	.241	.491
24	Madeline Tanner	9	18	13	3	3	0	0	0	3	4	0	1	0	0	5	5	.231	.444	.231	.675
22	Trinity Queen	9	18	15	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	6	.067	.222	.067	.289
17	Ansley Collins	5	5	4	2	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	.500	.600	.500	1.100
7	Kristen Poteete	2	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
5	Megan Bright	2	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	.000	.000	.000
8	Aubrie Banton	4	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.000	1.000	1.000	2.000
Totals		30	936	788	232	178	43	2	9	154	186	26	45	29	0	101	132	.294	.390	.368	.779

#	Roster	IP	GP	GS	W	L	SV	SVO	BS	SV%	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HBP	ERA	WHIP
22	Trinity Queen	104.1	23	14	8	5	0	0	0	.000	128	77	43	29	47	12	2.885	1.505
5	Megan Bright	71.0	20	16	6	6	0	0	0	.000	88	79	55	47	42	7	5.423	1.901
21	Rebekah Kelley	6.1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000	11	9	5	1	3	0	5.526	1.895
Totals		181.2	30	30	14	11	0	0	0	.000	227	167	101	77	92	19	3.892	1.673



2019 Union County Softball Schedule

Date	Time	Opponent	Location
8/2	7:00	Pickens	Home
8/10	11:00	Habersham	Home
8/10	3:00	Commerce	Home
8/12	5:55	Lumpkin	Lumpkin
8/14	3:45	North Forsyth	North Gwinnett
8/14	5:40	Jackson	North Gwinnett
8/19	5:55	Gilmer	Gilmer
8/21	5:30	Pickens	Pickens
8/22	5:30	Monticello*	Home
8/24	11:00	East Hall	East Hall
8/24	1:00	Stephens	East Hall
8/27	5:30	Elbert*	Elbert*
8/29	5:30	Putnam*	Home
9/4	5:55	Lumpkin	Home
9/5	5:00	Social Circle*	Social Circle*
9/10	5:30	Banks*	Home
9/12	5:30	Oglethorpe*	Oglethorpe*
9/14	11:00	Heard	UWG
9/14	1:00	Newnan	UWG
9/16	6:00	Madison	UNG
9/17	5:30	Rabun*	Home
9/18	5:55	Gilmer	Home
9/23	5:55	East Hall	Home
9/25	TBA	Region Playoff	TBA
9/26	TBA	Region Playoff	TBA